



LEVERAGING RURAL FESTIVALS FOR SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract: This study aims to critically examine the potential of rural festivals as instruments for sustainable community development, using the Keiskammahoek Music and Art Festival [KMAF], a rural home-grown festival hosted in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa as a case study. The KMAF serves as a compelling case study for understanding how locally initiated festivals in rural areas can drive social and economic transformation in rural contexts. Through a quantitative research design, questionnaire surveys were administered to Keiskammahoek residents (N=326) who had previously attended the KMAF using a convenience sampling technique. The data was analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Findings demonstrate how rural festivals can be utilized to make a significant contribution to sustainable rural community development especially through leveraging the tourism, marketing and economic opportunities presented by the festival. They reveal that rural festivals such as the KMAF can play a crucial rôle in advancing sustainable development goals by harnessing tourism, marketing, and economic opportunities generated through the event. These festivals not only attract visitors and stimulate local businesses, but they also foster cultural pride and identity, thereby reinforcing the social fabric of rural communities. However, to achieve this and realize the full potential of such festivals, enhanced collaboration among event stakeholders in rural areas is essential, particularly to strengthen their connections, enabling the events to effectively impact the local communities. The study argues that better collaboration, improved stakeholder management, and eventually, efficient leveraging are suggested for the advancement and socioeconomic growth of South Africa's rural areas. By embedding collaboration and inclusivity in the festival planning and management, rural communities can transform these cultural events into sustainable engines of growth and development. The study suggests that the KMAF exemplifies how rural festivals, when effectively managed, can serve as a catalyst for long-term development, positioning them as valuable tools for the advancement of socioeconomic resilience in rural areas.

Keywords: rural festivals, event leveraging, sustainability, local economic development, rural tourism

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INTRODUCTION

There has been growing recognition for the potential of tourism festivals to play a transformative role in rural economies worldwide (Getz & Page, 2016). Rural festivals are events that are hosted in rural spaces and are generally recognized as viable means of promoting rural revitalization through human connection and cultural exchange (Klien, 2010; Hawkins & Ryan, 2013; Tagore-Erwin, 2018). According to Gibson et al. (2011) as well as Mahon & Hyrylainen (2019), rural festivals have a greater impact on the local economy because they involve significant investments in tourism-related services like hotels, cafes, and restaurants, as well as in related industries like waste management, building and equipment rental, and legal services. Despite this growing recognition, festivals in rural spaces have been largely neglected in the existing literature, resulting in them remaining underdeveloped and an often-overlooked research topic, particularly in developing economies (Getz, 2010; Getz & Page, 2016).

Furthermore, there is a lack of clear policies to effectively integrate rural festivals into broader sustainable community development initiatives. Whilst there has been a growing body of knowledge at a global level focusing on rural festivalisation, there is a notable lack of research focusing on rural festivals in Africa generally, with the majority of studies (Cawley & Gillmor, 2008; Rossetti & Quinn, 2021; Qu & Zollet, 2023; Qu & Cheer, 2021) concentrating on rural festivals hosted in the Global North. Similarly, for South Africa, there has been a dearth of academic literature on the role of festivals in rural contexts, with much of the existing studies concentrated on the developed urban centers.

The neglect is unanticipated as festivals in rural areas are more likely than festivals in urban areas to maximize their direct benefits for their host communities by utilizing local infrastructure and community resources (Gibson et al., 2012; Peric et al., 2016; 2012). Thus, from the perspective of rural regeneration, the festival's long-term coexistence with the community, the development of creative social networks, and the social enhancement it offers the community must all be taken into account (Qu & Zollet, 2023). In this sense, it is widely acknowledged that rural festivals, often referred to as socially engaged art festivals, are effective ways to encourage rural rejuvenation via interpersonal relationships and cross-cultural interactions (Klien, 2010, Hawkins & Ryan, 2013; Tagore-Erwin, 2018).

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South Africa has become one of the most popular tourist destinations on the African continent, characterized by a unique blend of rural and urban landscapes that offer a wide array of memorable tourist experiences (Nyikana & Tichaawa, 2023; Rogerson & Visser, 2020; Visser, 2023). However, much academic and government focus has been on areas that are already developed, such as Gauteng, Durban and Cape Town, South Africa’s major metropolises. In recent times, the South African National Development Plan (NDP) vision for 2030 outlines the government’s commitment to refocusing attention from urban areas to developing rural areas (National Planning Commission, 2011).

