SHARING ECONOMY AND INCLUSIVE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT: A CASE STUDY ON THE WATERBERG DISTRICT IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract: The purpose of the study was to analyse inclusive tourism development in the Global South, using a case study of Airbnb's interventions in the Waterberg District of South Africa. Adopting a qualitative approach, the research was conducted in three phases. The first phase consisted of a focus group held with Airbnb representatives who were involved in the planning and operations of the programme. The second and third phases involved in-depth interviews with Airbnb partners and graduates of the Airbnb Academy, respectively. The findings reveal that previously excluded groups were able to become tourism producers, through the skills development programme, joining the Airbnb app, and the tangible outcomes from the interventions. The programme also widened the scope of opportunities for members who previously did not identify as part of the tourism value chain. Further, there was a notable change in the tourism landscape, now involving experiences that are more authentic and representative of the culture and lifestyle of the community. However, the tourism industry is prevalently white-owned, presenting substantial challenges for graduates of the programme to tap into the tourism market. The findings confirm that inclusive tourism is intrinsically embedded in the local context: politics, economy, and society. In this regard, the study expands and contextualises the literature on inclusive tourism development in the Global South.

Keywords: Inclusive tourism, Airbnb, skills development, South Africa

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INTRODUCTION

Globally, there has been much debate on the attainment of inclusive tourism development and growth (Peterson et al., 2020; Bakker et al., 2023). This is, in part, due to the deeply seated exclusive nature of tourism which has garnered much criticism (Rogerson and Rogerson, 2020). Indeed, several scholars have criticised the long-standing practice of tourism being dominated by large companies, and the subsequent profits from this economic sector accruing to the upper and middle class, while simultaneously marginalizing poor communities (see, for example, Kadi et al., 2022; Scheyvens and Biddulph, 2018). Inclusive tourism, described as a multidimensional concept, refers to a manner in which tourism development is approached in order to provide a range of holistic benefits, resulting in sustainable and equitable outcomes (Kadi et al., 2022; Scheyvens and Biddulph, 2018; Biddulph and Scheyvens, 2018).

Inclusive tourism is understood in this research as a transformative form of tourism where marginalised groups are involved in tourism production, consumption, benefit-sharing, and decision-making (Rogerson and Rogerson, 2020). Established in 2008 to assist local residents at destinations to maximise the use of housing and experience options, Airbnb has become a global force in the global tourism landscape (Ioannides et al., 2019; Negi and Tripathi, 2022).

The proliferation of Airbnb in many destinations has raised several pertinent questions, many of which are related to the impacts of this global platform to communities, destinations, and visitor experiences (Kadi et al., 2022; Cheng et al., 2022). Certainly, while Airbnb routinely underscores how their services and business model benefit all members of the community and can drive inclusivity, several researchers have criticised the associated increased housing prices, higher cost of living, subsequent resident resentment of Airbnb, overuse (and abuse) of the sharing rhetoric (Hall et al., 2022; Cheng et al., 2022; Ioannides et al., 2019). Largely, the research on Airbnb has been centred on urban settings, often popular or growing tourism cities (Adamiak, 2022).

With Airbnb expanding its network to rural, and less developed regions, coupled with their Inclusive Tourism Committee (and subsequently the establishment of the Airbnb Entrepreneurship Academy), there is an opportunity to expand the lens on Airbnb and its role to inclusive tourism development. Through the Airbnb Entrepreneurship Academy, Airbnb partners with local organisations to develop an immersive education programme, introducing participants to the

