

Lekgau, Refiloe Julia¹ – Daniels, Tracy² – Tichaawa, Tembi Maloney³

The Sharing Economy, Inclusive Tourism Development and Entrepreneurship: A Case Study from South Africa⁴

ABSTRACT

The sharing economy has been increasingly recognized for providing opportunities for tourism entrepreneurs and fostering inclusive tourism growth. Through its Inclusive Tourism pledge, Airbnb established the Airbnb Entrepreneurship Academy to empower women and youth in rural communities. This study examines the role of Airbnb and its private-public partnerships in fostering inclusive tourism growth in the Waterberg District of South Africa through the Airbnb Entrepreneurship Academy. The study was conducted using qualitative interviews and focus groups with stakeholders involved in the Airbnb Entrepreneurship Academy, including four Airbnb representatives, twenty-three academy graduates, and eight public and private sector partners. The key findings show that driving inclusive tourism development in the Waterberg required the involvement of local, regional and national public and private partners. The study found that the Airbnb Entrepreneurship Academy was instrumental in providing knowledge and capacity-building opportunities to emerging entrepreneurs in the region. Additionally, social capital, mentorship and continued support emerged as important drivers enabling emerging entrepreneurs to actively participate in the tourism sector. However, the local tourism context influences the successful operations of tourism enterprises and, consequently, inclusive growth through tourism. This study contributes to the growing literature on tourism skills development and the sharing economy within rural and emerging tourism destinations.

Keywords: Airbnb, inclusive tourism, sharing economy, entrepreneurship, skills development

¹ Lecturer, PhD, School of Tourism & Hospitality, College of Business and Economics, University of Johannesburg, South Africa, Email: rlekgau@uj.ac.za, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0303-7592>

² Academic Head, PhD, School of Tourism & Hospitality, College of Business and Economics, University of Johannesburg, South Africa, Email: tracyd@uj.ac.za, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8854-8227>

³ Full Professor, PhD, Head of Department, School of Tourism & Hospitality, College of Business and Economics, University of Johannesburg, South Africa, Email: tembit@uj.ac.za, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1913-3730>

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INTRODUCTION

The sharing economy is an economy in which companies use accessibility-based business models for peer-to-peer markets (European Union, 2013). According to Kowalczyk-Aniol et al. (2024), this economic model is based on peer-to-peer sharing of access to goods and services and individuals sharing their resources through online networks, allowing for collaborative consumption. Within the tourism context, the sharing economy can be described as all tourism-based initiatives and services such as accommodation, transport and destination services, that individuals can share with others through online networks (Ketter, 2019; Hossain, 2020). The success of the sharing economy in the context of tourism is evident in the dramatic growth of companies based on this model such as Airbnb and Uber. The significant growth, prominence and role of the tourism-sharing economy is also largely attributed to the perception that this promotes sustainable economic development by providing access to the industry for those who previously did not have these opportunities (Cheng et al., 2020; Cheng, 2016).

Despite this, there is little evidence to demonstrate how the sharing economy influences entrepreneurship and regional inclusive tourism growth. In response to this, and considering its position in the tourism-sharing economy, in 2021, Airbnb in South Africa announced a three-year commitment to the development of an inclusive tourism industry. This commitment largely focused on providing infrastructure, training and investment to support inclusive tourism development and to support community-led tourism initiatives (Airbnb, 2021). As part of this commitment, the Airbnb Entrepreneurship Academy was established to empower a new generation of tourism entrepreneurs using the Airbnb sharing platform. The Academy is grounded in Airbnb's drive to ensure that the South African tourism industry is truly inclusive, opening access to the industry for more South Africans, particularly those who have been historically disadvantaged (Airbnb, 2022). As such, the Academy provides citizens with opportunities to develop their skills, targeted predominantly at women and youth in rural and underdeveloped areas, assisting them to become tourism entrepreneurs using the Airbnb platform and benefitting from tourism activities. Through the Academy, Airbnb has also provided a platform for public and private institutions within the tourism industry to collaborate to promote inclusivity and lower the barriers to entry.

