Sustaining Tourist Loyalty toward Cultural Heritage Tourism Sites Amid COVID-19: A Case of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

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Abstract

This paper explores how tourists' loyalty toward South Africa's cultural heritage tourism sites has been sustained amid COVID-19 pandemic. The data were collected from 25 conveniently sampled tourists' narratives at the KwaBulawayo Cultural Centre and Ondini Cultural Centre and Museum and were merged with the reviewed literature and the theoretical framework. It was revealed that the theory of planned behaviour is highly suitable to predict the manner in which a specific social group responds to a phenomenological reality. Review of literature and findings of the study indicate interconnectedness between destination branding and sustainable tourist loyalty. It was also clear that factors associated with cultural heritage tourism sites such as image, essence, nostalgic consumption, recommendations, actual visits, and revisits are influenced by internal and external factors. For instance, sustainable tourist loyalty to cultural heritage tourism sites amid COVID-19 has been attributed to satisfactory service, tourist-destination emotional and nostalgic attachment, and unique offerings. These attributes enhance socio-cultural and economic development of cultural heritage tourism sites and local communities. However, sustainable tourist loyalty may be derailed by disparities in terms of spatial capacity. Destination positioning is considered as a viable strategy by which tourist loyalty amid hazardous global crisis can be attained.

Keywords: Branding essentials; sustainable tourist loyalty; COVID-19 pandemic; cultural heritage tourism; KwaZulu-Natal

Introduction

Revisiting cultural heritage sites has become a popular initiative for tourists whose needs and expectations were satisfied during a first encounter (Hasan & Jobaid, 2014). A cultural heritage tourism site is a geographical site that stages its tangible (e.g., architecture, artefacts, culinary offerings) and intangible (e.g., religious rituals, language, nostalgic atmosphere) resources for tourist enticement and revenue generation. Satisfying tourists' expectations engenders memorable experiences that they might want to rekindle (Tichaawa & Makoni, 2018). A large number of tourists thus repeatedly visit certain cultural heritage destinations which is referred to as tourist loyalty (Pike et al., 2010; Chen et al., 2016; Chatzigeorgiou & Christou, 2016). In the context of tourism, a destination is described as a blend of consumers' space and tourism products through which a holistic experience is provided, and is subjectively interpreted according, but not limited, to the consumers' travel itinerary, cultural background, visiting purpose, and past experience (Fuchs & Weiermair, 2003). There are several pillars (referred to here as branding essentials) that underpin tourist loyalty, namely: inspiration, satisfaction, prior

experiences, perceived destination image, destination positioning, emotional attachment, and trust. Tourist inspiration relies on a co-ordinated system that comprises natural and social dynamics that ensure value for money and shape tourists' decisions about their behaviour and experience prior to and during visits to cultural heritage destinations (Björk & Kauppinen-Räisänen, 2019). However, tourism experiences are subject to natural hazards and disasters (Kwok & Koh, 2021). Tourism has thus been severely impacted globally by COVID-19 (United Nations World Tourism Organization [UNWTO], 2020), which also impacted adversely sustainable tourist loyalty due to restrictions put in place to curb the rampant spread of the pandemic (Stone et al., 2021). Sustainable tourist loyalty is defined within the context of this paper as consistent tourists' inclination to revisit and recommend South Africa's cultural heritage tourism sites in the wake of the unprecedented hazardous global crisis. In many parts of the world, destination marketing organisations (DMOs) have been operating within a daunting environment due to the advent of global crisis. Some studies (e.g. Zondo & Ezeuduji, 2015; Ezeuduji et al., 2016; Haarhoff & De Klerk, 2019; Gumede & Ezeuduji, 2021) focused specifically on South Africa's tourist destination branding, while others (e.g., Khambule, 2020; Luke, 2020; Odeku, 2020; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020a; Bama & Nyikana, 2021; Ikwegbue et al., 2021) studied the impact of COVID-19 on the country's economic sectors, including tourism. However, there is a paucity of research on the sustainability of tourist visits and/or revisits to the country's tourist sites amid the COVID-19 pandemic. It is against this backdrop that this paper explores how tourist loyalty toward South Africa's cultural heritage sites has been sustained amid COVID-19.

Theoretical framework
The theory of planned behaviour (TPB) posits that tourists' travel inclination and their perceptions of potential destinations are determined by internal and external factors (Lu et al., 2018; Sigala, 2020). Internal factors such as hospitality, resource disposability and courtesy contribute significantly toward tourists' satisfaction and willingness to extend a period of stay at a destination, while external factors such as poor infrastructure, natural disasters, political unrest, social dimensions, and health crises may discourage potential tourists from visiting affected destinations. Combined, these factors either facilitate or impede tourists' aspiration to visit a particular tourist destination (Gumede & Ezeuduji, 2021). According to the TPB, travelling is underpinned by intention and initiative (Ajzen, 2011). The views, attitudes, and behaviour of potential or experienced tourists when considering a destination are influenced by their thoughts, feelings, and the expressions of others regarding the intended destination. Their final decision is then driven by the meaning they attach to a particular tourist destination resulting from tourist-destination interactions, experiences, and engagement. This process is described as "destination branding" (Haarhoff & De Klerk, 2019: 202) which entails a continuum of essentials such as essence, image, and loyalty that will determine growth or decline in the tourism industry (Gumede & Ezeuduji, 2021). As a frequently cited and influential model to assess human behaviour in social sciences research (Ajzen, 2011), TPB was used to underpin the exploration of sustainable tourist loyalty towards South Africa's cultural heritage sites amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

Review of related literature
Destination branding: The cultural heritage tourism nexus
Destination branding refers to the collective representation of what the outside world thinks, feel, and/or says about cultural heritage tourism destinations (Talerman, 2014). The outside world's view of a tourist destination thus significantly shapes its reputation while it also strengthens its ties with experienced and/or potential clientele (Haarhoff & De Klerk, 2019).