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potential benefits of becoming a tourism entrepreneur by hosting their products on the Airbnb platform. In doing so, the Academy assists those from diverse backgrounds and historically underrepresented communities learn how they can potentially benefit from tourism development in their locations (Airbnb, 2024). The current study focuses on the case of the Airbnb Entrepreneurship Academy in the Waterberg District of South Africa, an area developed through the mining sector and which has recently begun transitioning to tourism based on its rich natural and cultural landscape.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Inclusive tourism
Inclusive tourism is tourism that promotes local development by being inclusive of low- and middle-income population groups, aiming to reduce income inequality (Butler and Richardson, 2015). The concept of inclusive tourism development is based on the premise that tourism development can, in fact, be inclusive and aid in efforts to reduce poverty if all stakeholders involved in the tourism value chain contribute to the creation of opportunities for all and allow for all to share in the benefits of tourism-related activities. Considering this, Scheyvens and Biddulph (2018) propose that the elements of inclusive tourism are overcoming barriers for disadvantaged groups to access tourism activities either as producers or consumers; facilitating self-representation by marginalised groups so that they are represented; challenging existing power relations; widening the range of people involved in tourism decision making; positioning new places on the tourism map; and encouraging mutual learning and respect between hosts and tourists. Kadi et al. (2022) highlight the central concern being to bind these concepts together to ensure tourism benefits are widely and equitably shared. According to the South African Green Paper on the Development and Promotion of Tourism in South Africa (2023), an inclusive South African tourism sector can be achieved through increased skills development, entrepreneurship, and financial support. To promote tourism inclusivity there is a need for leveraging innovation to create compelling experiences, building partnerships to strengthen the sector's impact nationally, regionally, and globally, addressing barriers to tourism growth, and aligning with the countries' social development and cohesion initiatives (South Africa, 2023). Overall, inclusive tourism development is a multi-dimensional concept that involves overcoming barriers to access to the tourism sector, widening the range of people who have tourism decision-making powers, and putting new places on the tourism map, all in a way that allows the benefits of tourism to be shared (Kadi et al., 2022; Biddulph and Scheyvens, 2018). Following the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the South African tourism industry, the country's Tourism Sector Recovery Plan noted that there is now an opportunity to rethink the tourism sector and its contribution to the people of South Africa, building a more inclusive sector that ensures the benefits are enjoyed widely and fairly (South Africa, 2023).

The Airbnb Entrepreneurship Academy and Inclusive Tourism Development
Airbnb is an online platform through which hosts can rent out accommodation spaces or tourism and hospitality experiences to increase their income, engage in tourism entrepreneurship and become a part of the broader tourism industry (Reinhold and Dolnicar, 2017). According to Airbnb, the platform promotes inclusive tourism as it provides a peer-to-peer platform, giving any individual access to the tourism industry (Kadi et al., 2022). Scheyvens and Biddulph (2018) add that as Airbnb provides marginalised individuals with a means through which to share their tourism offerings, it does indeed promote inclusive tourism development. In South Africa, the Airbnb Entrepreneurship Academy has been established to empower new generations of tourism entrepreneurs to promote inclusive and sustainable tourism in the country.

The Academy is a skills development programme that seeks to assist marginalised and previously disadvantaged groups to become succesful tourism entrepreneurs using the Airbnb platform. Since 2017, the Academy has been presented through 24 training workshops across South Africa through partnerships with public and private organisations to break existing barriers to entry into the tourism market and to distribute tourism benefits more equally (Airbnb, 2024). Despite this, the extent to which Airbnb contributes to inclusive tourism development has come into contest as in order to fully understand that, a clear picture is needed of who is engaging with the platform as a tourism entrepreneur in terms of class, race, gender, background and the conditions in which they are operating (Scheyvens and Biddulph, 2018). The current study addresses this gap by engaging with those engaging on the platform within the Waterberg region.

Case study: The Waterberg District
Found in South Africa's Limpopo province, the Waterberg District boasts appealing landscapes, diverse flora and fauna, and vibrant cultures (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2019). Comprising six local municipalities, including Bela-Bela, Lephalale, Modimolle, Mookgophong, Mogalakwena, and Thabazimbi, the district is endowed with abundant natural resources, supporting the three main economic sectors, primarily mining, agriculture, and tourism (Waterberg District Municipality, 2024). The district faces several challenges that require strategic interventions, relating largely to socio-economic disparities, such as high levels of unemployment and poverty which exacerbate the social inequalities brought forth by the apartheid legacy (Waterberg District Municipality, 2024). Indeed, the historical inequalities persist, with marginalised groups, including women and traditional communities, facing many barriers to participation and empowerment in the major economic sectors in the region including tourism. Additionally, many communities in the Waterberg district lack access to essential services such as clean water, healthcare, and education, hindering socio-economic development. Further, 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 (Waterberg District Municipality, 2024). These infrastructural and network challenges understandably affect tourism development and broader economic growth. Moreover, the mining sector is the largest

economic sector, contributing 57.5 % to the GDP of the district, related land uses pose severe threats to the integrity of the bioregion and ecosystem. While Waterberg's economy is primarily driven by the mining sector, the tourism industry is one of the region's emerging economic sectors, gaining increasing attention owing to its potential for socioeconomic development, environmental conservation, and economic diversification (Waterbeg Tourism, 2023; UNESCO, 2019). As a tourism attraction, the destination is known for its nature and outdoor experiences, such as game drives and bird viewing at the numerous provincial and privately owned game and nature reserves found within the region (Waterberg Tourism, 2023).