Against this backdrop, the current study sought to determine how the sharing economy through Airbnb has influenced tourism entrepreneurship and regional inclusive tourism growth. The study draws on the case of the Waterberg District in the Limpopo province in South Africa, designated as a Biosphere Reserve by UNESCO and known for its conservation and natural attractions. The Airbnb Entrepreneurship Academy was implemented in the Waterberg District in support of the region's District Development Model, designed to foster collaboration between government and private partners to address issues of poverty and unemployment through the creation of opportunities relating to tourism development (Lekgau et al., 2024). The study demonstrates that tourism initiatives grounded in the sharing economy, such as the Airbnb platform and the Airbnb Entrepreneurship Academy can

be effective in fostering entrepreneurship and inclusive tourism development. To leverage its effects, we argue that entrepreneurs and those engaging in business through the tourism-sharing economy must be provided with additional support and skills necessary for success in the tourism industry. We show in the paper how the case of the Waterberg District represents an example of how initiatives embedded in the tourism-sharing economy can be used in other regions to promote entrepreneurship, economic development and sustainable inclusive tourism growth.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The sharing economy in tourism refers to the redistribution of goods and services on a peer-to-peer basis, either for a fee or for free (Shang et al., 2023; Dolnicar, 2021). Initially, this change in economic structure was viewed as a disruptor to existing economic models as it presented a new structure largely based on integrated collaboration and direct peer-to-peer commercial activities (Altinay & Taheri, 2019; Lutz & Newlands, 2018). Since then, views have changed, and the dramatic growth of the sharing economy can be attributed to various factors including technological innovations, the rise in social networking platforms, the demand for improved distribution of goods and services and increased environmental consciousness (Kuhzady et al., 2021; Altinay & Taheri, 2019). The tourism industry has been one of the most significantly impacted by the growth and development of the sharing economy, which has completely shifted its dynamics.

The dramatic impact of the sharing economy on the tourism industry can also be attributed to the increasing use of technology in tourism and the development of smart destinations that have specific strategies for the use of technology, innovation, sustainability and inclusivity (Csapo & Vegi, 2023). This economic model within the tourism context is seen to meet the needs of both travellers and hosts due to the provision of more meaningful experiences, two-way information sharing and authentic interactions (Shang et al., 2023). The nature of the sharing economy allows individuals to become tourism entrepreneurs easily, and without significant barriers to entry to the market, largely because of the use of technology, hence creating job opportunities and ongoing positive economic impact (Xie & Chen, 2019; Altinay & Taheri, 2019; Kahraman et al., 2023). Through the sharing economy, local residents at destinations are also able to develop themselves as tourism entrepreneurs by sharing their resources and experiences with tourists, essentially becoming suppliers and sellers of their own tourism products and services (Sigala, 2017).

Various studies (see for example Alrawadieh & Alrawadieh, 2018; Andreotti et al., 2020) have found that residents at tourism destinations experience a range of benefits from becoming entrepreneurs through the sharing economy including income generation, education through engagement with people of different cultures, personal growth, the attainment of personal development goals, altruism and career transitioning. These entrepreneurship opportunities also pose a lower risk to individuals and allow for the pursuit of creative and new ideas with lower costs than in the conventional economy (Leich et al., 2022). The access that the tourism-sharing economy provides to those

seeking to enter the market, is also often viewed as a means of promoting inclusivity and stimulating inclusive tourism development. According to Biddulph and Scheyvens (2018), inclusive tourism is a form of transformative tourism in which groups who have previously been marginalized can become engaged in the tourism industry and share in its benefits. This also includes the inclusion of those with accessibility challenges who should not be neglected by the tourism industry (Raffay & Gonda, 2020). To achieve inclusivity in tourism, the industry should be inclusive of all income groups, assist in the reduction of social inequalities, create employment opportunities, stimulate poverty alleviation and have a positive impact on local communities (Biddulph & Scheyvens, 2018; Butler & Rogerson, 2016). Where this is successfully achieved, the results will lead to increased skills development, entrepreneurship, financial support, leveraging innovation to create new experiences, building and strengthening partnerships, removing barriers to tourism growth and supporting social development (Lekgau et al., 2024).