This view is basically informed by a positive match between anticipated (i.e., pre-travel expectations) and actual experiences (i.e., on-site experience) while in a cultural heritage destination (Chen et al., 2016). This phenomenon (i.e., a positive match between pre-travel expectations and on-site experience) is referred to by Severt et al. (2007) as tourist satisfaction. In the context of cultural heritage tourism, satisfaction is viewed as a function of pre-travel expectations and post-travel experiences (Aliman et al., 2016). It is derived from a tourist destination's tangible and intangible offerings and results in tourist loyalty (Frangos et al., 2014). These offerings are embedded in cultural heritage that is passed on from generation to generation (Tichaawa & Makoni, 2018) and serves as a means to connect people with the past, celebrate the present, and embrace the future. Tourists' attention has increasingly been drawn toward cultural heritage tourism sites across the globe (Hasan & Jobaid, 2014). According to Kaufman and Weaver (2006), tourists visit cultural heritage sites to study, experience and enjoy the tangible and intangible resources of a specific societal group. Apostolakis (2003) argues that cultural heritage tourism can be defined as either descriptive or experiential. The descriptive group focuses on the material elements of a culture as they are motivated by aspirations to study, experience, and enjoy tangible and intangible cultural resources such as rituals, artefacts, history, religion, festivals, language, gastronomy, art, folklore, and architecture that provide unique experiences and fulfil a nostalgic yearning (Vong & Ung, 2012). The experiential group focuses on visitor experience which is determined by the hospitability or hostility they experience first-hand. As a highly competitive business endeavours, satisfying consumers' needs is a primary aim of cultural heritage tourism destinations (Schoeman, 2016). The destinations plan strategically to meet tourists' demands and devise strategies that are in line with new developments in the tourism industry (Getz, 2008). Cultural heritage tourism is driven mainly by the socio-economic and socio-cultural well-being of local communities (Gumede & Nzama, 2021). Consequently, the tourism industry and local communities suffer when visitor numbers decline as tourists consume services and products offered at tourist destinations (Cheng et al., 2013).

Branding essentials: Interconnectedness to achieve growth in cultural heritage tourism
Various studies (e.g., Rosi, 2014; Chatzigeorgiou & Christou, 2016; Botschen et al., 2017; Ezeuduji & Mhlongo, 2019; Haarhoff & De Klerk, 2019; Gumede & Ezeuduji, 2021) have alluded to the interconnectedness among various components (i.e., brand image, brand essence, and brand loyalty) of branding. When this interconnectedness is strong, it results in an increased flow of tourists toward a particular cultural heritage destination. Manhas et al. (2016) iterate that a target market is enticed by strategies that showcase the uniqueness of a destination. This relies on brand imaging that interests the evaluative perception of potential tourists about a particular cultural heritage destination because it stimulates their cognitive, distinctive, and affective response through marketing strategies. Perceived destination image is the manner in which a particular cultural heritage destination is expected to impact potential tourists. Accordingly, a destination image is described by Tasci et al. (2007: 200) as "an interactive system of thoughts, opinions, feelings, visualisations, and intentions toward a particular destination". Likewise, Choi et al. (1999) view a destination image as beliefs, ideas, and/or impressions held by people about a particular destination. Apart from being a fundamental factor in tourists' travel decisions and plans, a destination image is also an important factor in tourist satisfaction (Cheng et al., 2013). Tourist satisfaction is an overall feeling of being impressed by a particular destination and is measured in terms of pre-travel expectations, actual experiences, and intent to return or recommend a destination to potential tourists (Chen et al., 2016; Altunel & Erkurtb, 2015). It is also linked to a sense of nostalgia when a particular cultural heritage site is visited (Hewison, 1987). The New Oxford Dictionary of English (1998:

1266) defines nostalgia as "a sentimental longing or wistful affection for the past". It is for instance experienced when concentration camps are visited in Germany and Poland or when tourists visit the killing fields of Colombia, the Holocaust Museum in Washington DC, and Hiroshima in Japan. Many international travellers also visit Isandlwana in South Africa as it marks a battle during the Anglo-Zulu War in 1879 (Laband, 1998). This sensation (i.e., tourist satisfaction) depends on tourists' pre-travel expectations that are met by their actual experiences. These experiences are shaped by first-hand encounters with visible, invisible, palpable, and impalpable offerings at a tourist destination (Altunel & Erkurtb, 2015).