In this way, the government’s goal is to work towards economic activities that lead to sustainable development of the country’s rural areas (Mhlabane et al., 2023). In response to the South African government’s recent shift in development focus toward rural areas, this study examines the potential of rural tourism festivals as a sustainable development tool. By exploring how these festivals provide real-life experiences, the research aims to inform policy-making and enhance rural development strategies. Therefore, this study explores rural festivals in South Africa as the country’s rural communities are deeply rooted in history and rich traditions, with festivals serving as important sites for cultural expression, intergenerational knowledge transmission and having a greater impact in boosting the local economy since they have a large expenditure in tourism-related services as well as in allied industries.

This study aims to critically examine the effective leveraging of rural festivals for sustainable community development using the Keiskammahoek Music and Art Festival [KMAF]. We argue that the festival is positioned to play a crucial role in the regions, and analyzing its leveraging possibilities could assist in terms of recommendations for policy and planning as well as for strategic initiatives for sustainable tourism development through rural festivals.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Event leveraging

The event leveraging concept serves as the foundation for this study. Pan (2023) describes such leveraging as the deliberate application of calculated and smart methods to maximize the positive impacts of event hosting, ensuring optimal use of the opportunities to benefit from the events in question. Mahon & Hyyryläinen (2019), as well as Qu & Zollet (2023), suggest that, if the necessary partnerships are established between the festival organizations, event planners, and non-festival stakeholders to incorporate each event into the festival organizations’ marketing mix, rural festival events can be used to boost the level of festival participation in the rural setting.

According to Chalip et al. (2017), it is necessary to address potential obstacles to event leveraging, such as the inability to accommodate new participants, the event’s exclusion of local participation, and the disincentives resulting from elite performances that appear to be out of reach for prospective participants. Event portfolio planning and leveraging is challenging because it involves multiple stakeholders with conflicting or different demands, interests, and expectations, which can lead to serious management problems (Ziakas, 2021).

Nonetheless, the tactic of event leveraging is deemed successful by those who are able to take advantage of the opportunity to effectively design related events (Chalip, 2017). A model was therefore proposed by Chalip (2004), which has been widely adopted for effective leveraging of tourism events and festivals, as seen in Figure 1 below.

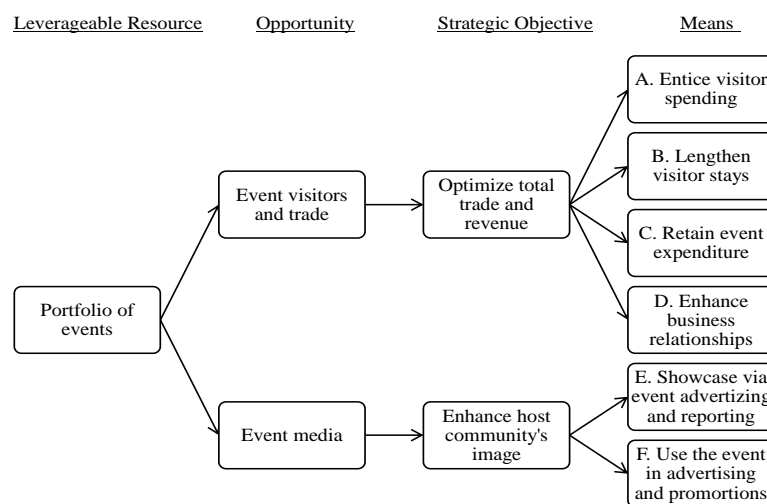


Figure 1. Chalip’s (2004) economic model for host community event leverage (Source: Adapted from O’Brien & Chalip, 2007:298)

According to O'Brien & Chalip (2007), the approach depicted in Figure 1 above offers the host town the opportunity to benefit from hosting an event in both the short and long term. As per Chalip (2004), there are four methods to attain intermediate leverage: (A) increasing visitor spending; (B) extending visitor stays; (C) retaining event expenses; and (D) leveraging the event to fortify regional business relationships. Furthermore, there are two complementary ways to use event media to promote an event and the region it is taking place in, as illustrated above: (E) showcasing the region through event reporting and advertising; and (F) utilizing the event in regional promotions and advertising (Chalip, 2004; O'Brien & Chalip, 2007). Therefore, the event leveraging theory is thought to be crucial for providing this study with a solid foundation. The idea of event leveraging is crucial because the current study focuses on a rural festival that

has previously drawn a sizable audience, sponsors, and other stakeholders. This makes it an ideal platform to evaluate the potential of leveraging in the context of the rural festival and sustainable community development. The second theory that forms the basis of this study is stakeholder theory, which is presented in the next section.