While the positive impacts of the sharing economy on the tourism industry are largely purported, concerns continue to be raised, particularly over the significant disruptions caused, adverse effects on employment, increasing levels of competition, growing work/life imbalances, governance, and the potential negative impacts on host communities (Stergiou & Farmaki, 2019; Kuhzady et al., 2021). Along with this, questions remain regarding the regulatory environment of the tourism-sharing economy, competition with traditional markets which place these at a price disadvantage, uncontrolled growth of companies operating within the sharing economy resulting in negative social impacts and the destruction of communities and concerns relating to physical and data safety (Meenakshi, 2023; Hou, 2019). Existing research (see Kowalczyk-Aniol et al., 2024; Zmysłony et al., 2020; Ferrari, 2016) provides evidence that participation in the tourism-sharing economy is largely influenced by human and social capital, which in South Africa are not evenly distributed. This suggests that those communities that have a low level of social trust, such as the previously disadvantaged, are often excluded from the tourism-sharing economy as a result of poor social and human capital, decreased levels of tolerance and low levels of openness to strangers. These communities are therefore often excluded from the tourism economy and the benefits derived therefrom. Scheyvens and Biddulph (2018) further add that for the sharing economy to assist in promoting inclusivity in tourism, what must be considered is who is included and excluded in tourism activities and what the terms of their inclusion or exclusion are. Once these questions are answered, the potential barriers to entering the tourism industry can be identified and removed, allowing for the self-representation of previously marginalised groups and encouraging their active engagement in tourism activities and decision-making processes.

The role of Airbnb in the global tourism-sharing economy cannot be overlooked and the growth of the platform on a global scale has brought about both positive and negative consequences along the tourism value chain (Demir & Emekli, 2021; Dudas et al., 2020). Airbnb has created widespread opportunities for individuals to develop themselves into tourism and hospitality entrepreneurs, stimulating innovations in tourism entrepreneurship and allowing local residents across the globe to

generate an income through tourism activities (Karlsson & Dolnicar, 2016; Demir & Emekli, 2021). This has been made possible by ordinary people now having the opportunity to generate an income and participate in the tourism economy by simply sharing their space (Kadi et al., 2022). Ki and Lee (2019) add that this has in turn created new tourism services, empowered consumers, facilitated socialization between tourists and host communities, stimulated urban regeneration, and brought tourism to previously unvisited destinations. These potential positive impacts of Airbnb clearly illustrate the role that it might have in boosting tourism entrepreneurship and stimulating inclusive tourism development through the sharing economy. Despite this, much criticism has been raised against Airbnb in terms of its commercialization of local living spaces, contribution to the commodification of people's daily lives, its role in overcrowding tourism destinations and the damage that it has done to feelings of place attachment (Ahuja & Lyons, 2019; Amore et al., 2020). Through Airbnb, local homes have in many cases been transformed into lodgings for tourists, creating unaffordable housing markets and contributing to gentrification (Cocola-Gant & Gago, 2019). This raises the need for particular consideration in terms of tourism development through the sharing economy in a manner that is sustainable to both visitor and host and which is viable in the long term.

In response to these actual negative outcomes and criticisms against Airbnb, in South Africa, the Airbnb inclusive-tourism commitment and the related Airbnb Entrepreneurship Academy have been established to regulate the Airbnb sharing economy environment, increase public and private collaboration through the sharing economy, develop further programmes that support inclusive and sustainable tourism development, lower the barriers to entry to the tourism industry, and empower those previously excluded from the tourism industry (Airbnb, 2023). In doing so, through the Airbnb Entrepreneurship Academy, tourism entrepreneurs will be provided with digital and financial accessibility, skills development opportunities, and access to funding to support their business concepts. The ways in which the sharing economy and platforms such as Airbnb have influenced entrepreneurship and regional inclusive tourism development and growth in South Africa remain under-researched in the existing body of tourism knowledge. The current study now draws on the case of the implementation of the Airbnb Entrepreneurship Academy in the Waterberg District in response to this.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach to gain a holistic understanding of Airbnb's involvement in the Waterberg region through the Airbnb Entrepreneurship Academy which was hosted there. Due to the unique research scope and the need to capture detailed perspectives from stakeholders involved in the Airbnb Entrepreneurship Academy, the study was embedded in the paradigm of interpretivism, as it was necessary to explore the experiences, views, and perspectives of the different stakeholder groups involved in the Airbnb Entrepreneurship Academy. Accordingly, the participants in the study were divided into three groups: (i) Airbnb representatives involved in the Academy's operations,