Expectations are created in terms of service standard, level of courtesy, and nature of offerings. These are measured against the symbolic meanings associated with the particular cultural heritage features in the tourist's memory (Haarhoff & De Klerk, 2019). Rajesh (2013) and Picazo and Moreno-Gil (2019) argue that the cognitive (e.g., physical infrastructure), distinctive (e.g., customs and rituals), and affective (e.g., hospitability, information sources, socio-demographic attributes, and tourists' first-hand experiences) attributes are the main antecedents of successful cultural heritage tourism. Ezeuduji and Mhlongo (2019) argue that destination brand imaging is a composite of a multitude of impressions obtained by potential and experienced tourists regarding a particular tourist destination from a variety of sources. A cultural heritage destination's brand image thus comprises multidimensional attributes and requires both factual and effective marketing strategies (Gumede & Ezeuduji, 2021). Brand essence evokes distinct emotions in tourists when they visit a particular cultural heritage site (de Chernatony & Harris, 2010). Light et al. (2012) state that brand essence captures the core spirit of a tourist destination and ensures its competitive advantage as it entices tourists to choose this brand over its competitors. There are numerous factors that determine brand essence such as functional values (i.e., observable, palpable, and measurable heritage attributes found in architecture, gastronomy, and artefacts), emotional values (i.e., ambience, religion, language, rituals, and hospitability) and peripheral attributes (e.g., former colonial ties, trade agreements, land mass, and income disparities between the place of origin and the tourism destination) (Chen et al., 2016; Ezeuduji et al., 2016; Viljoen & Henama, 2017). All cultural heritage destinations are characterised by their own images that subsequently influence tourists' decisions to visit/revisit a destination or not (George, 2017). Brand loyalty entails the repeated purchasing of a tourism destination's offerings by experienced tourists regardless of changes in conditions (Chatzigeorgiou & Christou, 2016). Scholars such as Chen et al. (2016), and Mokoena (2020) argue that brand loyalty hinges upon four key components, namely: memorable experiences, destination consumption, destination attachment, and tourist satisfaction. Memorable experiences are generated by enjoyable activities at a tourist destination (Kim et al., 2012), whereas destination consumption is the manner in which tourists select, purchase, use, maintain, repair, and dispose of any product or service offered at a tourist destination (Campbell, 1987). This phenomenon is associated with the affective bond that develops between a tourist destination and its visitors as a result of positive and memorable experiences (Kyle et al., 2005). Destination attachment occurs when a visitor experiences an inextricable connectedness over time with a tourist destination as a result of the destination's enjoyable physical and social attributes. This attachment is associated with infrastructure, ambience, and hospitability (Chen et al., 2016).

South Africa's government and tourism industry's response to COVID-19
South Africa offers unique tourist destinations due to its many scenic attractions and cultural heritage sites (Mokoena, 2020). KwaZulu-Natal, the Western Cape, Gauteng, and the Free State are pivotal cultural heritage tourism nodes (Khumalo et al., 2014; Masilo & van der Merwe, 2016; Nkwanyana et al., 2016; Ezeuduji et al., 2016; Rogerson & van der Merwe,

2016; Gumede, 2019; Mokoena, 2020; Nhlabathi & Maharaj, 2020; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020b). Tourism contributes significantly to the country's economy in terms of employment and the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) due to tourism-related micro, medium, and macro enterprises (SMMEs) (Odeku, 2020). For instance, the sector contributed 1.5 million jobs and 9.3% to the GDP in 2019 (World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), 2020). However, the sector was not recognised as an essential service and consequently had to be shut down during the COVID-19 pandemic when the country was in lockdown (Bama & Nyikana, 2021). As tourism sustainability depends mainly on human mobility and sociability, the two things that have been undermined by COVID (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020a), South Africa's tourism industry ground to a halt in March 2020 (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 2020). Having considered situational urgency, World Health Organization (WHO) public health guidelines, and stringent lockdown restrictions, international tourism declined by 60% to 80% during 2020 (UNWTO, 2020). These restrictions triggered significant disruption of major arts and cultural events and thus employment and revenue derived from cultural heritage tourism dropped significantly. In response, some countries (e.g., China, England, and America) implemented a unique tourism recovery action plan to sustain tourism amidst the COVID-19 pandemic (Chen et al., 2020; Wood, 2021). In Africa, it became apparent that the developmental milestones achieved over the past decades may be reversed, while the chronic challenge of poverty may also be exacerbated due to the long-term ramifications of COVID-19 (Buheji et al., 2020). Various authors (e.g., Mooney & Zegarra, 2020; Nyawo, 2020; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020b; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021) share a common view that the mostly exposed to the global havoc unleashed by COVID-19 are the economies of tourism-dependent destinations and local communities. Nevertheless, the fact that tourism has demonstrated resilience to previous global health, political, socio-economic, and environmental crisis (WHO, 2015; Novelli et al., 2018), it could bounce back from COVID-19 and its ramifications (Sigala, 2020; Gumede, 2022). Resilience is a process of linking a set of adaptive capabilities with a positive trajectory of functioning and adaption during a post-business operation's interruption (Norris et al., 2008). The findings from the cross-country analysis carried out by Farzanegan et al. (2021) on international tourism and COVID-19 cases and deaths indicated that countries that are exposed to international tourism such as South Africa are mostly prone to large cases. Thus, a new and bold direction had to be charted by the government and the tourism industry (Kwok & Koh, 2021). Equally, the impact of COVID-19 on South Africa's macro and micro-economic sectors prompted extensive anxiety in both the state government and the vast majority of tourism business fraternity (Gumede, 2022; South African Government, 2021). The apprehension engendered by COVID-19 prompted urgent responses from the state government and tourism industry. By the same token, key stakeholders' responsiveness has drawn the interest of numerous authors. For example, Hemmonsbey et al. (2021) focused on the responses and adaptations by South Africa's sport tourism sector, Rogerson and Rogerson (2020a) analysed the government's and tourism industry's response to the early development and spread of COVID-19 in South Africa, and Nyawo (2020) evaluated government responses and measures on COVID-19 in the tourism sector with a specific focus on tour guides.