Stakeholder theory

This study is also grounded in the stakeholder theory, a theory adopted from the strategic management field. From the business context, the theory emphasizes the fact that an organization tends to be supported and affected by several persons and organizations, as well as by those who are supported and impacted by the organization (Barney & Harrison, 2020). In the same way, it has been a popular theory in tourism and events studies, such that Allen (2008) developed a framework using six major event stakeholder groups, which are the host organization, the host community, coworkers, event sponsors, the media, and participants/spectators. In this way, the argument is that every event contains a variety of stakeholders, each with their own unique viewpoints, concepts, and objectives and they are also impacted by the event in different ways (Van de Wagen & White, 2010). For festival events such as that in this study, the key stakeholders are illustrated in Figure 2 below.

The stakeholder theory is of key importance because this study argues that, to ensure that the event expands and is a success, all the stakeholders that are involved, such as community/residents, event attendees, event owner, and event sponsors, should collaborate effectively. It is through collaborations that the festival can reach optimal leveraging for sustainable community development. But the collaboration is only made possible by ensuring a proper stakeholder analysis, in order to correctly classify the different roles that the different stakeholders play in the festival event.

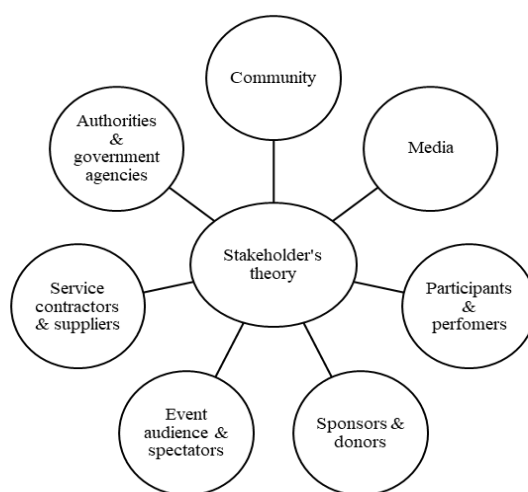


Figure 2. Rural festival event stakeholders (Source: Adapted from Van de Wagen & White, 2010:25)

Stakeholder analysis

According to Reed et al. (2009) as well as Thompson (2012), stakeholder analysis is an analysis that includes identifying stakeholders, identifying differences between them, classifying them, and examining their interactions. A stakeholder analysis is a useful tool for comprehending the behaviour, intentions, relationships, agendas, interests, and resources of important stakeholders and how they have affected or may affect the decision-making process (Węgrzyn & Wojewnik-Filipkowska, 2022). Such a stakeholder analysis was conducted for this study, and it yielded five (5) main stakeholders for the KMAF.

The first stakeholder is the host community/residents, whose responsibility it is to offer ideas and recommendations to help find appropriate methods for handling significant problem areas and managing the events (Chen et al., 2018; Trawoger, 2014).

In addition, visitors/event attendees and participants are also seen as important stakeholders of the KMAF. They have an obligation to act morally during the festival to reduce the negative socioeconomic and environmental impacts of tourism in the area (Lee, 2013). Based on the fact that they have the power to shape the event's positioning, their opinions on the use of rural festival events for the good of the community are crucial. In the context of the current event, many such attendees are from the local region, at times doubling up as both residents and event attendees.

Another important stakeholder is event owners, planners and organizers. It is the responsibility of event organizers to plan, coordinate, and promote events and decide which groups of individuals are directly related to the event (Getz, 2022). They are therefore usually held accountable for the success or failure of the event (Serravalle et al., 2019). The fourth group includes local businesses like restaurants, bars, bed and breakfasts, supermarkets, and local suppliers. Such businesses are regarded as the private sector, which contributes to the success of the event by also sponsoring the event.

According to Derrett (2004), the success of events depends on the private sector, and concludes that businesses provide a variety of support mechanisms, including cash, in-kind sponsorship, influence, and reflections of community attitudes. Lastly, event sponsors are also regarded as stakeholders of the KMAF. Event sponsorship provides support in the form of cash or in-kind contributions, or even both (Cornwell, 2020). Involving the sponsors in the leveraging of events for the destination and other interested parties makes sense since it will allow them to play a crucial part in any endeavor to create a sustainable path for community development (Ziakas, 2023). In order to use rural festival events for the good of the community, it is essential to apply both the event leveraging theory and the stakeholder theory. Firstly, this study argues that the KMAF can only be effectively leveraged if the community is given centre stage during the festival, in line with the notion of event leveraging.