Recently the Waterberg District Municipality formulated the District Development Model, which sought to adopt a public-private partnership approach to development in the region. In 2021 Airbnb was invited by the District Municipality to help build inclusive tourism as part of the Model, partnering with several local stakeholders, including the Waterberg Biosphere, Limpopo Women in Tourism, The Relay Institute, The Lapalala Wilderness School, and the Endangered Wildlife Trust. In 2022, Airbnb began to roll out a programme to boost economic opportunities through tourism with three primary objectives which were to drive inclusive tourism through skills development through the Airbnb Entrepreneurship Academy; to enable digital access through the provision of free Wifi; and to engage in partner-led destination promotion to create awareness of the unique offerings of the Waterberg. The Waterberg District thereby forms a valuable case study site to examine the transformative power of inclusive tourism as a driver of socioeconomic development, environmental conservation, and innovative initiatives fostered by Airbnb.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a purely qualitative approach to gather a comprehensive insight into the role of Airbnb in inclusive tourism development in the Waterberg. The study was exploratory in nature, owing to the uniqueness of the scope of research, as well as the need to gather in-depth views and opinions of the stakeholders involved in the Airbnb Entrepreneurship Academy. Accordingly, the study had three participant groups: (i) Airbnb representatives who were involved in the operations of the Academy, (ii) Airbnb partners in the Academy, including representatives of 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, located in the five local municipalities in the District (to ensure representation).

A purposive sampling approach was utilised for all of these participant groups. Interviews with Airbnb partners and focus groups with Airbnb representatives were held online, while interviews with Academy graduates were conducted face-to-face as well as via telephone (to accommodate participants residing in further areas). Tables 1 and 2 show the participants' codes assigned to the graduates and partners included in this report.

The interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed via Otter.ai. The transcriptions from Otter.ai were reviewed further by the fieldworkers to ensure the accuracy of transcription and that meaning (and translations) were captured. Finally, these transcriptions were uploaded onto Atlas.ti, a qualitative analysis software where the data was coded and grouped into themes, and are presented in the following results section.

Figure 1 below illustrates the methlogical steps taken in this research.
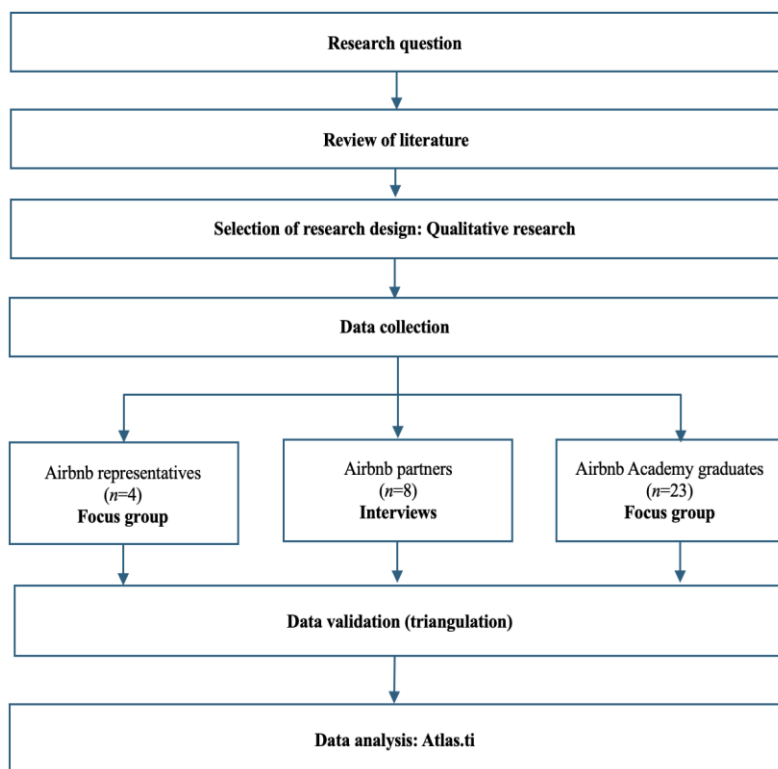