The government's response to COVID-19 ramifications has been strategic and sequential in approach. Having taken potential threats to the lives of the citizens and the country's economy due the rampant spread of COVID-19 into consideration, the country's government, informed by rigorous consultation with relevant bodies led by the National Coronavirus Command Council (NCCC), declared a 'National State of Disaster' and immediate inception of precautionary measures with effect from the 15th of March 2020 (Arndt et al., 2020). Immediately following upon the declaration of National State of Disaster, the

introduction of a national lockdown as from the 27th of March 2020, which was subsequently extended to the 18th of August 2020, was announced alongside the stringent precautionary measures to contain further spread of COVID-19. Travel restrictions and cross-border closures were among these measures (Mail & Guardian, 2020). The national government alongside provincial governments identified appropriate quarantine (i.e., a strategy used to prevent transmission of COVID-19 by keeping people who have been in close contact with someone infected with COVID-19 apart from others for a period of 14 days) locations across the country for use by the citizens arriving back from Wuhan, China (Ngqakamba, 2020). In partnership with the Discovery Health (one of the country's leading private health care providers), the government offered home-based isolation for individuals either diagnosed with COVID-19 but with only mild illness or for those awaiting test results (Jacob, 2020). Based upon a report prepared for the Presidency, the national government announced the country's long-term planning response to the COVID crisis for the phased withdrawal of lockdown measures on the 23rd of April 2020 (The Presidency, 2020). At its core is a governance framework for a 'risk-adjusted strategy' for economic activity which is based on different levels of alert and adapted to the epidemiological threats associated with COVID-19 (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020a). The state government, through the Department of Small Business Development (DSBD), disbursed stimulus fund grants and loan waivers to SMMEs including those under the ambit of tourism sector to sustain their business operations amid COVID-19 (South African Government, 2021). The tourism ministry made it clear that reinforcing the agenda for tourism sector transformation is a core focus for the national government in recovery planning as COVID-19 is viewed as "an opportunity to distribute the benefits of tourism to rural and township communities" (Kubayi-Ngubane, 2020: 1). Following a significant decline in new COVID-19 infection cases due to citizens' enhanced behavioral responsiveness to the pandemic (Kollamparambil & Oyenubi, 2021), and positive response to vaccination roll-out since its inception on the 17th of February 2021 (Dzinamarira et al., 2021), most restrictions have been lifted. This initiative enabled reinstatement of the country's economic sectors including tourism and related businesses (South African Government, 2021). Despite, the country has not achieved the target herd immunity due to vaccination hesitancy among certain citizens (Kollamparambil & Oyenubi, 2021).

The Department of Tourism, the Tourism Business Council of South Africa, and the International Finance Corporation (2020) view domestic tourism as a beacon of hope and a viable catalyst for the recovery of the country's tourism sector (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020a). Accordingly, South African Tourism has crafted a Tourism Recovery Plan (TRP) with which it intends to resuscitate a devastated tourism industry due to COVID-19 (South African Tourism, 2020). Revival of domestic tourism, business travel, and youth travel are the cardinal pillars of TRP (Smith, 2020). In most parts of the world, visiting friends and relatives (VFR) has been acknowledged as a viable post-disaster recovery strategy (Backer & Ritchie, 2017). However, VFR travel has not been acknowledged by the South African Tourism as a strategy for reviving the country's emasculated local tourism economies (Backer & Ritchie, 2017). A tourism task team has been set up by the City of Cape Town to develop a local response and recovery plan to strengthen local travel and support local businesses that have been adversely affected by COVID-19 (Invest Cape Town, 2020). Recovery interventions as proposed by the International Tourism Research Network (ITRN) need to be domesticated and regional tourism marketing orientated (Bieger & Laesser, 2020).