Although it is an entertainment festival, it is held in a rural village context where community development is much needed. Thus, the festival needs to be used with the community's development as the main focus to help it thrive and have a significant influence. In turn, this will build capacity in the local area, which can assist in better hosting future festivals, given that there is a strong appetite for these and they are well-attended. Additionally, the event should make sure that the community provides most of the workforce and the equipment needed, such as tables, chairs, tents, and other festival-related materials.

By doing this, leakages will be avoided, and the majority of the festival's earnings and economic benefits will remain in Keiskammahoek. Secondly, the current study makes the case that all of the stakeholders who were identified and mentioned in the stakeholder analysis should work together to make sure the event grows and is a success. This is in line with the stakeholder theory. Identifying the event's key and secondary stakeholders and precisely defining their responsibilities is a critical concern in doing a stakeholder analysis. In order for the KMAF to be effectively leveraged and to benefit society more than it has in the past, all pertinent stakeholders must be identified, and their roles must be clearly defined. The study argues that, when the stakeholders of the event work together, event leveraging will be achieved.

Festivals as a tool for Local Economic Development

It has been argued in the extant literature that the two primary objectives of arts festivals are to preserve and promote art and culture and to stimulate the domestic or global economy (Pan & Huan, 2013; Stankova & Vassenska, 2015). Events and festivals are special kinds of social contact that enhance human value and set humans apart from other beings (Vitner Markovic et al., 2019). People are ready to go to far-off places to take part in festivals and events because they are seeking meaning in their lives (Berbeka et al., 2012). Frost & Frost (2020) opine that the reputation of an event community, its organizers, or both could potentially act as seed capital for the intentional creation of sociocultural, participative, and economic benefits. In other words, rather than the events themselves, the reputation of the event community is what attracts people to attend, support, participate in, and connect with festivals (O'Brien, 2006). Therefore, festival events should use active event leveraging to provide a marketing offering that can satisfy the needs of various stakeholder groups, which can differentiate and increase the competitiveness of the host destination. This will increase the promotion of the event and the host destination, draw more visitors during and after events, and boost the host destination's visitor economy (Son et al., 2021). It is evident therefore that local economic development can be achieved from festivals, even in a rural setting. This is based on the idea that since most members of the working class move to cities to work, there is relatively little economic activity in rural areas. As a result, these festivals aid in mitigating some of the challenges that may arise in areas with high rates of unemployment, low literacy and inadequate infrastructure, such as Keiskammahoek.

Heritage interpretation has evolved beyond its traditional role as a visitor management tool to become a means of fostering inclusive and resilient tourism development. While national park managers have long used interpretation to enhance visitor experiences and promote responsible behaviour (Worboys et al., 2015; Moscardo, 2017; Moscardo & Hughes, 2023), recent scholarship highlights the need to move beyond Western, nature-centred models that overlook cultural diversity and local knowledge systems. In particular, Western approaches to the creation and validation of knowledge are deeply embedded in academia, which has historically been hostile to Indigenous voices and epistemologies (Smith, 1999; Kovach, 2010; Lambert, 2014; Finegan, 2019). As Kovach (2010) notes, much of what dominant society considers "legitimate knowledge" is produced by a small, homogeneous group operating in formal institutions. Consequently, interpretive practices shaped by such frameworks frequently assume that interpreters and visitors share similar worldviews, learning styles, and values (Xu et al., 2013), overlooking the diverse cultural contexts of audiences in places such as sub-Saharan Africa. To advance more inclusive and contextually relevant forms of heritage interpretation, it is necessary to engage multiple ways of knowing and to foreground the narratives of local and Indigenous communities.



Figure 3. Topographic map showing major towns and rural areas in the region (Source: Nkunzi, 2023:49)

Integrating storytelling traditions, oral histories, and community voices into interpretive programmes not only strengthens visitors’ emotional and ethical connections to place but also empowers host communities to define and communicate their own heritage. In this way, rethinking interpretation through pluralistic and decolonial lenses contributes to more equitable, culturally inclusive, and resilient forms of ecotourism (Clarke, 2014; Finegan, 2019).

METHODS

According to Visser (2015), research methodology refers to the steps a researcher must take in order to find the answer to their research problem. For this study, a quantitative research method was used. Quantitative research is defined as a study that employs mathematics-based approaches, specifically statistics, and numerical data to understand phenomena (Yilmaz, 2013). A structured survey was administered in-person to residents of Keiskammahoek (Figure 3 & 4) who had previously attended the KMAF (n=326). The questionnaires were distributed in a 5-kilometre radius around the town center, where the event was hosted using a convenience sampling method. Convenience sampling is the practice of gathering data from a research population that the researcher can easily contact (Rahi, 2017). Convenience sampling is relevant to practically any research because it essentially means that the researchers use a sample that is easily accessible and available (Golzar et al., 2022).

