African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure **2025, Vol. 14 No. 5 pp. 1051-1057**
ISSN: 2223-814X

Beyond the Mainstream: Unlocking Event Tourism Potential Through Pigeon Racing in South Africa

Tracy DANIELS
School of Tourism and Hospitality
College of Business and Economics
University of Johannesburg, South Africa,
Email, tracyd@uj.ac.za
Corresponding Author

Rene WENTZEL
School of Tourism and Hospitality
College of Business and Economics
University of Johannesburg, South Africa,
Email, renew@uj.ac.za

Abstract

Recent global events have highlighted the importance of domestic tourism to the South African tourism industry as an engine for economic resilience and sectoral recovery. If leveraged correctly, niche sport events can offer targeted, cost-effective and culturally relevant strategies for stimulating travel among locals and distributing economic and social benefits. Despite this, the potential of niche sport events has been largely overlooked. The present study investigated how niche pigeon racing events can be leveraged to stimulate domestic tourism development in South Africa. A mixed methods approach was utilised, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews to gather a comprehensive set of data from pigeon fanciers and organisers. The findings reveal that pigeon racing niche events are significant for the South African tourism and events industry, making a notable contribution to the local economy. The study determined the need for enhanced marketing strategies and support from both governmental and community sectors to promote inclusivity and accessibility. The research bridges existing gaps in understanding the contribution of niche sport events to the South African events industry. The study further provides a novel contribution to the currently limited body of knowledge on pigeon racing in the context of sport tourism and tourism development.

Keywords: Sport event tourism, niche events, event leveraging, pigeon racing

How to cite this article: Daniels, T. & Wentzel, R. (2025). Beyond the Mainstream: Unlocking Event Tourism Potential Through Pigeon Racing in South Africa. African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure, 14(5):1051-1057. DOI: https://doi.org/10.46222/ajhtl.19770720.693

Introduction

The hosting of events is widely recognised as a global tool to stimulate tourism activities and development, resulting in a range of benefits including economic growth, nation branding and social development (Lu et al., 2020; Muresherwa et al., 2022). Event tourism is globally used as a strategy to attract tourists to destinations, creating an enabling environment for local entrepreneurs to participate in entrepreneurial activity (Mxunyelwa & Busisiwe Kilani, 2020). The rapid growth of events has globally been seen as a unique type of tourist attraction (Mxunyelwa, 2017) that can be used as a tool to attract tourism investments, particularly in countries such as South Africa with developing economies. Events are further seen as a key motivator of tourism and are at the forefront of many destination marketing and development plans (Getz, 2008). According to Mallen & Adams (2024), niche events are created from innovation that modifies or reinvigorates an idea or designs an entirely new experience for a specific audience group. Similarly, Novelli et al. (2022) state that niche event offerings are designed for specific market groups shaped by similar characteristics such as demographics and social status. Mallen et al. (2024) highlight that niche events can be developed and hosted by anyone with new and unique ideas, and play a critical role in sustainable tourism development and diversifying offerings (Novelli et al., 2022), and that niche tourism can play a significant role in strategies focussed on rejuvenating destinations, enhancing destination authenticity and allowing for adaptations to meet evolving customer demands (Novelli et al., 2022). Niche tourism is further considered a strategic approach that can counter mass tourism through offering alternatives that emphasise sustainability and unique experiences rather than mass-market offerings (Novelli et al., 2022; Mallen et al., 2024). While the positive outcomes of niche tourism are evident, the South African National Department of Tourism (NDT) (2022) has found that while niche tourism holds great promise, it has not been fully leveraged or enhanced in the country to support tourism development and destination sustainability.

According to Galen (2023), pigeon racing entails teaching homing pigeons to fly from various distances back to their lofts. Pigeon racing participants are known as fanciers, and they raise and train pigeons to become elite athletes. Pigeon racing is a sport that does not receive much attention, which could be assumed to be the case due to a lack of knowledge thereof (Baker, 2013; Mostert & Donaldson, 2024). This also means that the sport has been largely underestimated, although it holds great potential for attracting tourists to sporting events. International and local enthusiasts travel to witness these races, adding a unique element to the sports events tourism landscape (Mostert et al, 2024). Racing pigeons also contribute to the socio-cultural aspects of communities as they provide pigeon fanciers with the opportunity to not only reconnect with nature but also provide them with a sense of freedom (Baker, 2013). Pigeon racing is therefore considered both an independent and a community sport as it emphasises personal expertise, commitment and competition, while also promoting societal integration. South Africa is considered one of the world's top locations for pigeon racing lovers (Mostert et al, 2024), but despite this, the country has not capitalised on the sport and its associated sport event tourism offerings to widen its appeal to tourists from both domestic and foreign countries. Annually, the AfrikaPro Premier One Loft Series, a now world-famous pigeon racing event, is held at Phala Phala Wildlife Farm in Limpopo, South Africa (Smit, 2024). This event comprises one-loft racing, a unique take on the traditional pigeon race in which pigeons from various breeders are bred and then sent to be trained together in a single