Research setting

This paper reports on the findings of a study that was conducted at KwaBulawayo Cultural Centre (KBCC) and Ondini Cultural Centre and Museum (OCCM) on the north coast of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, over a period of 6 months (July to December 2021). The study was conducted during the pandemic to capture participants' perceptions and explore their experiences of the impact of COVID-19 on tourism in the study area. KBCC is located less than a twenty-minute drive from Empangeni.
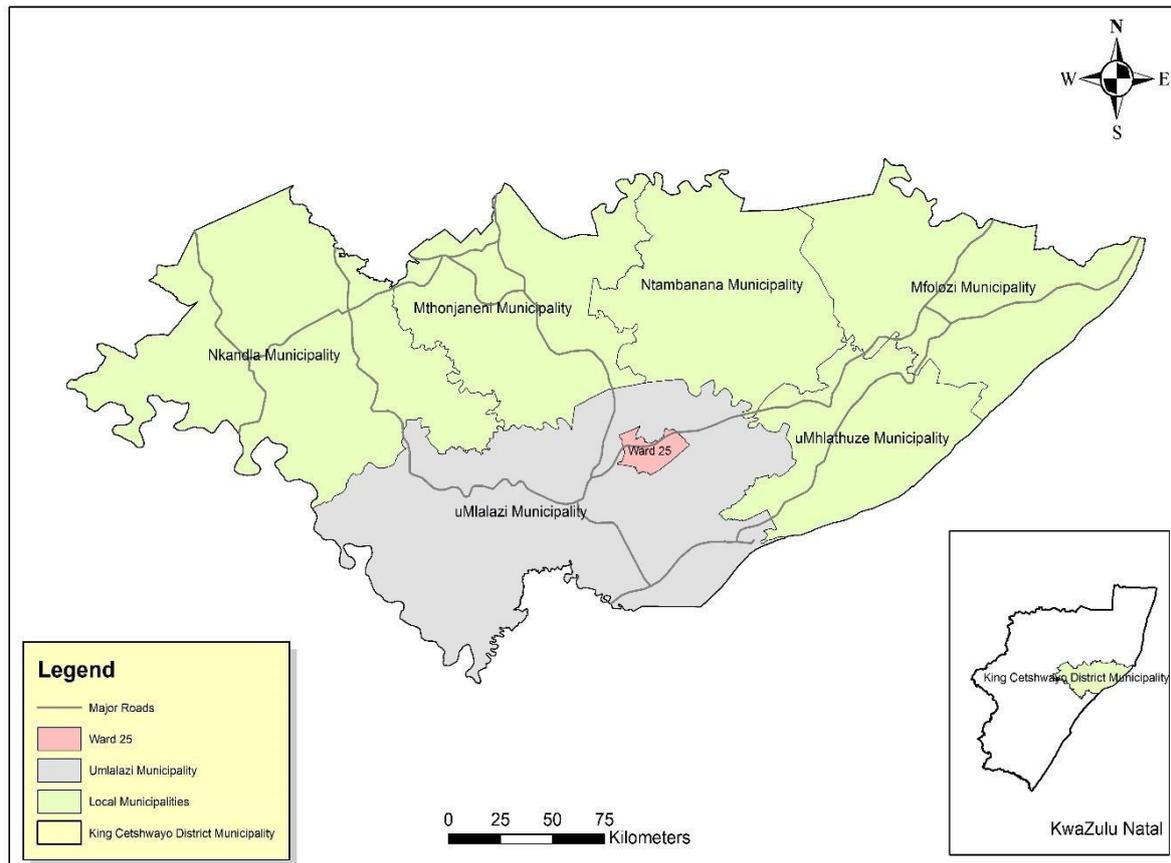

Figure 1. The Map illustrating geographical location of the KBCC
Source: Authors' construct

It nestles in the uMhlathuze Valley in ward 25 of the uMlalazi Local Municipality in the King Cetshwayo District (uMlalazi Local Municipality, 2017/2022). The centre is of prime importance to Zulu culture and history and a historical hub of the Zulu nation's growth. It was built on the homestead of King Shaka kaSenzangakhona and was named KwaBulawayo, meaning 'the place of killings', as King Shaka was ambushed and brutally stubbed here by his enemies (Cele, 2001). The King famously formed his military might (*ibutho)* near this setting where older men lived and trained young men in fighting skills and behaviour (Cele, 2001). It also served as the King's court of justice where culprits were officially prosecuted (Ritter, 1955). Some prominent cultural heritage attractions adjacent to KBCC include Queen Nandi's grave, Coward's Bush, Mandawe Cross, Ongoye Forest, and Shakaland Cultural Village (Shakaland, 2015). The centre is community-owned, managed, and operated. Its objectives are to ensure that local customs and traditions are preserved for future generations. It educates people on the significance of the Zulu nation and provides visitors with a truly authentic and remarkable African experience (Cele, 2001).
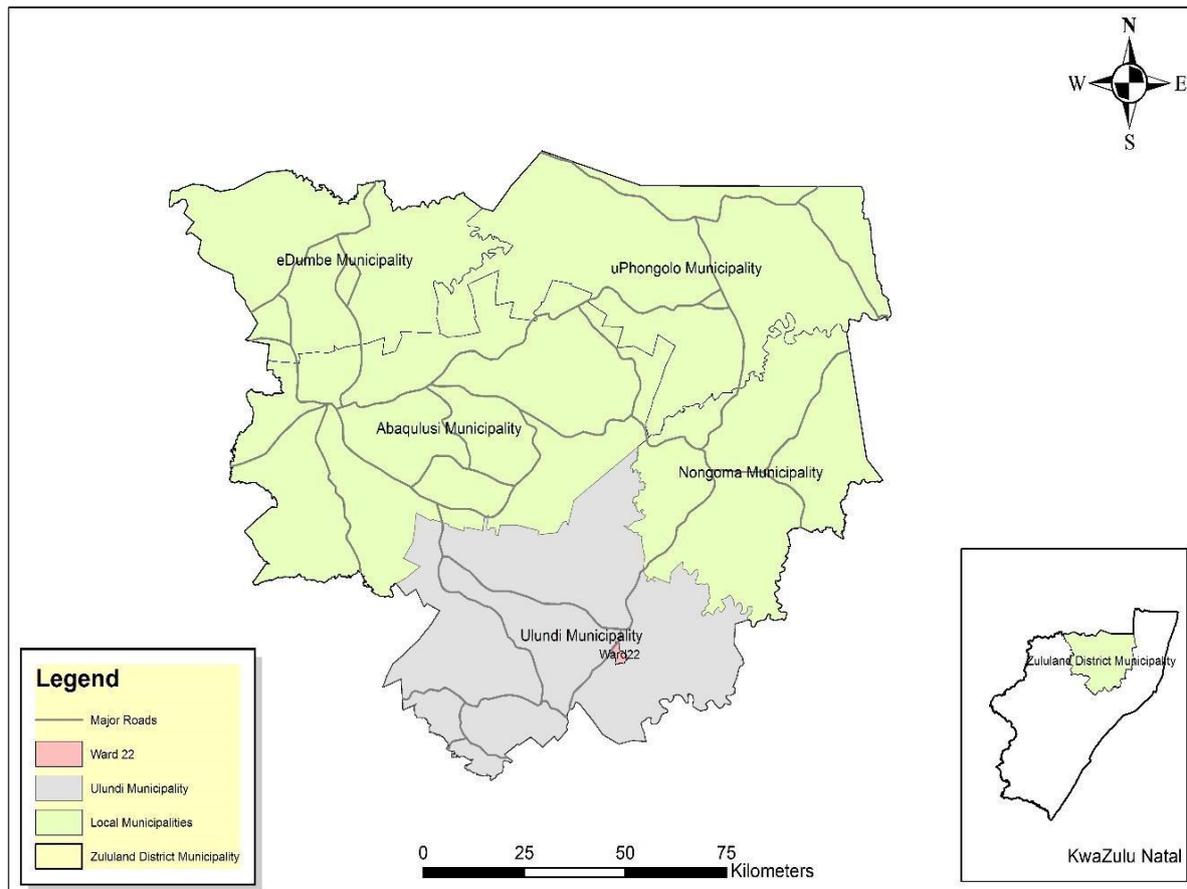
Figure 2. The Map illustrating geographical location of the OCCM
Source: Authors' construct