Figure 1. Summary of methodology

Table 1. Profile of Airbnb graduate participants

Participant code	Location	Type of experience	No. of employees	Alternative source of income?	Years in tourism?	Reason for starting business
GI1P1	Makopane	Traditional healer	None	Yes	1 year	Additional income
GI1P2	Makopane	Beautician	5	Yes	1 year	Saw Opportunity
GI1P3	Makopane	Caterer	1	Yes	1 year	Passion
GI2P1	Lapalala Wilderness School	Bee experience	None	No	1 year	Needed income
GI2P2	Lapalala Wilderness School	Nature guide	None	Yes, employed elsewhere	1 year	Saw opportunity
GI2P3	Lapalala Wilderness School	Accommodation	None	Yes, employed elsewhere	1 year	Saw opportunity
GI3P1	Mokopane	Catering	5 part time	None	2 years	To create employment for others. Make money. To follow passion
GI3P2	Mokopane	Cultural tours	1 fulltime, 2 parttime	None	+20years	Need for additional income. To follow passion
GI4P1	Lephalala	Guesthouse	4 permanent and 5 temporary	None	+ 5 years	Saw a need for accommodation
GI4P2	Lepalala	Accommodation	1 part time	None	+ 5 years	Needed money
GI5P1	Vaalwater	Transportation, offering shuttle services and tours	2 permanent, 3 part time	Construction	10 years	Passion
GI5P2	Vaalwater	Freelance tour guiding	Works alone	Safari tours	Since 2017	Passion, people requesting my services and needed the money
GI5P3	Vaalwater	Nature guide	Works alone	Employed somewhere else	Since 2017	Passion, vast knowledge and the need to share that knowledge.
GI5P4	Vaalwater	Traditional healer	Work alone	Construction, agriculture and livestock	2 years	A suggestion made by a friend
GI5P5	Vaalwater	Bird guide	Work alone		Since 2008	Lost employment due to covid-19
IIP1	Lephalale	Accommodation	Works alone	Tender	2 years	Saw opportunity
IIP2	Lephalale	Accommodation	Works alone	Government employee	2 years	Saw opportunity
IIP3	Lephalale	Accommodation/ Entertainment	Group of 3	Cultural centre	2 years	Income opportunity/ passion
IIP4	Thabazimbi	Accommodation	7	Yes, employee	4 years	Saw opportunity
IIP5	Thabazimbi	Tour operator	1 permanent, obtain students need internship when there is a need for extra hands	Tourism grading assessor	From 2019	Covid-19 Saw a gap in the market
IIP6	Modimolle	Experience - church	8 part time	Security company	4 years	Wanted a challenge
IIP7	Modimolle	Beauty therapist	1 permanent and 3 part time	None	8 years	Lost job
IIP8	Bela-Bela	Tour operator	3 part time staff	Social worker	6 years	Saw a gap and the increase in unemployment.

Table 2. Partner Interviews

Participant code	Organisation
PI1	District Municipality
PI2	District Municipality
PI3	District Municipality
PI4	PPGI
PI5	Laphalala Wilderness School
PI6	Women in Tourism
PI7	Waterberg Biosphere
PI8	Limpopo Tourism

RESULTS
Opportunities for entry into the tourism market

The Airbnb skills development program in the Waterberg involved boot camps hosted in 2021 and 2022 with interested and emerging entrepreneurs. These interventions are premised on the simplicity of the Airbnb concept, that is, anyone with available space and passion can create a listing on the app and be open to a vast potential market. Interviews with the Airbnb representatives, as well as their partners in this intervention, revealed a key activity undertaken was to publicise these boot camps to the six local municipalities in the Waterberg District. This involved industry associations sharing information amongst their members, and District representatives along with local tourism stakeholders hosting utilising several means to spread information on the Airbnb skills development programme. A representative of the District Municipality explained:

We have different structures in the district, you will have your tourism associations, and we also have email addresses, like a database of those who are active in the sector. So we email and we send to the associations to distribute them amongst their members. And also, I think, on the website as well [PI1].

In addition to the above, some participants broadened other strategies used to spread the information as widely in the district as possible including roadshows. These roadshows provided information on highlighting tourism, its role in the District economy, opportunities therein, and the Airbnb app. Individuals involved in these roadshows explained the importance of ensuring this information was digestible, resulting in translating these concepts into local languages (Sepedi).

One of the enablers inclusive tourism through Airbnb's skills development programme, was that it raised awareness on the scope of opportunities for local entrepreneurs and subsequently was able to widen the number of people that could be involved in the tourism sector. Table 1 above is a clear indication of this, there the program attracted participants who offer a diverse range of experiences, ranging from accommodations, tour guiding to traditional healers and beauticians. Indeed, both partners and participants alike commended Airbnb for raising awareness of the tourism value chain, as some of the participants had not previously considered themselves as operating in the tourism sector:

So some of those who are doing it, [such as] your beauticians they didn't know that they within the tourism value chain. So that knowledge [creation] part of it as well. And some experiences that they did, there's this guy who takes care of dogs, his love for dogs, he wouldn't have associated with tourism. So that's a new experience to offer [PI1].