(ii) partners of Airbnb in the Academy, including representatives from the District Municipality, Public-Private Growth Initiative (PPGI), Lapalala Wilderness School (LWS), Women in Tourism – Limpopo chapter, Waterberg Biosphere Reserve, and Limpopo Tourism, and (iii) graduates of the Airbnb Entrepreneurship Academy from the five local municipalities in the District, to ensure diverse representation. A purposive sampling method was used for selecting participants from all these groups. Interviews with Airbnb partners and focus group discussions with Airbnb representatives were conducted online. For the graduates, the researchers arranged for five focus group discussions as per the five local municipalities in the district. These focus groups were held both in-person and over the phone to accommodate those in more remote areas.

The study received ethical clearance from the School of Tourism and Hospitality's Ethics Committee and adhered to all required ethical guidelines. Data collection occurred between 30 November and 6 December 2023. Interviews and focus group discussions were recorded with permission and transcribed using Otter.ai. Fieldworkers then reviewed the transcriptions to ensure accuracy and that the intended meanings, including translations, were properly captured. The transcriptions were subsequently uploaded to Atlas.ti, a qualitative analysis software, where the data was coded and categorized. In presenting the findings, the researchers have assigned codes to each participant to ensure their anonymity, where Airbnb representatives' responses have an 'A' in their code, while Airbnb partner participants 'AP' and focus group participants 'FG'. These letters are followed by numbers (with no significant meaning) to differentiate participants from each other.

RESULTS

Inclusivity and Airbnb interventions

One of the major themes emanating from the analysis was the factors contributing to the effectiveness of the program in fostering inclusive tourism and economic growth through the empowerment of emerging entrepreneurs. These factors concerned the strategic selection of participants, the engaging and challenging content/learnings, and the duration of the program. Generally, the results demonstrated the centrality of inclusiveness in the interventions of Airbnb and its partners. Certainly, the findings demonstrated that the success of the Airbnb Entrepreneurship Academy in driving inclusive tourism growth was, in part, attributed to how this opportunity was presented to communities within the district, the selection of members to be involved in the Academy as well as the partnerships developed amongst local, regional and national stakeholders.

The research uncovered that Airbnb's partnerships with local stakeholders assisted in sharing information about the program with the wider District. Partners such as Limpopo Women in Tourism, Lapalala Wilderness School, and District Municipality shared this information through their formal and informal networks, while the District Municipality shared information on their websites, and through posters. Additionally, the study found that the Airbnb team along with the Relay Institute also

underwent a series of road shows, to share the information with the local municipalities. Discussions with the partners revealed the importance of making this information digestible, such as explaining tourism, Airbnb (or its concept), and inclusivity in local languages (mostly Sepedi). This assisted in broadening the pool of potential participants. Once this phase of the project was completed, a selection process followed, where screening questions were asked to members of the District who applied to the Academy. A description of the selection process (as well as its rationale) is detailed below by one of the Airbnb representatives:

We then go through an intensive recruitment process alongside the partner. So firstly, we have criteria that we have established as the Academy. Help set people up for success. So that varies from individual criteria. So, for example, they should have an entrepreneurial passion or willingness to engage with entrepreneurship. They should have access to a smartphone so that they can download the Airbnb app. They should have access to a bank account because we know that they need a bank account to be able to get paid out on the Airbnb platform. And the criteria like that goes on. Then we also have some kind of community criteria tourism criteria. So for example, the community should be accessible. People should be able to get there. It should typically have an anchor tourist attraction as we're not in the business of developing a tourism hotspot but rather looking at how Airbnb can be used as another access way to market so a lot of the hosts for example, have either had some experience in tourism or have an interest or maybe have a family member that's hosted a guest before or there's some kind of link there, or at least a real willingness or want to get engaged [A1].

While there were a few participants who recommended that the program should be open to a wide number of people, a large share of the participants noted the importance of having a selection process, with particular attention to entrepreneurial spirit, which better positions an individual for success (Urban, 2013; Rosado-Cubero et al., 2022). Indeed, these participants concur that the already limited resources must be effectively utilised to support entrepreneurs who are able to take off with the skills, networks, and other assets provided by the Academy.