OCCM is located in ward 22 of the Ulundi Local Municipality in the Zululand District. The centre was built on the site of the royal residence of another former king of the Zulu nation, King Cetshwayo. It was officially opened by the late King Goodwill Zwelithini Zulu on the 20th of August 1983 (Zululand, 2020/21). King Cetshwayo is known for his robust resistance to the British Empire that intended to annex Zulu territory in 1879 (Laband, 1998). The site houses a rich collection of the cultural heritage of the Nguni people of south-eastern Africa (Zululand, 2020/21). The museum features a collection of authentic artefacts and Zulu and British military attire and weapons (Zululand, 2020/21).

Methods
This study examined the views of tourists who visited/revisited the centres during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study adopted interpretivism as the research paradigm. Human behaviour is socially constructed and prompted by a particular phenomenon and behaviour is best understood when subjects are subjectively studied within their own environment and social context (Maree & Pietersen, 2016). An explanatory research design was adopted within a qualitative research approach. Face-to-face unstructured interviews were conducted with 25 participants. Cheng et al. (2013) argue that in-depth interviewing is the most appropriate tool for data collection in cases where the participants' perceptions pertaining to a particular phenomenon are solicited. The COVID-19 pandemic is a unique phenomenon that has dramatically reshaped numerous segments of tourism demand and supply (Gössling et al., 2021). Tourist behaviour towards particular tourist destinations thus needed to be subjectively

studied and understood as the depth and severity of the impact of COVID-19 were unique for each tourist destination. Each tourist destination devised unique strategies to sustain tourism demand during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, and an explanatory design was adopted to enable the reader to understand how the specific social groups under study behaved in light of their subjective worldview (Nieuwenhuis, 2016). This approach enabled the evaluation of raw data while an intensive literature review assisted in supporting or refuting the findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). An interview guide was used to pose five open-ended interview questions. Data were collected from 25 conveniently sampled international and local tourists (Ali, 2015; Creswell, 2014). The participants were selected based on their potential knowledge of the topic under study and their willingness to participate, which contributed to the trustworthiness of the study. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from site managers at cultural heritage tourism sites. The participants voluntarily completed and signed a consent form. The results are credible as the interview schedule was aligned with the aim of the study (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). The in-depth interviews elicited rich and saturated data. Eliciting the participants' insightful narratives was the primary goal and they were allowed to become active constructors of their experiences (Caton & Santos, 2007). All COVID-19-related safety precautions were rigorously applied. Eleven (11) international tourists (4 at KBCC and 7 at OCCM) and 14 domestic tourists (6 at KBCC and 8 at OCCM) were involved in face-to-face interviews. The interviews were recorded on a mobile phone and transcribed verbatim at a later stage for data analysis. Field notes were concurrently recorded to serve as a back-up (Sutton & Austin, 2015). The data were thematically analysed to identify common threads using codes that emerged from the data, and shared meanings resulted in themes that illuminated the phenomenon under study (Clarke & Braun, 2017). A recent study by Rogerson and Rogerson (2021) employed a similar approach to determine the impact of COVID-19 on changing tourism demands in South Africa.