loft before the race. Along with this, there has also been an increase in the number of smaller-scale pigeon racing events being hosted, such as the Aviomed Interprovincial Race, SANPO pigeon shows and the smaller scaled One Loft events (SANPO, 2024). Capitalising on these events would draw attention to South Africa as a destination which provides unique event experiences, attracting both local and international travellers. Despite this, little attention is paid to pigeon racing and other niche events in South Africa, with the focus being skewed to mainstream events within the country's existing event portfolio. Along with this, the contribution of pigeon racing to the existing South African event tourism sector remains unknown. The aim of the study was therefore to identify the contribution of pigeon racing to the South African sport event tourism industry and to provide recommendations on how this can be capitalised on to enhance the potential economic and social benefits for local communities and destinations. The study provides a novel contribution by contributing to the limited body of knowledge on pigeon racing and other niche events in South Africa, their impact and contribution, and strategies on how they can be leveraged for future event tourism growth and development.

Literature review

The South African events industry

In South Africa, event tourism plays a significant role in the local economy, as events are seen to provide a significant financial injection for the host city, steering development, creating a positive destination image, expanding the traditional tourist season and drawing both local and international visitors (Mxunyelwa et al, 2020; Turco et al., 2003). Spronk & Fourie (2010), note that sports events are characterised by innovative and complex athletic or recreational activities designed to entertain audiences through a set program. Following the dismantling of apartheid and the establishment of democracy in 1994, South Africa has actively pursued hosting international sporting events. The country experienced a drastic rise in tourism following the 1994 democratic elections, partly because of attracting major sporting events such as the Rugby World Cup in 1995 and the FIFA World Cup in 2020. This strategic move aimed to generate foreign income through a surge in tourism and by positioning the nation as a premier destination for sports event tourists and foreign investment (Giampiccoli, Lee & Nauright, 2015). South Africa is today known to host major events (Mxunyelwa et al., 2020) and is the most widely recognised sports event tourism destination in Africa. The focus of sport event tourism in South Africa to date has largely been on the hosting of mega-events to improve destination image, generate foreign income and leave positive legacies which has resulted in less attention being paid to the hosting of small scale sporting events, which also have positive impacts as they work within the existing framework of a community (Raso & Cherubini, 2024). Giampiccoli et al. (2015) argue that even though South Africa has a large-scale outward focus, it holds numerous recurring sporting events where locals have control, and that are organised and run locally or regionally (within South Africa) rather than by international sporting organisations. Parra-Camacho, González-García and Alonso-Dos-Santos (2021) add that smaller-scale sport events such as these, have the potential to improve standard of living, boost pride and instil in locals' a sense of being part of the community while providing leisure possibilities and promoting local involvement. Parra-Camacho et al. (2021) further elaborate on the positive impacts of these events, including engagement in sports, improved destination image, enhanced human resources and social advancement. While small-scale sporting events have minimal worldwide impact, they occasionally draw amateur athletes from many nations, enhancing the city's image as an ideal location for sports (Parra-Camacho et al., 2021).

The potential of niche events

Niche events are those that can be linked to a particular characteristic or lifestyle activity of those who attend these events, and attendees to these events demand specialist activities to meet their specific needs (Novelli, 2005). Niche tourism has long been a significant part of the South African tourism industry but has garnered increased attention following the negative impacts of the pandemic on the country's tourism landscape (Rogerson, 2011; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021). The reasons for this are that niche market groups, such as niche event tourists, are viewed as being more economically, environmentally and socio-culturally sustainable and allow for higher levels of community engagement and improved geographical spread of tourism activities (Novelli, 2005; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021). The World Tourism Organisation (WTO) and the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) both view niche tourism as more valuable to host communities than traditional modes of tourism (Farsani, 2020), as it presents opportunities that are more sustainable, less damaging and promotes inclusivity (Novelli, 2005). Along with this, niche event tourism can be used to address the issue of seasonality in travel (Nair & Mohanty, 2021). According to Sant, Misener and Mason (2019), event hosting cities can maximise the benefits of hosting these niche events by adopting a strategic approach to planning and event management, known as event leveraging. The authors further highlight that the strategic approach focuses on exploring how a destination uses all its events together and how these events can benefit each other, highlighting the need for collaboration. The NDT (2022) notes that niche events play a crucial role in South Africa, as they provide opportunities to develop small-scale, controlled, and well-operated products that meet the ever-changing needs of tourists. It is further argued that if leveraged correctly, niche events provide enhanced opportunities that are more sustainable, less harmful and better positioned to attract high-value visitors (Department of Tourism, 2022). O'Brien & Chalip (2008) state that such event leveraging challenges the traditional event management paradigm by emphasising the importance of strategic planning for long-term host community benefits, utilising event impacts as a tool to evaluate these leveraging strategies. The authors further argue that this approach takes the sole focus of the success of an event away, and the aim is now on the ability of the event to generate lasting positive effects.