The entrepreneurship academy is not going to give things on a silver platter, but you have to play your part as well. You have to be active, and willing to change certain things to achieve certain things, you have to get out of your comfort zone, and you have to be a critical thinker because being narrow-minded is not going to get you anywhere [FG9].

Following the selection process, a two-day boot camp was organized for the selected members of the communities. Additionally, this process revealed the challenges faced by the various stakeholders in the District and enabled Airbnb to assist both the community members in being producers of tourism services as well as the involved stakeholders to support the drive towards fostering an inclusive tourism sector.

Skills development and the sharing economy

Learning, particularly skills development, is widely accepted as a prerequisite for transformative and sustainable tourism growth (Schonherr et al., 2023). All of the participants commended that the learnings derived from the Airbnb boot camps, ranging from the importance of undertaking business research and planning, the value of creating appealing content and understanding the influence of media, and how to create personal stories relating to the experiences and customer management technique (including conflict and complaint management). This program thereby assisted in ensuring that graduates cannot only able to create and promote their offerings but also compete in a competitive tourism environment as the demands of customers are continuously changing (Daniel et al., 2017). In this regard, one partner elaborated:

To enable transformation and inclusive growth you need to help develop tourism-specific skills. So that's where the likes of Airbnb I think played an important role you know 50–60 students suddenly have not only more skills in terms of how to interact with the tourist, but they also have exposure to online which we know where the world is going [AP7].

Additionally, scholars such as Torres Valdes et al. (2019) note that the tourism industry is in a transitional period, requiring new skills. Sakamoto (2019) underlines the need for skills development systems to focus on the existing and pertinent challenges of marginalisation and limited accessibility of the broader society (particularly youth and women) into mainstream economic activities, particularly considering the emerging changes and transformation therein those sectors. One of the praises of the Airbnb Entrepreneurship Academy was its showcasing of existing opportunities that can be leveraged into the tourism industry through the sharing economy. One graduate espoused:

But also a whole lot of experience, Waterberg offers a variety of experience. You know, I've always thought that experience is jumping going into it by heart balloon, ziplining but I didn't know that there is just so much in an experience like playing with mud, people riding a donkey. We do have those in the Waterberg and experience with the elephants in Bella Bella, people drawing [and] people cooking. I didn't know those [were] experiences before Airbnb. So Airbnb itself kind of like opened up those many opportunities that have always been in front of us, we just didn't know them as experiences [FG16].

The Airbnb program, which was arguably tailored to the Airbnb business module (of home-sharing and experiences) is an increasingly growing trend within the tourism industry that breaks down barriers between the host and the tourists, as well as tourism and host communities. As such, the study found the provision of skills embedded in the Academy to be important in transitioning the district's economy to tourism and providing skills that are transferable to other tourism entrepreneurship ventures that may not be related to Airbnb. However, one of the criticisms of the Airbnb boot camp was its duration, as each boot camp lasted for two days and focused on practical and peer-to-peer learning. Some of the graduates lamented over the short duration of the bootcamp for some reasons including the difficulty they found using the app, and the difficulty in truly grasping the information in the short period.

I would say, before I give a mark, we received a lot. We did a lot, but the time was short. We couldn't absorb as much as we could because the time was limited because we had to do everything fast, even though we were able to communicate. Even after classes, we will communicate via phone calls, zoom meetings, or WhatsApp meetings and stuff like that, but the time was limited. But then so all in all, I would really rate them 10. They were good those guys, they're good, but the time was short [FG20].

Further, the participants mentioned the opportunity to add further information (such as practical guides on how to market oneself and financial literacy) should these programs have a longer duration. A few participants offered an alternative approach where perhaps more assistance could be provided to the participants before the start of the boot camp, for instance, some participants had mentioned some difficulty in navigating the app.