Leveraging the availability of natural and cultural assets

Overwhelmingly, the natural and cultural features in the Waterberg have been described as unique features that offer several opportunities for local community members to leverage to generate a sustainable income within the tourism industry. Some participants mentioned the nature reserves and game farms as key attractions that draw people to the district municipality, and the opportunities that exist to tap into the tourist markets drawn by these attractions:

For me, I think it's the bushveld itself, number one. Number 2, it might not be most of the big five, but we have so many lodges around the game areas, some of them do have the big five. So, I find that it is attractive to the outside world because the things that we have most of the people don't have them outside there [GI2P3]

The natural landscape and diversity in the Waterberg District are arguably the primary motives for tourists' arrival to the district, and are one of the reasons for Airbnb's intervention in the Waterberg. While several participants acknowledged the game farms are privately owned and therefore exclusive in nature, Airbnb provided the opportunity to create experiences complementing the existing tourism offerings, with some graduates being listed as bird guides, nature guides, and indigenous game. In this regard, one of the partners (a representative from the District Municipality) recognised the important part Airbnb played in diversifying the tourism experiences offered in the Waterberg District:

But now, Airbnb opened up more opportunities to everyone. Before it was never inclusive because only one or two service providers [would] benefit. But now it can be a chain of people that are going to benefit because they're not only coming to sleep over and seeing the big five, [rather] they're coming over then having cultural experience, going hiking and then come back [to] sleep over, then the process starts again. That automatically then brings in some funds into the area which is what we've been looking for, to say we want the area to bring in more sustainable jobs [and] sustainable money. [PI3]

In terms of cultural assets, other participants made reference to the local culture as well as the township culture as appealing tourism features that could add, and enhance the tourism offerings in the region as such several participants utilised the natural and cultural assets in forming their tourism offerings.

This tied well in with Airbnb's mandate to provide graduates with the skills to harness these assets and thereby turn them into products that could be listed on the platform and offered to a global audience.

Simplicity in the Airbnb model/concept

Airbnb is designed to provide easy access for individuals to enter the market, by simply having a space and or a passion. Several participants applaud the Airbnb model/concept as it provides wide array of opportunities, with relatively few barriers. Participants elaborated that becoming an Airbnb host was much simpler and doable as opposed to starting a business which involves comparatively more time and financial resources. In fact, several partners have added that the Airbnb Academy was to provide the necessary resources to participants, enabling them to form their own venture by the end of the boot camp, therefore fostering sustainable livelihoods:

You have to just tell them that Airbnb is just helping people to make money on themselves that's the first point and the easiest way because you don't demand so much, because it's only to go somewhere and pay money for changing the house to residence to home sharing. So there is no anything that we paid you can just use what you have. That's how simple it is [GI1P1].

Related, some participants were of the view that this program came at the right time, as the country's tourism sector

was emerging from COVID-19, and much of the population was battling the economic consequences of the pandemic and required new economic opportunities to rebuild their income, which was not possible through Airbnb. For instance, see the quote from GI2P2.

I think Airbnb came to the Waterberg at the right time. We just came back from COVID-19, people were frustrated, [and] a lot of people lost their jobs. So I believe that when they [Airbnb] came into the Waterberg they came to save a lot of people that did not have hope at that point in time. So the experience broadened the horizon, not just for me, but for other people who are residing within the Waterberg. Because Waterberg is isolated you in your little corner thinking you doing everything right until someone comes in look, there's something better you can do. So I think it was just a candle that we've been waiting for.

Tangibles benefits received from Airbnb

The second objective of Airbnb's intervention in the Waterberg District was to increase digital access for Airbnb participants. Many parts of the Waterberg region are remote, and coupled with load-shedding challenges, many tourism entrepreneurs are facing connectivity issues. An in-depth understanding of these challenges was further revealed in the recruitment process of participants for the Academy. As such, to address these challenges, Airbnb partnered up with Ikeja to increase connectivity in the Waterberg region. Furthermore, Airbnb also provided Wi-Fi routers and UPS devices for graduates of the Academy at the graduation ceremony, which enabled them to stay online even during load shedding. Relatedly, one of the first commendations participants spoke of when discussing the impact of Airbnb in the Waterberg is the provision of wifi routers and the UPS. This is due to the strenuous challenges posed by low connectivity in most parts of the region in addition to load shedding which is a national crisis. The quotes below from the Airbnb graduates showcase the importance of these benefits to business operations:

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 loadshedding 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. You can say oh loadshedding, oh network but we are always connected. So yeah, we are given a platform to go meet people from different places [II3].