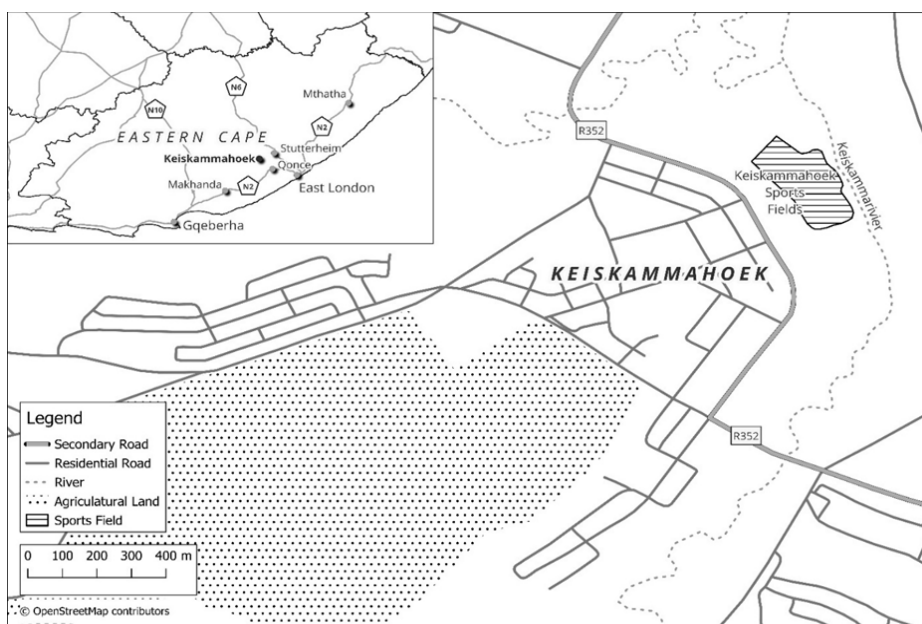


Figure 4. Festival location, Keiskammahoek Sports Field (Source: Nkunzi et al., 2025)

In relevance to this study, and to enhance comprehension of the festival's leveraging potential, the sample was limited to residents who had participated in the event during the previous three years. This made it possible to evaluate some of the socioeconomic factors related to the occurrence. The surveys were captured and analyzed using the IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences [SPSS] program. Figure 5 below summarizes the research methodology process followed for this study.

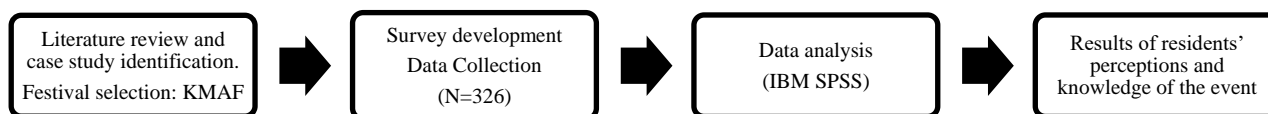


Figure 5. The methodology steps of the study (Source: Authors)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Sociodemographic profiles of attendees

The demographic profiles of the respondents are shown in Table 1 below. For the most part, the respondents were relatively youthful in age, with a combined majority of them (86.5%) falling between the ages of 18 and 44 years. There was an equal split between the male (48.3%) and the female (48.3%) genders. Many of the respondents (75.7%) were in some form of employment, whether that be full-time, part-time or self-employed, resulting in varied income brackets per month.

Table 1. Demographic profiles of respondents (Source: Authors)

Characteristics	Category	Percentage of total (n=326)	Characteristics	Category	Percentage of total (n=326)
Age	18–24	17.5	Monthly income (In South African Rands)	No income	16.6
	25–34	35.3		1000–5000	19.3
	35–44	33.7		5001–10 000	14.1
	45–54	12.0		10001–15 000	18.7
	55–64	1.5		15 001–20 000	11.3
			20 001–25 000	5.8	

				25 001<	2.8
				Prefer not to say (confidential)	11.4
Gender	Female	48.3	Occupation	Full-time employed	46.8
	Male	48.3		Part-time employed	17.5
	Prefer not to say	3.4		Student	13.8
				Self-employed	11.4
				Unemployed	10.5