Support and mentorship

To a large extent, the Airbnb Entrepreneurship Academy exceeded graduates' expectations. The views from both graduates and partners speak positively to the work done by Airbnb in uplifting and empowering entrepreneurs and highlighting the numerous opportunities available to them within the tourism industry, and with the platform. Specifically, participants spoke positively towards the work done in information sharing, providing capacity and tangible outputs (i.e., UPS and Wi-Fi routers), as well as the consistent help of Airbnb throughout the program and even afterward, with the assistance of mentors. The quote below by one of the graduates encapsulates such views:

The support since we listed our experience Airbnb has been holding our hand from day one until today to the extent of getting us the UPS to deal with the load shedding to the routers, we have WiFi 24/7 And that helps us to be always available because if you're offering a service it can be very frustrating to customers just trying to get a hold of you and you're not there. We are given a platform to meet people from different places. And they're always on the phone 24/7 [to] help you through until you are done registering your business or listing your experience on the website. So you're given a mentor, saying whenever you come across a problem, here's a mentor [FG6].

The mentorships provided by Airbnb were instrumental in kickstarting the graduates' ventures through Airbnb. Additionally, numerous participants went into more depth, stating that the mentorships were especially helpful in times when participants encountered challenges and setbacks, and they were able to learn from their mentors. This continuous learning thereby assisted in fostering more knowledge sharing on tourism entrepreneurship for the Airbnb graduates. Further, some partners, such as the Relay Institute continue to support the graduates in their endeavors post the boot camp. Accordingly, these findings emphasize the importance of support and mentorship in driving inclusive tourism growth in rural and emerging destinations. This importance is even more pronounced in destinations such as South Africa where inclusive tourism development is grounded on the national priority to reduce poverty alleviation and unemployment (Butler & Rogerson, 2016) where small tourism enterprises are key to achieving this goal.

Social networks and rural entrepreneurship

The analysis revealed another major theme in the data, which was related to the formulation of social networks and capital amongst the graduates and Airbnb partners. Certainly, the participants applauded the strong social networks formed during the formal boot camps. The graduates spoke of the creation of a WhatsApp group chat for the graduates which enabled the participants to continue being in contact with one another, facilitating the sharing of important information. For instance, one participant explained:

My business with the challenges I mentioned earlier on, but what I like is the networking, like FG3 said, we now have a WhatsApp group and we attend conferences where we go meet different people. So I believe that I'm still trying to build and with the networks that I'm building every day with my meeting people every day, eventually, it's going to grow my business [FG5].

Meeting different kinds of people, expects and also the experience was a lot like when we were at Lapalala Wilderness School, the ideas that we were sharing with the people, even those guys from Airbnb, they helped us a lot by how to sort yourself on the phone, even now we still struggling to sort ourselves out or to do the bookings and all that [FG13].

Entrepreneurship in rural environments is characterized by strong elements of social capital through the social networks embedded in these tourism spaces (Tomay & Tuboly, 2022). These social networks enabled the participants to collectively problem-solve the myriad of challenges that they faced. Indeed, Asmit et al. (2024) expounded these challenges to include limited infrastructure and facilities, minimal exposure to external sponsors (or funding opportunities), limited access to markets and resources, unsupportive business environments and lack of human capital. These challenges are especially prevalent in the Waterberg District, which has small businesses working collectively to navigate this troubling environment.

Notably, while the participants recognized the contribution of Airbnb in addressing some of the skills gaps in this tourism space, an overwhelming number of participants added that the program was too specific to creating Airbnb experiences. As seen in the quotes below, the graduates of the program require more business and management-related skills to ensure the longevity of their operations on the Airbnb app and outside the app:

I believe that one of the things like I said, like capacity building. Capacitating, the small emerging businesses that are just babies in the industry, to capacitate them with the right tool. So if it's marketing, like marketing capacity building, if it's communicating their product, because I believe that some people are not buying into the product because you're not communicating well [AP7].

First thing of course, it should be business training, like the principles of business, running a proper business, you know, your marketing and stuff. And then secondly, maybe will be in line with tourism now. But yeah, the first thing should be that, and then the other things should fall and then from there the second part would be funding [AP3].