According to Hemmonsbey & Tichaawa (2018), because of leveraging sports events, the way in which these events are run is undergoing a significant change, with stakeholders focusing on long-term benefits. Furthermore, media, especially

social media, has become an undeniable force in maximising the impact of sporting events. Similarly, O'Brien et al. (2008) mention that through using event media to enhance a host community's image, long-term leverage is achievable. The strategic leveraging approach argues that to get the most out of hosting a sporting event, communities should begin maximising benefits as early as the planning stage (Pereira et al., 2020), highlighting the importance that, instead of applying generic strategies, successful leveraging involves tailoring them to the unique qualities of the host destination. Taks et al. (2018) note that the Event Leveraging Framework (ELF) is a framework that views an event as an add-on to the host destination's offering. Taks et al. (2018) suggest the use of the Event Leveraging Framework (ELF), as the expansion and integration of this framework suggests the generalisability of the model across various strategic objectives, leading to the argument that for a successful event leveraging a strategic vision for its deployment should be in alignment with specific strategic goals. An event's impact is determined by its integration into the host destination's existing products and services as well as the strategic action taken to achieve the determined objectives (Taks et al., 2018), highlighting that the benefits that the host community obtain are subject to the objectives that they want, which dictate the selection and implementation of specific strategies and tactics to realise the desired outcomes.

The pigeon racing sport and pigeon racing events

Pigeons' exceptional navigational abilities have spurred the growth of pigeon racing as a sport (Allen, 2009). This competitive sport, sometimes compared to the fast-paced world of horse racing, has a particular blue-collar charm that draws participants from a variety of backgrounds. The history of pigeon racing can be traced to Belgium, where the first pigeon race was held in 1815 and then spread to London, where in 1819 a race of 32 pigeons was held from London to Antwerp (Allen, 2009). Today, pigeon racing events are competitive activities where trained racing pigeons are released from a designated location, often hundreds or thousands of kilometres away from their home loft. The pigeons then rely on their homing instincts to navigate and return to their home base as quickly as possible. The first pigeon to arrive, or the one with the fastest average speed over the course (depending on the race format), is declared the winner (Allen, 2009). According to Mostert et al. (2024), the pigeon racing sport consists of 5 diverse pigeon-related events, namely, the World Olympiad, pigeon rollers, pigeon shows/pageants, and long, middle, and short-distance racing. Mostert et al. (2024) further define the pigeon sport as a unique and historic sport type that involves releasing trained homing pigeons with the purpose of returning to their home lofts to compete in races. International fanciers that partake in One Loft racing events are of key significance in both elevating the profile of the sport and in generating considerable revenue for the South African tourism industry, thus contributing to the national economy, especially as these events are not limited to urban areas, therefore providing benefits to more rural and underdeveloped host destinations (Mostert et al., 2024). Baker (2013) adds that pigeon racing is both an individual and community activity, as it relies on personal knowledge, dedication and competitiveness, but also allows for social engagement.

Methodology

The current study employed a mixed-methods research approach. The research was conducted in two phases, the first of which was qualitative in nature, involving in-depth semi-structured key informant interviews with stakeholders involved in the pigeon racing sport and the events industry in South Africa. Key informants were selected based on their knowledge, experience and expertise, and were interviewed using an interview guide focusing on the current contribution of the pigeon racing niche to the South African events industry, opportunities and challenges and how these niche events could be leveraged to positively impact the South African events industry. Interviews were transcribed and analysed using Atlas.ti. Data analysis was conducted using a systematic process of identifying, coding, and interpreting recurring themes within the interview transcripts. By recognising common themes in interviews with key informants, including event organisers and pigeon fanciers, a better understanding of the "why" behind the data was obtained. The second phase of the data collection process involved the collection of quantitative data using surveys distributed among pigeon racing forums, at pigeon racing events and gatherings and at club meetings. The simple random sampling method was used as this relies purely on probability, providing every potential participant with an equivalent likelihood of being chosen for the study. Simple random sampling also minimises bias, as it provides impartial and representative data (Noor, Tajik, & Golzar, 2022). The survey was developed based on existing literature and consisted of three sections: respondent demographics, involvement in pigeon racing events, and the contribution of pigeon racing to the events industry. A total of 359 surveys were completed by respondents. Quantitative data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