Attendees' perceptions and knowledge of the festival

Source of information about the event

The respondents were asked where they found out about the festival, in an attempt to determine the most influential source of information. Table 2 below shows that the majority of the respondents (34%) were informed by family and friends. This is closely followed by those who were informed by electronic media (25.5%), work-related sources (16.3%) and radio and television (12.6%) respectively. These findings show the importance of family and friends as well as social media in marketing and raising awareness about the festival. In this regard, the festival organizers should capitalize on these platforms, especially social media to increase the attendee numbers, and leverage the opportunity to showcase their activities and those around the area. In terms of the frequency of attendance, Table 2 also shows that many of the respondents (44.5%) had been to the festival once before. Whilst there were some who were there for the first time during data collection (27.6%), there were a notable number (25.7%) who had been to the festival between 3 and 4 times. This suggests that the residents support and regularly attend the festival, and would thus have some insights as to the potential of the festival to be leveraged effectively for community development.

Table 2. Source of information about and frequency of attendance at KMAF (n=326, in %) (Source: Authors)

Made aware of the event by	Total (n=326, in %)	Frequency of event attendance	Total (n=326, in %)
Family/Friends	34.0	This will be my first time	27.6
Electronic media (e.g. social media)	25.5	Once before	44.5
Work-related/professional colleagues	16.3	3–4 times	25.7
Radio/Television	12.6	5–6 times	1.6
Travel agent	7.0	7–8 times	0.3
Print media (e.g. newspapers)	4.6	Over 8 times	0.3

Motivations for attending festival

Table 3 below presents findings in relation to the motivations that drive festival attendance at the KMAF. The respondents were asked to choose only their one most important motivation for attending the festival. The findings show that the most prominent motivations included the opportunity for family togetherness (12%), socializing (11%), the entertainment in the festival (9.2%), the festive atmosphere (8.9%), relaxation opportunities (8.6%) as well as business opportunities (8%).

There were other motivations indicated, but the most prominent ones are important for the linkage between the festival and community development of the rural area it is hosted in. For starters, the opportunity to provide opportunities for bonding with family, socializing and relaxation are important factors for the future of the festival. Nyikana & Tichaawa (2023) have emphasized the need to achieve memorable experiences in events in order to encourage repeat visitation and positive word-of-mouth. Likewise, the business opportunities it offers for residents is a key driver of festival leveraging, as underscored by Makhooane (2017). Any festival that includes opportunities for the locals to be involved, especially in terms of formal and informal businesses plays an important role in the local economy and its development (Nkunzi et al., 2025).

Table 3. Motivation to attend the event (n=326, in %) (Source: Authors)

Motivations	Total (n=326, in %)	Motivations	Total (n=326, in %)
Family togetherness	12.0	Educational purposes	5.8
Meeting people/socialising/networking	11.0	Understanding and learning about the KMAF	5.5
In-festival entertainment	9.2	Quality of the KMAF	5.2
Festive atmosphere	8.9	Promotions and giveaways	3.4
Relaxation/leisure	8.6	The event's location and area	2.8
Business opportunities	8.0	The overall cost	2.8
Build-up activities	7.4	Previous experience	2.8
Appreciation of arts festival	6.1	Weather	0.5

Table 4. Activities participated in, either in the area or near the event venue, either prior to, or after, the event (n=326, in %) (Source: Authors)

Activities	Total (n=326, in %)	Activities	Total (n=326, in %)
Night life	20.8	Entertainment	5.6
Visiting of friends and family	19.9	Culture and heritage	4.1
Shopping	10.5	Health	2.6
Food and beverages	10.2	Adventure	1.8
Sport	9.9	Trading	1.2
Visiting of natural attractions	6.1	Wildlife watching	0.6
Business	6.1	Medical	0.6

Other activities besides festival attendance

Table 4 below presents findings in relation to the activities that respondents participate in, before or after the festival, in the precinct of the festival. This is based on Jani & Mwakyusa's (2021) suggestion that festival organizers should make sure that the events and programs offered are engaging and are capable of increasing the festival's appeal and entertainment value for attendees. Doing this creates memorable experiences and guarantees high levels of overall satisfaction with the event (Nyikana & Tichaawa, 2023). The findings reveal that the most popular activities before or after the festival were nightlife (20.8%) and visiting friends and family (19.9%). Since the festival centers around an evening showcase featuring both local talent and renowned performers, a vibrant nightlife atmosphere was to be expected. Likewise, many attendees reported learning about the event through family and friends, and expressed that their motivation for attending stemmed from a desire for social connection and quality time with loved ones. Consequently, visiting friends and family emerged as a key activity surrounding the festival experience. Beyond the core entertainment and social dimensions of the festival, attendees also demonstrated notable intentions to engage in activities that contribute to local economic development. These included shopping (10.5%), consumption of food and beverages (10.2%), participation in sporting activities (9.9%), visits to nearby natural tourist attractions (6.1%), and business-related engagements (6.1%). Collectively, these behaviors represent significant avenues for economic stimulation and should be considered integral to strategic festival planning. By incorporating these consumption patterns into the broader management framework, organizers can enhance the festival's utility as a catalyst for local economic growth and optimize its impact across multiple sectors.