Participant 2: They made it easier for me to operate because we were given routers and UPS. So that has made it easier for me to start and even run my business effectively as now I am able to work from home since I have 100% Wi-Fi access. In terms of loadshedding, my UPS is on standby [GI3P4].

While many tourism businesses have begun to adapt to the load shedding crises through the use of inverters and generators, these options are too expensive to invest in for smaller businesses (Muluh and Lekgau, 2023). As such, these tangible benefits were greatly appreciated for several reasons, including that they addressed the immediate challenges facing the tourism sector, addressed the long-standing challenges facing rural communities in South Africa (i.e., lack of connectivity), and allowed graduates to continue operating their businesses even during load shedding.

Changed perceptions of tourism and tourism entrepreneurship

The majority of the participants applauded Airbnb for changing the perception of tourism. Historically, tourism was undertaken by white people, and later the tourism sector grew to cater to international tourists, with the black domestic market being on the periphery. While there have been some efforts to change these stereotypes, these feelings of 'other' linger in today's society. Interestingly, the participants explained that the Airbnb model changed perceptions on not only being tourism producers, but consumers as well, (for instance, *'especially for us blacks, we don't know much about tourism. We think tourism is for whites and people from overseas'* IIP7). In terms of being producers, some participants added that the requirements in starting a business were much less through Airbnb:

Most definitely. Everybody needs to be on Airbnb because I love the fact that it promotes village and township tourism and as well as encourages people to start with what you have [GI3P2].

Moreover, several participants mentioned the program to have changed their perception of venturing into their own enterprises:

Before the Airbnb academy, I had a lot of doubts. Venturing into the programme taught me that its okay to start at zero and gradually grow. The fact that I am not yet complete but I was able to get guests who were okay with my establishment, it gave me confidence, it gave me the motivation to push [II8]

Most people are misled in terms of starting businesses. They think you need to have lots of capital and resources. So, with Airbnb their moto is saying, start with what you have, start with that extra room in your house, don't think you need to have a guesthouse to get into the tourism industry. I think we need to get out there and inform people that you can start with anything that you have [II6].

From the above quotes, it is clear that Airbnb positively changed the mindset of the participants. Further, considering regions such as the Waterberg are typically characterised by close social networks, there is an opportunity to leverage the social change fostered by Airbnb to have a greater societal impact. In fact, many of the participants mentioned that through their own informal networks, they spoke positively about Airbnb and the opportunities in the tourism industry.

Destination marketing

One of the objectives of Airbnb's intervention was centered on creating a destination promotion campaign for the Waterberg region. As the Waterberg was primarily a mining region, having only transitioned to sustainable growth through inclusive tourism, the region has a low tourism presence. The study found the destination promotion campaign to have been executed in two phases, the first phase showcasing the work done by Airbnb (and partners) in driving inclusive tourism in

the District, and the second phase centering on shining a spotlight on the broader Waterberg region and its tourism appeal, using Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Further, the interviews with Airbnb partners revealed their assistance in sharing the content on their social media pages, with the tagline 'Escape the normal' was consistently used in this social media campaign, which aimed to inspire tourists to diversity from the most commonly visited destinations and rather explore the Waterberg region. Moreover, this promotional campaign also had a strong domestic market focus, especially in considering the close proximity of the Waterberg to Johannesburg. Interestingly, the discussions with graduates of the Academy uncovered that marketing exposure was their greatest, forefront challenge. Many, if not all, of the participants stressed the need for more marketing and awareness of the tourism offerings in the Waterberg: Outside and within the community, we need to sell Waterberg biodiversity and the community that lives here. Like now, there are quite a few of our people who don't know much about birding. So, when I got myself into birding, I found out that it is only mainly white people who are interested in bird watching. I also found out that this is one of the fastest growing hobbies worldwide, also nature, in general, not only birding, even my industry mates, they can witness that most of the people interested in nature are white people. So, we need to sell it to the people so that they can get awareness about nature, tourism and hospitality.