Results

Demographic profile of respondents

The demographic profile of the survey respondents is presented in Table 1 below, and the profile of the key informants is presented in Table 2. Table 1 illustrates that most respondents involved in pigeon racing were male (90%), while 9.5% were female. The average age of the respondents was 51 years old, with most of the respondents (53.7%) falling between the ages of 46-65 years old. Most respondents came from Gauteng (29.5%) and the Western Cape (26.5%). The data also shows that 70.2% of the respondents held a certificate or higher qualification, reflecting a well-educated population. The most consistent employment status was full-time employed (43.5%), followed by self-employed (24.8%) and retired (22.6%). Table 2 indicates that key informants interviewed were all involved in the administration and governance of the pigeon racing sport.

Table 1: Demographic profile of respondents

Variable		Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	323	90%
	Female	34	9.5%
	Other	2	0.5%
Age group	18-25 years	14	3.9%
	26-35 years	37	10.3%
	36-45 years	59	16.4%
	46-55 years	96	26.7%
	56-65 years	97	27.0%
	>65 years	56	15.6%
Province of residence	Eastern Cape	36	10%
	Free State	28	7.8%
	Gauteng	106	29.5%
	KwaZulu-Natal	14	3.9%
	Limpopo	18	5.0%
	Mpumalanga	27	7.5%
	Northern Cape	11	3.1%
	Northwest	24	6.7%
	Western Cape	95	26.5%
Highest level of education	No formal schooling	1	0.3%
	Primary schooling complete	6	1.7%
	Secondary schooling complete	100	27.9%
	Certificate / diploma	172	47.9%
	Undergraduate degree	32	8.9%
	Postgraduate degree	48	13.4%
	Other	0	0%
Employment status	Unemployed	5	1.4%
	Working full time	156	43.5%
	Working part time	21	5.8%
	Retired / pensioner	81	22.6%
	Self employed	89	24.8%
	Home executive	7	1.9%
	Other	0	0%

Table 2: Demographic profile of key informants

Participant code	Organisation represented by participant	Role within the organisation
K1	SANPO	Fancier
K2	SANPO	Treasurer
K3	SANPO	Secretary
K4	SANPO	President
K5	SAIPR	Owners

Involvement in pigeon racing and pigeon racing events

Table 3 below is a cross-tabulation displaying the relations between respondents' participation, membership, and the means through which they became involved with the sport.

Table 3: The relationship between membership and involvement (n=359) (in%)

Participation	Membership (SANPO)	Through family % (n)	Through friends % (n)	Through media % (n)	Through local club % (n)	Total % (n)
Active fancier	Yes	58% (163)	30% (83)	2% (5)	6% (18)	96.4% (269)
	No	3% (8)	0%	0%	1% (2)	3.6% (10)
	Total	**61% (171)**	**30% (83)**	**2% (5)**	**7% (20)**	**100% (279)**
Spectator	Yes	27% (4)	33% (5)	0%	7% (1)	67% (10)
	No	33% (5)	0%	0%	0%	33% (5)
	Total	**60% (9)**	**33% (5)**	**0%**	**7% (1)**	**100 % (15)**
Retired fancier	Yes	33% (5)	20% (3)	7% (1)	7% (1)	67% (10)
	No	13% (2)	13% (2)	7% (1)	0%	33% (5)
	Total	**47% (7)**	**33% (5)**	**13% (2)**	**7% (1)**	**100% (15)**
International fancier	Yes	38% (5)	38% (5)	8% (1)	8% (1)	92% (12)
	No	0	8% (1)	0%	0%	8% (1)
	Total	**38% (5)**	**40% (6)**	**8% (1)**	**8% (1)**	**100% (13)**
Intrigued newcomer	Yes	38% (10)	38% (10)	12% (3)	8% (2)	96% (25)
	No	0%	4% (1)	0%	0%	4% (1)
	Total	**38% (10)**	**42% (11)**	**12% (3)**	**8% (2)**	**100% (26)**
Employee/ Assistant	Yes	45% (5)	18% (2)	9% (1)	9% (1)	82% (9)
	No	18% (2)	0%	0%	0%	18% (2)
	Total	**64% (7)**	**18% (2)**	**9% (1)**	**9% (1)**	**100% (11)**
Total		**58.2% (209)**	**31.3% (112)**	**3.3% (12)**	**7.2% (26)**	**100% (359)**