Asmit et al. (2024) contend for more skills development programs, geared toward emerging entrepreneurs owing to their crucial role in the economic (and inclusive) transformation and interventions such as

the Airbnb Academy positioned to facilitate entry to marginalized communities growing in frequency and importance. While it took on a public-private partnership approach, Airbnb's intervention in the Waterberg was primarily industry-led, and centred on the Airbnb business model. Considering the lack of tourism management knowledge and experience in communities in the Waterberg, the primary drawback, which is that there wasn't an existing knowledge base from which to complement the learnings from the Airbnb Entrepreneurship Academy, is a great one. This then leads to questions on the future viability of these newly established businesses. This concern is further exacerbated by the resource limitations of the support structures (such as associations) in the Waterberg. For instance, one Airbnb partner mentioned that while slow progress is progress nonetheless, the apparent need to further assist these entrepreneurs is a daunting task considering the financial resources needed:

There is we starting to see the impact. Because life-changing. But the question perhaps might be, is it at a rate that we need? And the answer will be, 'more work needs to be done in order to yield a better benefit of the programme and start to see more fruits based on what it's done'... We also pick up gaps. Because some of them have graduates who might need some skills that could really assist their businesses to flourish. So the reality is, if funding is available, we could do more. But because the funding is an issue, and also as a nonprofit organisation, we are able to do things that we can, based on where we find a surplus, but if we don't have a surplus, as certain aspects, we might not be able to do it [AP9].

While private-public partnerships are instrumental in driving economic growth, there have been questions on the sustainability of such relationships and the environments they were set. For instance, Pilving et al. (2019) consider the lifecycle of private-public partnerships and consider formal and informal partnerships which were found to have different timeline paths. This is a similar situation to tourism partnerships in the Waterberg District, in that the partnerships spearheaded by Airbnb fostered informal partnerships amongst the local stakeholders which are more likely to continue after Airbnb's intervention in the region. These could be foundational steps to driving inclusively in tourism development and growth in the region as there is a recognized importance on empowering emerging and previously marginalized entrepreneurs as well as fostering an inclusive tourism environment that enables these entrepreneurs to operate successfully. However, the constraints on resources within these local stakeholders may adversely affect their ability to achieve this inclusive and sustainable growth. The following theme presented grounds for these issues in the Waterberg context.

The destination in context

To understand the contribution of Airbnb and the partnerships in fostering inclusive tourism growth through skills development programs, it is imperative to consider the destination context. The Waterberg region is an emerging tourism destination, slowly diversifying from its predominant mining sector. Tourism and the sharing economy models such as Airbnb promise ease in which marginalised communities can create economic opportunities from their natural and cultural resources

(Zhang et al., 2019). However, the reality is that communities in rural and underdeveloped regions face substantial challenges. Notably, the participants were of the view that the current local context of the Waterberg posed severe challenges for the growth and progress of the graduates, with the two common challenges being low connectivity in the region and the lack of meaningful tourist numbers. In terms of low connectivity, participants cited poor road infrastructure and poor connectivity to a number of communities in the region, as seen by one focus group participant mentioning *‘To my side I think in some areas, the roads [are] a challenge. You know, especially during the rainy seasons’* [FG2]. Much of the Waterberg district is rural, with most of the urban areas dispersed and fragmented, and characterised by limited infrastructure and transportation networks which pose accessibility challenges between the remote areas (Asmit et al., 2024; Zhou et al., 2017). These infrastructural and network challenges understandably affect tourism development and broader economic growth.

Moreover, one of the primary challenges is the low number of tourist arrivals to the region. Discussions with representatives from Airbnb revealed Waterberg to have been a strategically selected destination owing to the proximity of the destination to Johannesburg and the potential to disperse tourist flows away from traditional hotspots. Unfortunately, the process of marketing and branding the Waterberg and the people in the region may only reap rewards in the long term, along with continuous marketing and promotion. Currently, the region is facing few tourist arrivals, with a number of the participants pointing out that the few number of tourist visitations are concentrated on the existing game reserves.

The challenge is not getting enough tourists and I think the reason is that tourists go to the game reserves and not the villages. So for now, that [is] the main challenge, not receiving enough guests [FG20].