Future intentions and destination marketing implications

Makhooane (2017) asserts that a person's attitude acts as a conduit between their perceptions and their intended behaviour. For a better understanding of the residents' awareness of utilizing rural festival events for community benefit, it is imperative to analyze their attitudes and opinions of the KMAF in terms of several factors. As a result, this section describes how they viewed and understood the event. This was done through a five-point Likert scale of agreement ranging from Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree and Strongly Disagree as seen in Table 5 below. Firstly, the study set out to find out if going to KMAF has encouraged additional people to visit Keiskammahoek. A vast majority of respondents (88.4%) agreed with the statement that attending KMAF had encouraged attendees to encourage others to visit Keiskammahoek. This finding was in line with prior suggestions from Lu et al. (2020) as well as Peterman et al. (2020) who argue that planning tourism-related events, such as rural festivals, could help communities establish a reputation as popular vacation destinations, which would then attract more tourists to the destination and its environs. The mean score of 4.21 and the standard deviation of 0.922 indicated that most respondents thought favourably of the statement. With regards to an intention to attend the festival again in future, an overwhelming majority of the respondents (84.6%) were definitely keen to do so, with a mean score of 4.12 and a standard deviation of 0.925. This was a similar trend regarding the festival influencing them to participate in other similar activities and festival events in the area (82.5%).

Table 5. Encouragement of attendance at the KMAF ($n=326$, in %) (Source: Authors) (Note: M = Mean; STD = Standard deviation)

Whether attendance at the KMAF had encouraged respondent to	SD	D	N	A	SA	M	STD
Motivate other people to visit Keiskammahoek	4.0	1.2	6.4	46.3	42.1	4.21	0.922
Return to the Keiskammahoek to participate in the event again	3.1	3.4	8.9	47.9	36.7	4.12	0.925
Participate in similar events around Keiskammahoek	5.2	4.9	7.4	49.4	33.1	4.00	1.036
Visit other rural areas near Keiskammahoek	6.4	6.7	11.3	47.7	27.9	3.84	1.104
Change/reinforce previous perceptions of Keiskammahoek	11.0	8.3	8.0	35.9	36.8	3.79	1.317
Keiskammahoek has been revealed by KMAF as an area that promotes ...							
Friendliness	8.3	2.8	10.7	48.8	29.4	3.88	1.117
Being welcoming	2.8	2.5	7.4	53.3	34.0	4.13	0.863
Neighbouring attractions	3.4	8.9	9.2	44.8	33.7	3.97	1.045
Being safe	24.8	13.8	8.9	31.3	21.2	3.10	1.513
Having a rich heritage	21.5	10.4	12.6	23.9	31.6	3.34	1.536

Notably, the festival appears to have served as a catalyst for broader rural tourism, with a substantial proportion of respondents (75.6%) reporting that their attendance motivated them to explore additional rural areas surrounding the host location. This behavioral shift is further supported by the finding that 72.7% of participants experienced a positive change in their perception of the region following the event. These outcomes suggest a strengthening of the destination's brand image, underscoring the festival's potential to reshape visitor attitudes and stimulate dispersed economic activity—particularly significant given the rural context of the host area. In relation to the destination branding potential associated with the festival, a significant majority of respondents (78.2%) perceived the event as fostering a sense of friendliness within the area. According to Qu et al. (2011), the core functions of a destination brand are identification and distinctiveness, which encompass strategic efforts aimed at shaping perceptions that positively influence tourists' decision-making. The resulting brand image serves as a critical factor in this process, complementing other influential elements such as cognitive evaluations, historical and cultural landmarks, scenic beauty, and natural attractions—all of which may be leveraged in destination marketing strategies (Ferreira et al., 2022). Findings from this study further indicate that most participants viewed the area as welcoming (87.3%) and believed it effectively promoted nearby tourist attractions (78.5%). However, two key dimensions of destination branding emerged as areas of concern. A considerable proportion of respondents did not perceive the area as a safe destination (38.6%) or as one possessing a rich heritage legacy (31.9%). Given the centrality of safety and cultural heritage to effective destination marketing, these aspects warrant targeted attention in future branding initiatives.