Table 3 reveals that 93.3% of the respondents were registered members of SANPO, while 6.7% were not. The data also shows that 58.2 % of respondents got involved in the sport through family, 31.3% of the respondents became involved in the sport through friends, followed by 7.2% of respondents got involved through a local club/ association and 3.3% respondents due to media. The media attracting the least amount of attention suggests that the media does not effectively reach or resonate with potential members, thus limiting awareness and interest in pigeon racing. The concern regarding limited awareness was raised by a key respondent from SANPO who stated: "I think one of the things that needs to happen is that we need to have a better marketing strategy for getting the normal everyday citizen to know more about racing pigeons, as a whole in South Africa" (K4). The high number of respondents registered with SANPO indicates that pigeon racing in South Africa is a very organised and regulated activity. The finding present that 96.4% of the respondents were active fanciers, with family (58%) and friends (30%) being the key sources of their involvement., indicating strong community connections within the sport. In contrast, spectators have a lower level of engagement, with 67% of the spectators being registered SANPO members. Highlighting that 60% of the spectators got involved through family, and 33% respondents got involved through friends. The data also revealed that 33% of spectators are not SANPO members, which indicates a need for strategies to convert them into active members. Retired fanciers also display a significant participation; 67% of the retired fanciers are still registered SANPO members. 33%

of the respondents got involved through family connections. However, 33% of the respondents are not registered SANPO members, highlighting potential detachment among this group. Interestingly, 96% of intrigued newcomers are SANPO-registered members, showing a subtle growth in the sport. While 82% of employees and assistants are registered members and are primarily influenced by family connections (45%). The findings suggest that family connections are a key aspect for attracting and maintaining membership across all groups. To foster greater involvement, SANPO should implement strategies that target spectators, encourage retired members to lengthen their participation, and leverage family ties to encourage participation of newcomers.

The survey data collected indicated that 59.6% of the respondents travelled outside their city to participate in pigeon racing events, while 40.4% travelled locally. While 92.8% indicated that they travel domestically to attend pigeon racing events, 7.2% indicated that they travel internationally. In terms of spending patterns, 50.4% spent between R0–R5,000, 37.9% spent between R5,000–R20,000, and 11.7% spent above R20,000 while attending events. Guesthouses/B&Bs (35.9%), self-catering (25.1%), and staying with friends or family (21.7%) were the preferred accommodations. Respondents rarely travelled alone, as 37.9% travelled with friends, 26.7% with teammates, and 20.9% with family. Pigeon racing events also generate economic benefits, as participants engage in activities such as travelling to visit friends and family (58.2%), dining (46.5%), shopping (44.8%), and visiting local attractions (40.4%). There was also a high demand indicated for seminars (55.7%) and family-friendly activities, which reflects a need for both educational and social opportunities within the sport. The following table presents the results of the chi-square test conducted on the relationship between participation and active spending.

Table 4: Chi-Square Test on the relationship between participation and active spending (*n*=359)

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	60,455[a]	15	<,001
Likelihood Ratio	55,258	15	<,001
Linear-by-Linear Association	5,932	1	,015
N of Valid Cases	359		

As presented in Table 4, the large Chi-Square value (60.455), with the 15 degrees of freedom (df), implies a considerable difference between observed and expected frequencies. The P-Value (0.001) offers compelling evidence that the relationship is not due to chance but rather reflects a genuine connection between participation and spending in the context of pigeon racing events. The likelihood ratio and linear-by-linear association tests further confirm this finding, with the latter ($p = 0.0015$) indicating a linear trend where spending changes systematically with participation levels. These results provide strong support for a genuine relationship between participation intensity and expenditure behaviour among pigeon racing participants.

Perceptions of pigeon racing events

As seen in Table 5, the majority of respondents agreed that pigeon racing events have a positive impact on the area where they are held (economic 89%, social 90%, community spirit 86.1%). A significant portion of respondents believed that pigeon racing events do not receive enough support from local governments (94%) and media coverage (94.5%), while 79.8% agreed that pigeon racing events create employment opportunities for local communities. Interestingly, 86.3% of the respondents believe that the pigeon racing sport is important for the South African culture.