The tourism sector in the Waterberg is centered on nature-based experiences and driven by privately (white) owned game reserves. The quote above confirms the prevalence of the apartheid legacy of white domination of tourism product ownership (Butler & Rogerson, 2016). As such, the Airbnb Entrepreneurship Academy graduates must compete with well-established tourism businesses, which operate in an exclusive environment, for a small number of tourists. These challenges resulted in very slow progress and bookings for the graduates after the program. A representative from the Airbnb team further lamented on this matter:

I think that tourism demand in the area wasn't very, very high. And so we didn't see hosts getting a lot of bookings, even though in some instances, the quality of the listings was really good. So for example, they might have enjoyed professional photography. Their writing was really wonderful. The pricing was really reasonable and fair value. And yet we just and they had all the dates available, and yet we didn't see any bookings. Whereas if that very same listing was in an area that enjoyed very, very high tourism numbers, it would certainly have gotten bookings and so I think that was one observation was just maybe the remoteness of the Waterberg and how few people were able to book even though I think the quality of the listings in some instances were really great [A4].

As seen above, the ultimate success of this entrepreneurial support is dependent on the nature of the tourism demand, and perhaps time. The Waterberg District has the potential to draw from the domestic market and disperse the tourist flows from the Kruger National Park and Durban as domestic tourism destinations in South Africa. However, these are long-established tourism hotspots, and attracting this market will require time and further promotional campaigns on this destination, thereby requiring continued wide stakeholder interventions.

CONCLUSIONS

Rural and emerging tourism destinations such as the Waterberg are faced with a myriad of livelihood-related challenges, and tourism, and the expansion of entry possibilities are positioned as a sector that is able to make transformative change. The study found that driving inclusive tourism development relied on information sharing, providing access to opportunities, support and mentorship, easing local challenges, and forming strategic local, regional, and national partners. The focus on the Airbnb Entrepreneurship Academy was particularly informative in examining how previously marginalized communities could be empowered to be producers of tourism experiences and the investigating process of opening up a previously exclusive tourism industry.

Skills development has been argued to foster inclusive economic growth and initiatives such as the Airbnb Entrepreneurship Academy are instrumental in driving the inclusion of SMMEs into the tourism space. Skills development is a cornerstone to structural transformation, and in an era of changing work structures, afforded by the disruption (or advancements) of the sharing economy, could contribute to inclusive economic growth. In examining the role of the Airbnb Entrepreneurship Academy in fostering inclusive tourism growth in the Waterberg District of South Africa, the study found the program to have been instrumental in providing knowledge and capacity-building opportunities to emerging entrepreneurs in the region. Airbnb and the private-public partners were aware of the realities of these entrepreneurs and provided much support in all phases of the program to ensure the production of high-quality tourist experiences and services, as well as entrepreneurs who can operate in the industry and capitalize on emerging opportunities within the sharing economy. However, the long-term structural barriers persist to challenge the longevity and growth of these entrepreneurs. Certainly, counteracting the inherently exclusive tourism sector, which faces low demand and poor infrastructure requires more concerted efforts from both the private and public sectors.

The attainment of inclusive tourism growth in South Africa is an important agenda given the high levels of unemployment and poverty, the continuing apartheid legacies (i.e., white ownership of tourism products), and the inherent possibilities in tourism (and now the sharing economy) to address these concerns. As such, future research could consider other technologies and platforms within the sharing economy and their contributions to widening the scope of opportunities for marginalized communities to be producers and consumers of tourism experiences, as well as the level of acceptance

into utilizing these technologies in rural tourism environments. Additionally, the role of destination marketing to promote new tourism landscapes was a strong focus of Airbnb's intervention, which correlates with the focus of broader national tourism to spread tourism activities beyond traditional tourism hotspots in South Africa. Accordingly, further research could examine the inclusiveness and representativeness of marketing strategies utilized in promoting emerging destinations in South Africa. Moreover, this research, and much of the existing studies on inclusive tourism in South Africa (see for instance, Butler & Rogerson, 2016; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020), focused on the tourism supply perspective, and a broader and more holistic understanding of inclusive tourism in this country should include the views of the domestic tourists and their perceptions, experiences in being included and represented in tourism spaces. Finally, as this research focused on the Airbnb Entrepreneurship Academy, which included a mixture of communities in the Waterberg district, more research is needed on the specific opportunities, challenges, and realities of women, youth, and people living with disabilities to being providers of tourism experiences as these groups still require further support from the tourism industry and policymakers.

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