DISCUSSION

This study critically analyzed the leveraging possibilities of a rural festival for sustainable community development in South Africa. This is on the basis of rural festivals being identified as presenting unique opportunities to serve as catalysts for community development in the country. They do this through the strategic harnessing of local cultural assets, traditions and social networks for broader community development. Our argument in this study lies in the fact that, when strategically planned and supported by relevant stakeholders, rural festivals can stimulate economic activities through tourism, and create employment opportunities, albeit temporary in nature. Most importantly, they can trigger a vibrant local economy through local entrepreneurial opportunities around crafts, food production and other hospitality-related sectors. In the context of the KMAF, where there are many social ills and challenges, the opportunities for entrepreneurship, and informal trading in particular becomes crucial in the planning and management of the festival going forward. This is linked to the optimization of the leveraging of the event for sustainable community development.

The KMAF draws many visitors to the local rural area and as such serves as an important drawcard for the redistribution of visitor flows away from urban centers. In turn, this can encourage investment in infrastructure and community services that will benefit residents and tourists alike. From the findings, it is clear that the festival is poised to play an instrumental role in showcasing indigenous knowledge systems if properly planned for which in turn will foster cultural pride and strengthen community identity. Key findings from this research show that the festival is well attended by young, employed people. They learn about the festival dates and activities through their friends and family as well as through electronic media sources like social media. They are motivated by the opportunities for family togetherness, socializing, relaxation and the festive atmosphere to attend the festival. In addition to this, they identify the business opportunities, education and broader appreciation of the arts festivals as being important drivers of attendance at the festival. Besides attending the festival, other activities of interest in the area include nightlife, visiting friends and relatives, shopping as well as food and beverages. There was also mention of attending sporting events, natural attractions, entertainment, business opportunities as well as culture and heritage as popular activities before or after the festival, strongly suggesting that the festival leads to broader tourism activities. The findings also point to a strong willingness to constantly return to the festival annually and to further recommend it to others. It also promotes surrounding rural areas as places to visit for tourists. However, there were slight concerns around the safety standards and the lack of rich heritage associated with the area being included in the planning and management of the festival. Based on the above findings and to ensure that the developmental impact of the festival is maximized, the KMAF should be integrated into broader local development plans and strategies which are supported by relevant stakeholder groups. In this way, local stakeholders such as residents, small businesses and other structures should be involved in planning and decision-making about the leveraging of the festival for community development. In this way, equitable access to opportunities can be emphasized, the festival's goals aligned with longer-term community development goals and ideals. An important aspect of this is also building capacity for local residents such that they are able to capitalize on the festival-related opportunities, especially for entrepreneurship.

All these will assist with the effective leveraging of the KMAF such that it becomes more than a celebratory event, but rather a dynamic vehicle for social cohesion, economic resilience and place-based development in rural areas.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study contributes to the expanding body of knowledge on rural festivals in South Africa, by moving away from conventional event leveraging studies, which have tended to be dominated by sport mega-events and festivalization within the urban setting. Therefore, by using the experiences of a rural festival held in a very impoverished location, the current study adds to the body of knowledge already available about events, festivals, and the leveraging of festivals.

Consequently, the empirical results of this study about the use of rural festival events for sustainable community development should aid in filling a vacuum in the literature on event studies. By grounding the study in the event leveraging and stakeholder theories, the research provides a robust framework for enhanced understanding of the impacts of festivals in rural contexts. The event leveraging theory, in the context of this study points to the need to strategically use the festival to generate long-term benefits for tourism, economic development and destination branding in the immediate event space and the surrounding rural areas. In this way, the festival contributes to increased rural visitor numbers, improved perceptions of the region amongst visitors as well as increased spending and engagement with local economic activities in Keiskammahoek. Collectively, these contribute to effective festival leveraging and sustained local economic growth and development. Similarly, based on the challenges identified, the stakeholder theory in the context of this study highlights the need to identify and align interests of the diverse stakeholders involved in, or are affected by the festival.

This includes the residents, the attendees, local formal and informal businesses as well as the event organisers and sponsors. Collaborative value-creation can yield positive returns in the endeavours to leverage the festival for broader community development, particularly through the integration of the motivations for attendance into event planning and management. These two theoretical lenses point out the festival's role in serving as a cultural experience and a strategic tool for inclusive and sustainable development of this rural area and others similar to it in nature.

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