Findings and discussion
Satisfactory service fosters sustainable tourist loyalty
When solicited to share their views regarding the reason(s) for considering the cultural heritage sites as ideal tourist destinations to visit/revisit, the participants highlighted hospitability of the sites' personnel and local community towards visitors, rich history attached to the sites, ambience, and satisfactory service standard as the main inducement towards the sites. When expressing her view, one of the participants had to say:

> People at and in the vicinity of the site are so welcoming and hospitable towards visitors.... I am quite impressed with the service standard at this site as my expectations regarding the offerings have been met. It will be my pleasure to come back here again, especially when COVID-19 and its confining restrictions no longer apply (International tourist, KBCC, July 2021).

In line with the findings, Rajesh (2013) affirms that tourist loyalty is largely influenced by the perceived level of satisfaction derived from the overall destination experience. Similarly, numerous studies (e.g., Khumalo et al., 2014; Ezeuduji et al., 2016; Ezeuduji & Mhlongo, 2019; Haarhoff & De Klerk, 2019) found that most tourists visit, revisit, and recommend South Africa's cultural heritage tourism sites as a result of satisfactory state of physical infrastructure, unique offerings, and hospitability to visitors. Tourists' satisfaction with a destination's offerings has also been identified by Altunel and Erkurtb (2015) as a key antecedent of tourist-destination loyalty. Mokoena (2020) adds that satisfactory or positive on-site experiences at South Africa's cultural heritage sites are vital for return visits. Accordingly, the TPB posits that

tourists' travelling plans are motivated by internal (e.g., hospitality, resources, courtesy, perceived satisfactory experience, etc.) and external (e.g., infrastructure, social dimensions, political landscape, health status, etc.) factors. Hasan and Jobaid (2014) affirms that tourism is encouraged and sustained by good service, sound infrastructure, and security and safety. Therefore, rapport, a positive attitude, and tourists' satisfaction are crucial for engendering loyalty among local and foreign visitors alike (Altunel & Erkurtb, 2015). Although the findings indicate tourists' satisfaction with the experiences in cultural heritage tourism sites, the narratives subtly demonstrate that the tourists' turnout could have been greater if it was a normal and healthy environment. Thus, the socio-cultural and economic state of the sites and local communities might have been negatively impacted by COVID-19. The lesser the number of tourists in quest for cultural heritage experiences, the lesser the opportunity for socio-cultural and economic growth within the study area. Perhaps, it could be said based on the narratives that a greater tourists' turnout may be expected at the sites as all economic sectors including tourism have been re-opened fully.

Tourist-destination emotional attachment facilitates sustainable tourist loyalty

Reviewed literature indicates that emotional attachment to a tourist destination is key to tourist loyalty. Accordingly, when asked to reveal the motive behind their emotional attachment to the cultural heritage tourism sites, the participants highlighted positive perception, memorable past experiences, and influence from media platforms and social groups to have attributed to destination-tourist emotional attachment. According to Kyle et al. (2005: 155), destination-tourist emotional attachment refers to "*an affective bond developed between* a tourist destination and its visitors as a result of positive and memorable experiences". One of the participants stated:

> ...this site is the most appealing and unique amongst those I have visited so far...the site's attractiveness and uniqueness hinge upon the positive image disseminated by those who have had first-hand experience....Offerings here portray a unique and authentic culture and heritage of the Zulu tradition that most people want to experience....I feel so emotionally connected to this site….the remarkable experiences [of] on-site and off-site encounters [will] influence both our revisits and aspiration for others to share the same experience (International tourist, OCCM, October 2021).

Tourists are encouraged to visit a site through perceptions and a worldview that impact public opinion (George, 2017; Haarhoff & De Klerk, 2019). A key factor that influences such perceptions is destination positioning which ensures a site's competitive advantage (Okumuş & Yaşin, 2008; Manhas et al., 2016; Schoeman, 2016; Haarhoff & De Klerk, 2019). In the cultural heritage tourism sphere, South Africa competes with countries such as Uganda and Kenya and thus brand essence is an important attribute that cultural heritage sites need to market. South Africa is fortunate as numerous tourism sites have been bestowed World Heritage Site status by UNESCO (Mokoena, 2020) which boosted tourism (Dewar et al., 2012). Viljoen and Henama (2017) maintain that scenic and unique natural and cultural resources are essential for cultural heritage tourism as tourists are inclined to attach emotionally to such destinations. Emotional connectedness fosters a destination's competitive advantage as it prompts an irresistible desire to visit or revisit it (de Chernatony & Harris, 2010; Light et al., 2012). Many people who belong to the Zulu ethnic group and those who wish to engage with its cultural heritage are able to connect emotionally with it when they encounter authentic experiences that are endemic to the Zulu nation (Mokoena, 2020). A case in point is the visitors who would revisit the study sites regardless of the COVID-19 pandemic. Chatzigeorgiou and

Christou (2016) argue that loyalty encourages consumers to recommend a destination to others regardless of the environment. As the case with tourist satisfaction and in line with the stance of theoretical underpinning, the internal and external experiences contribute significantly to tourist-destination emotional attachment and facilitate tourists' inclination to revisit and recommend cultural heritage sites to friends, family, and social groups. In other words, tourist-destination attachment serves as a precursor of destination loyalty (Gumede & Ezeuduji, 2021). It may therefore be said based on the findings that a developed emotional attachment sustains tourist loyalty to cultural heritage tourism sites and enhances socio-cultural and economic growth amid COVID-19.