Tabel 5: Perceptions of Pigeon Racing Events in South Africa (n= 359) (in %)

Perception Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Pigeon racing is an important part of South African culture	51.5%	34.8%	9%	3.9%	0.8%
Pigeon racing events have a positive economic impact on the area where they are held	47%	42%	7.5%	3.1%	0.4%
Pigeon racing events have a positive social impact on the area where they are held	45%	45%	7.8%	2.2%	0.%
Pigeon racing events create employment opportunities for local communities	37.5%	42.3%	14.6%	5.0%	0.6%
Pigeon racing events create a sense of community spirit	47.5%	38.6%	11.9%	2%	0.%
Pigeon racing events do not receive sufficient support from local, provincial, and national governments	65.7%	28.3%	4.5%	1.%	0.5%
Pigeon racing events do not receive sufficient media coverage	63.5%	31%	4%	1%	0.5%
Pigeon racing events to date have not been effectively capitalised on in terms of how they can contribute to the South African events industry	51%	42%	6%	1%	0.%

The contribution of the pigeon racing sport was further highlighted by a key respondent who stated: “I think without any doubt, it does not only make a contribution to the events, but it also makes a meaningful contribution to the economy. If you consider from the start of pigeon racing, from the fuel that we use, the food that we buy from all our different suppliers, the medications, and then especially the events side, from a One Loft perspective we have people that come in. We have what we call five hotspot races, which is a pre-race to the final. Each hotspot is catered for. Each hotspot has an event where people come in and sit around, and we have a massive day held for everybody and then the final as well. The final is a big event; it is a big function. And it is shown across the world” (K5). Overall, the findings indicate that pigeon racing events are positively perceived by the large majority of the South African pigeon fanciers. One of the interview participants noted that One Loft events present significant opportunities to broaden participation, attract international visitors, and further enhance the sport’s contribution to the tourism and hospitality industry as well as the economy. The findings highlighted that the pigeon racing sport supports local economies while preserving cultural heritage and community bonds. A key participant of SANPO noted that: “The biggest factor for the events industry, for pigeon racing, is the One Loft races. So, first of all, getting the feet into South Africa and having them spend their money locally. But we have now got to start looking at other ways. And I think one of the big things that I have seen now is the new international way of monitoring pigeons and who's got the best pigeon in the world is the FCI. And I believe that hosting an FCI international seminar or the prize giving. Which I think at the moment is held in Belgium,

and if that could be rotated, and you could have South Africa hosting. I think you would bring in a large proportion of pigeon people from all over the world to come and participate in this" (K1).

Discussion

The findings of the current study reveal that pigeon racing events possess significant potential to strengthen and diversify the South African event tourism portfolio and stimulate travel, particularly domestically. These events do not only generate economic activity, but also contribute to community identity and local pride. The demographic data illustrates that the sport is still largely male dominated, consistent with existing research on sport event tourism (Mostert & Donaldson, 2024). Despite this, the gradual inclusion of women and youth signals a demographic shift that aligns with the global trend of feminisation in niche sport participation (Vadhera, 2018). This presents an opportunity for pigeon racing events to be positioned as more inclusive. The quantitative data gathered for the study presents a statistically significant relationship between participation in pigeon racing events and spending, showing that increased engagement in this events correlates to higher levels of economic contribution. This is supported by Nyikana &Tichaawa (2018) who argue that smaller scale sport events can generate substantial economic impacts due to sustained participation and repeat visitation. The spending patterns of pigeon fanciers, particularly on accommodation, food, fuel and equipment, is evidence on this. The preference of fanciers to make use of guesthouses and self-catering establishments also suggests that these events could spread economic benefits across smaller tourism enterprises, promoting equitable and community tourism growth. From a social perspective, the study reinforces the importance of pigeon racing as a vehicle for social cohesion, community connection and the preservation of intangible culture and traditions. The strong familial roots within the sport reveal how participation is largely underpinned by social capital. These findings resonate with those of Parra-Camacho et al. (2021), who emphasise the role of small-scale sporting events in fostering community spirit. In this respect, pigeon racing events embody what Daniels & Tichaawa (2021) refer to as the social resilience function of sport tourism, meaning its ability to unite communities through shared practices, while at the same time generating economic returns. In South Africa, domestic travel has seen significant growth and gained renewed attention following the COVID 19 pandemic. In this pursuit of growing domestic travel, niche events such as pigeon racing offer affordable, accessible and culturally embedded experiences that inherently foster community participation and local spending.