Market access (apartheid legacies)

Several participants drew concern about the lack of transformation in the tourism market in the Waterberg region. Largely, these participants underscored that while the nature reserve and game farms were drawing tourists to the region, these assets, and leading lodges and guesthouses were white-owned. Further, there remain limited opportunities to tap into that market, which is explained in the quote below by G5P5:

Okay I feel that we're struggling to transition. The reason being, we have a lot of game reserves. So when a tourist books, let's say they go into a game reserve they book everything. So they move from the airport, they get a shuttle straight to the lodge or the reserve, [and] they do everything inside the reserve once they're done. Back to where they come from. So I feel that in the Waterberg we need more opportunities where tourists don't only go to the game reserves and go back to the airport. We need to start creating our little market the local economy where we know that there are activities. [GI5P5]

Additionally, some participants allude to racial issues and mistrust still prevails, thereby limiting opportunities for collaboration or working collectively. One partner had the following to say regarding this matter:

There is [a] lack of trust among the different groups and the different [races] are still. If I were to just call a spade a spade, those who are whites, they're able to support one another and those who are black, are limited in terms of accessing the market. And particularly because even if you if even if they can do they need to [make] a football effort to attain one guest. But if you are white and whether you got qualification or no qualification, it's not an issue. You are able to just get a guest that regardless of what your skills are, but in us as a society amongst black, we need to really do quite a lot, you need to show and prove that you have a certificate and skills that [are] required [PI5].

DISCUSSION

The current study sought to examine interventions made by Airbnb towards growing inclusive tourism. Many countries recognise this global imperative and it has subsequently drawn much attention. Using the Waterberg District as a case study, valuable insights can be derived from understanding inclusive tourism in the Global South. Inclusive tourism is typically understood as a multidimensional concept focused on access and equity. Regarding the former, the results suggest access to be an important component of inclusive tourism in rural communities such as the Waterberg. This is owed to the history surrounding these areas, and the continued exclusionary legacies prevalent. As such, driving inclusive tourism requires addressing the substantial prevailing barriers facing host communities in tourism. Interventions by Airbnb demonstrate the power of providing access in addressing (to a certain extent) these institutionalised barriers. In this case study, the findings showed the Airbnb Academy fast-tracking the entry of new local tourism producers through the practical component leading to the development of tourism businesses, marketing. Additionally, the Academy provided practical and tangible assistance (addressing current tourism challenges, specifically the energy crisis) and proved instrumental in not only opening up the sector to marginalised communities but providing some assistance in their tourism enterprise operations.

Further, the findings illustrated how Airbnb changed the perceptions of graduates. Traditionally, tourism has always been understood as an exclusive activity, tailored by white people, for white people and international guests. In many developing nations, this perception of tourism is further exacerbated in resource-rich contexts that are sometimes characterised by land ownership conflicts, and limited access to natural resources. By the end of the Academy, the study found these perceptions to have broadened, owing to the inclusion of more disadvantaged groups in the tourism supply. Certainly, Tapfuma et al. (2024) argued inclusive tourism must be understood beyond economic pathways, but encompass the influence of empowerment. In this study, this is related to changing societal perceptions, or perceptions of those that must be included. Primarily, the findings point to the simplicity of Airbnb, in that one can easily become a host thereby making great strides to positively alter views on tourism and tourism entrepreneurship. Importantly, while tourism is promoted to host communities (especially marginalised communities) as a sector with immense potential for socioeconomic upliftment, the confines of tourism participation (or lack thereof) have yet to be fully understood. In the current case study, this intervention was able to absorb more people who are not traditionally included in the tourism sector. This also changed the perceptions of the District government on tourism, its stakeholders, and the broader tourism value chain. This is especially important for a destination is that newly developing its tourism industry, to effectively manage and grow.

Moreover, the use of an Airbnb case study sheds light on the impact of the sharing economy model on inclusive tourism growth in the Global South. Generally, the literature is contested and complex regarding the impact of the sharing economy