Nostalgic attachment enhances sustainable tourist loyalty
Unsurprisingly, the pandemic engendered hesitancy and caution among local and international travellers as they feared becoming infected during their travels. However, international tourists stuck to their travelling plans as they felt nostalgic about KBCC and OCCM and were confident about escaping infection as they had been vaccinated. Domestic tourists were cautious and adhered to all precautionary measures. One of the participants stated:

> [First], as a British citizen and archaeological anthropology student, I always had a strong desire to set foot on this site [which] is built on the capital and headquarters of King Cetshwayo, who is known for his resolute bravery in resisting the British Empire who wanted to annex the nation's heritage resources. Secondly, this site is adjacent to where my forefathers who fell in the Anglo-Zulu War in 1879 were laid to rest. Finally, the site preserves an important part of history as the remains of the Zulu nation's primitive weapons and the British troops' ammunition and uniforms are exhibited in the museum. Despite...COVID-19, I shall always come here as part of my studies and pay homage to my fallen forefathers... (International tourist, OCCM, November 2021).

Vesey and Dimanche (2003) argue that nostalgia and artefacts motivate tourism as visitors seek historic knowledge and entertainment. The rich history of the study sites attracts visitors who remember the history of their forefathers and then develop a nostalgic attachment that results in revisiting and recommending the sites to others. When triangulated with the tenets of the TPB and Triantafillidou and Siomkos's (2014) findings, the study confirmed that positive cultural heritage experiences prompt behavioural intentions and nostalgia that encourage revisits and recommendation to others. The findings provide sufficient basis for considering rich historical background as a precursor of sustainable tourist loyalty to cultural heritage tourism sites amid COVID-19.

Unique offerings engender sustainable tourist loyalty
Tourists' perception of revisiting the cultural heritage tourism sites in the future, and why [if they consider revisiting] would they do so were solicited. The participants recommended that further developments in spatial capacity and variations in offerings at KBCC would encourage them to visit this site again. They commended unique service and hospitability of the staff and locals as inducements for future visits. A tourist shared her views as follows:

> Although...the site is quite small and does not feature important facilities such as accommodation and culinary services, I shall most definitely want to come back.... As a member of the Zulu ethnic group it has always haunted me that I was not able to set foot on King Shaka's former capital [but] my desire has been fulfilled. The staff and community members...have been hospitable...which helps to build a positive image of

the site and its surroundings.... I am very impressed with the service standard, the artefacts, and their authenticity. The site's curator is well-informed and eloquently delivers informative and satisfactory facilitation regarding the historical background and offerings, especially the artefacts.... I felt inextricably connected with the site and aspire to come back for a revisit in the hope that most confining restrictions due to COVID-19 will have been eased" (Domestic tourist, KBCC, December 2021).

The findings confirmed that cultural heritage tourism is product-led and visitor-driven and that the development of service provisioning, with specific focus on experiential consumption, is pivotal in tourists' perception of quality (Chen & Chen, 2010). Consumption experiences involve the availability of goods that stir fond memories during tourism encounters (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). The participants' satisfactory experiences related to quality service at cultural heritage tourism sites were also emotional and nostalgic due to their cultural attachment (essence). These emotions engendered loyalty as they would share positive word-of-mouth messages with others and revisit the sites. Although the two sites share some similarities in terms offerings, each site is unique in terms of spatial capacity and the availability of amenities. Uniqueness was thus highlighted as a precursor to cultural heritage tourism and a driver of competitive advantage. The UNWTO (2018: 93) iterates that "many people travel outside their places of origin in the quest for unique cultural experiences [of] a specific ethnic society". Accordingly, Zlatanov (2015) acknowledges the quality and standard of its facilities as the key to tourism industry's success. It is evident based on the findings that branding essentials such as brand essence contribute immensely to the tourist preferences regarding an ideal tourist destination while determining tourists' decisions on visiting or revisiting a destination. They also enhance socio-cultural and economic growth within host destinations as tourists travel and pay for fulfilling a quest for distinct cultural offerings despite the advent of hazardous global crisis.

Conclusion

This paper sought to explore how tourist loyalty towards South Africa's cultural heritage tourism sites has been sustained amid COVID-19. Based on the narratives of the tourists that revealed their loyalty toward the cultural heritage sites amid the pandemic, this paper concludes that the manner in which tourists respond to circumstances is predicated upon the TPB. The TPB's theoretical perspective upholds internal and external factors as the basis for tourists' perceptions, emotional attachment, memorable experiences, and willingness to visit or revisit and recommend a tourist destination. Based on the findings and in line with the theoretical perspective, this paper concludes that cultural heritage sites have sustained tourist loyalty amid COVID-19 through satisfactory service, tourist-destination emotional and nostalgic attachment, and unique offerings.

South Africa's cultural heritage tourism sites offer unique, satisfactory, and memorable tourism experience. It transpired from the findings that there are disparities between the cultural heritage tourism sites in terms of spatial capacity. Specific needs and aspirations of visitors may not be satisfied at a destination with limited space and/or facilities. This limitation may hinder sustainable tourist loyalty toward cultural heritage tourism sites. Against this backdrop, it is recommended that key stakeholders pay more attention on destination positioning in order to meet the needs and aspirations of prospective and/or experienced clientele.

Acknowledgement

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