The qualitative findings of the study further indicate that pigeon racing events can be used as strategic platforms for local economic development and the revitalisation of non-traditional tourism areas. The One Loft Series provides an example of how such niche sport events can attract tourism to peripheral areas, contributing to regional development objectives. This aligns with the South African National Department of Tourism (2022)'s emphasis on leveraging niche tourism to promote rural economic development, encourage domestic travel and reduce the concentration of tourism activities to well-developed economic centers. The hosting of these One Loft events provides a design model that can be replicated, combining competition, community and education in a way that is beneficial to event attendees and host communities. It must be noted that despite its economic and social development potential, pigeon racing events remain significantly underleveraged. There is limited visibility of these events in the mainstream media and insufficient government support for the growth and development of the sport. These barriers reflect broader challenges faced by niche events in South Africa where policy and funding tends to prioritise mega events (Giampiccoli et al., 2015). There was near unanimous agreement that pigeon racing lacks the required media attention and media attention, highlighting a critical gap in terms of the recognition of these events. Strategic leveraging activities should be applied to these events to position them as part of existing events portfolios in South Africa, linking to broader destination marketing and tourism development goals. The sport also has a limited appeal to younger participants, posing a threat to its long term sustainability. The aging demographic of participants called for deliberate strategies to attract youth participation such as school outreach programs and digital enhancement through social media. This leveraging will only be successful with proactive planning with a focus on inclusivity (Pereira et al., 2020). From a theoretical standpoint, the current study strengthens the application of sport event leveraging and niche tourism frameworks within the African context. The study demonstrates that niche sport events can result in a range of positive impacts when strategically supported. Integrating pigeon racing events into the South African events portfolio and aligning it with existing tourism policy could enhance its visibility, stimulate rural tourism development and support social development.

Conclusion

The current study demonstrates that pigeon racing events, though often overlooked, hold notable potential as a niche sport event tourism product, capable of making meaningful contributions to the South African tourism and events landscapes. The findings of the study reveal that pigeon racing events foster social cohesion, preserve cultural traditions and generate tangible economic benefits through local spending and travel. Despite these potential benefits, pigeon racing remains significantly underleveraged due to limited marketing, minimal government support and low levels of public awareness. What is currently required is strategic intervention in terms of leveraging, inclusion in existing event portfolios, improving visibility and encouraging youth participation to allow for pigeon racing to events to evolve into drivers of sustainable domestic tourism development.

References

Allen, B. (2009). *Pigeon. London: Reaktion Books*. Available at: https://scholar.cu.edu.eg/wafaaabdelghany/files/book_73.pdf [Accessed on 20 April 2024]

Baker, A. R. H. (2013). Pigeon Racing Clubs in Pas-De-Calais, France, 1870- 1914. *Journal of Historical Geography*, *41*, 1-12. http://www.elsevier.com/locate/jhg

Daniels, T. & Tichaawa, T. M. (2021). Rethinking Sport Tourism Events in a Post-COVID-19 South Africa. *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure*, *10*(4), 1241-1256. https://doi.org/10.46222/ajhtl.19770720-16

Department of Tourism. (2022). Stimulating Sector Demand and Supply Through Niche Tourism Development: The Case of Rural Tourism in Selected Provinces. [Final report]. Department of Tourism. Available at: https://tkp.tourism.gov.za/ResearchRepo/Shared%20Documents/Stimulating%20sector%20demand%20and%20supply%20through%20niche%20tourism%20development%20the%20case%20of%20rural%20tourism%20in%20selected%20provinces.pdf [Accessed on 01 October 2025]

Farsani, N.T. (2020). Promoting Ghetto Niche Tourism in Isfahan, Iran. *Journal of Heritage Tourism*, *15*(1), 93-102. https://doi.org/10.1080/1743873X.2019.1593990

Galen, J. (2023). *Pigeon Racing Beginner's Guide: Understanding Pigeon Racing*. [Amazon Kindle]. Amazon Digital Services LLC - Kdp.

Getz, D. (2008). Event Tourism: Definition, Evolution, and Research. *Tourism Management*, *29*(3), 403-428. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2007.07.017

Giampiccoli, A., Lee, S. S. & Nauright, J. (2015). Destination South Africa: Comparing global Sports Mega-Events and Recurring Localised Sports Events in South Africa for Tourism and Economic Development. *Current Issues in Tourism*, *18*(3), 229-248. https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2013.787050

Gozalova, M., Shchikanov, A., Vernigor, A. & Bagdasarian, V. (2014). Sports Tourism. *Polish Journal of Sport and Tourism*, *21*(2), 92-96. https://doi.org/10.2478/pjst-2014-0009

Hemmonsbey, J. D. & Tichaawa, T. M. (2018). The Effects of Major Sport Event Leveraging for Tourism and Destination Branding: The Case of South Africa as an Emerging Destination. *GeoJournal of Tourism and Geosites*, *21*(1), 213-225.

Lu, S., Zhu, W. & Wei, J. (2020). Assessing the Impacts of Tourism Events on City Development in China: A Perspective of Event System. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 23 (12), 1528-1541. https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2019.1643828

Mallen, C. & Adams, L. J. (eds.) (2024). *Event Management in Sport, Recreation, And Tourism: Theoretical and Practical Dimensions*. 4th edn. London: Routledge.