on income equality, as while some studies argue that it can reduce inequality by providing opportunities and income to marginalised and/or poorer communities, others suggest that it may exacerbate inequality within the majority of the population (World Economic Forum, 2016; Hussain et al., 2023; Li, 2023). Interestingly, the study on the Airbnb Entrepreneurship Academy showcased both viewpoints. In terms of providing income generation opportunities, the Academy demonstrated the numerous opportunities to leverage these natural and cultural resources with many of the participants leaning more toward the Airbnb Experiences which has some remarkable potential to bring in more individuals to become producers in the tourism industry. This allowed graduates to build complementary tourism experiences, such as bird guiding, nature walks, and consultations with traditional healers. However, the findings similarly highlight the difficulty these small enterprises faced after the Academy, particularly in terms of sourcing capital (with little to no collateral) to maintain and grow business operations as well as meet the standards of international guests, thereby concurring with studies that have shown that inequality, related to (in the case study) access, income, and power can hinder sustained inclusive growth and potentially increasing inequality by shifting more income and opportunities to better-off households and providers. This thereby causes a wider disparity in the power dynamics within the tourism environment. In fact, the closed-off nature of the tourism market (dominated by white South Africans), as shown in the results, confirms the assertion of Baird et al. (2017), that social structures and systems that perpetuate marginalisation, poverty, and access to resources often exhibit considerable resilience and reliance on established paths. The continuation of these deeply seated issues affects the ability of the marginalised communities to operate successfully in the tourism industry. These graduates would have to compete with long-established tourism businesses, thereby reducing their chances of success, and longevity in the tourism industry. Indeed, Scheyvens and Biddulph (2018) argue that direct attempts at challenging these social and power dynamics are battling the odds.

Inclusive tourism should encompass the active involvement of all tourism stakeholders (Nyanjom et al., 2018). In many developing economies, such as South Africa, inclusive economic growth is premised to be driven by public-private partnerships, resulting in organisations such as PPGI seeking ways to connect government authorities with members of the private sector in collaborative relationships geared towards meaningful impact. The current showcased Airbnb's contribution towards fostering inclusive tourism through its partnerships, which resulted in the Airbnb Academy as well as destination marketing which has a role in changing the tourism map to involve new places and people. Indeed, private-public partnerships hold great potential, especially in leveraging the strengths of private-sector partners. In this case, Airbnb has experienced a rapid global expansion and has become a well-known and relatively trusted platform (Nyanjom et al., 2022), and the findings demonstrated how the company was able to leverage its global scale of the platform to showcase newer and less developed (and visited) destinations. Interestingly, while the marketing campaigns positively depicted the community, culture, and relationship with nature, these campaigns took a centralised planning approach led by Airbnb. This demonstrates a risk in the leveraging of public-private partnerships in inclusive tourism, more especially in cases where one stakeholder leads it. Relatedly, while Airbnb was able to reach a large number of people through its marketing campaigns, the limited tourist arrivals to the region were a commonly mentioned challenge highlighting that progress toward inclusive tourism requires time and an equitable multi-stakeholder approach.

CONCLUSION

The current study explored the role of Airbnb, specifically the Airbnb Entrepreneurship Academy in the promotion and development of inclusive tourism, using the Waterberg Region of South Africa as a case study site. In conclusion, the study found that the Airbnb Entrepreneurship Academy significantly raised the scope of opportunities for tourism entrepreneurs in the Waterberg, increasing the number of individuals involved in the sector.

Along with this, the Academy provided opportunities for locals to create experiences that complement existing tourism offerings in the regions, diversifying the current offering. The simplicity of the Airbnb model allowed participants easy access to launching their own tourism businesses, providing them with the necessary resources to create successful tourism ventures. The Acadamy furnished local participants with tangible products supporting entrepreneurship such as Wifi routers and provided market access to those previously excluded from tourism activities.

The literature on inclusive tourism and Airbnb's contribution (as well as its operations within tourism destinations) have been largely centred on developed and urban spaces. Airbnb's involvement in the Waterberg makes an interesting case study owing to the expansion of this global company into rural areas not developed in tourism but has the potential to grow in the sector. As such, the study makes a valuable contribution to literature as it broadens the scope of inclusive tourism research, particularly focusing on important matters such as providing access to marginalised communities and challenging power dynamics. Several lessons can be learned from this case study, including that inclusive tourism, more especially to address socio-economic challenges in destinations must adopt a multi-stakeholder approach, especially through private-public partnerships. Indeed, the approach to driving inclusive tourism growth must itself be inclusive of a myriad of voices, more especially those which have been silenced and/or marginalised.

This study presented several ways in which the sharing economy is able to provide opportunities for access in marginalised communities, however, it also highlighted when this sharing economy is introduced in rural spaces, the socioeconomic challenges affect the ability of marginalised communities to adequately and competitively operate. As such, inclusive tourism interventions, as such Airbnb's, should involve economic, spatial, and sociopolitical integration and subsequently be context-driven. It is recommended that to grow the extent to which Airbnb can assist in the development of inclusive tourism in the future, partnerships be extended beyond the Waterberg and that focus is placed on inclusive tourism capacity building for local stakeholders through an inclusive tourism development strategy. Similarly, future research needs to consider the role of stakeholders and formalised partnerships in driving inclusive tourism.

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