Mostert, C. & Donaldson, R. (2024). Pigeon Racing in South Africa: Exploring the Socio-Economic Nature and Extent of This 'Unknown Sport'. *Geosport for Society*, *20*(1), 25-45. https://doi.org/10.30892/gss.2003-106

Muresherwa, G., Tichaawa, T.M. & Swart, K. (2022). Developing Event Tourism in Zimbabwe: Opportunities and Challenges Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic. *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure*, *11*(3), 1259-1272. https://doi.org/10.46222/ajhtl.19770720.289

Mxunyelwa, S. & Busisiwe Kilani, K. (2020). Events Tourism as a Conduit to Promote Underdeveloped Tourist Destinations, With Specific Reference to the Mooiplaas Homecoming Music Event in East London, South Africa. *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure*, *9*(2).

Mxunyelwa, S. (2017). Events Tourism as Catalyst to Promote Destinations: Event Attendees' Perceptions of Events in East London, South Africa. *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure*, *6*(1), 1-9.

Mxunyelwa, S. & Tshetu, L. (2018). Festivals as a Niche for Local Economic Development (LED): A Case Study of The East London Port Festival (ELPF), Eastern Cape, South Africa. *African Journal of Hospitality Tourism and Leisure*, *7*(3), 1-14.

Nair, B.B. & Mohanty, P.P. (2021). Positioning Spice Tourism as an Emerging Form of Special Interest Tourism: Perspectives and Strategies. *Journal of Ethnic Foods*, *8*, 10. https://doi.org/10.1186/s42779-021-00086-4

Noor, S., Tajik, O. & Golzar, J. (2022). Simple Random Sampling. *International Journal of Education & Language Studies*, *1*(2), 78-82. https://doi.org/10.22034/ijels.2022.162982

Novelli, M. (2005). *Niche tourism: Contemporary issues, trends and cases*. 1st ed. London: Routledge. https://books.google.com/books?id=hyDej4okNxUC

Novelli, M., Cheer, J.M., Dolezal, C., Jones, A. & Milano, C. (2022). Introduction to Niche Tourism: Contemporary Trends and Development. In *Handbook of Niche Tourism*: xxiii- xxx. Edited by Novelli, M., Cheer, J.M., Dolezal, C., Jones, A. & Milano, C. Edward Elgar Publishing.

Nyikana, S. (2016). Using Sport Tourism Events as a Catalyst for Tourism Development in The Eastern Cape Province, South Africa. *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure*, *5*(3), 1-12.

Nyikana, S. & Tichaawa, T. M. (2018). Sport Tourism as a Local Economic Development Enhancer for Emerging Destinations. *EuroEconomica*, *37*(2), 76-89.

O'Brien, D. & Chalip, L. (2008). Sport Events and Strategic Leveraging: Pushing Towards the Triple Bottom Line. In *Tourism Management: Analysis, Behaviour and Strategy*, pp 318-338. A. G. Woodside, D. Martin (Eds.). CABI.

Parra-Camacho, D., González-García, R. J. & Alonso-Dos-Santos, M. (2021). Social Impact of a Participative Small-Scale Sporting Event. *Sport, Business and Management: An International Journal*, 11(2), 109-124. https://doi.org/10.1108/SBM-12-2019-0119

Pereira, E., Mascarenhas, M., Flores, A., Chalip, L. & Pires, G. (2020). Strategic Leveraging: Evidence of Small-Scale Sport Events. *International Journal of Event and Festival Management*, *11*(1), 69-88. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEFM-07-2018-0046

Raso, G. & Cherubini, D. (2024). Exploring Residents' Perceptions of The Socioeconomic Impact of Sport Tourism. *Sustainability and Sports Science Journal*, 2(2), 73-86. https://doi.org/10.61486/QWDZ4905

Rogerson, C.M. (2011). Niche Tourism Policy and Planning: The South African Experience. *Tourism Review International*, *15* (1-2), 199-211. https://doi.org/10.3727/154427211X13139345020697

Rogerson, R. & Rogerson, R. (2021). Niche Tourism Research and Policy: International and South African Debates. *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure*, *19*(4), 1131-1151. https://doi.org/10.46222/ajhtl.19770720-153

Sant, S. L., Misener, L. & Mason, D. S. (2019). Leveraging Sport Events for Tourism Gain in Host Cities: A Regime Perspective. *Journal of Sport & Tourism*, *23*(4), 203–223. https://doi.org/10.1080/14775085.2019.1711444

Smit, T. (2024). *AfrikaPro: A Beacon for Local and International Pigeon Racing*. [online] Farmer's Weekly. Available at: https://www.farmersweekly.co.za/animals/pigeons/afrikapro-a-beacon-for-local-and-international-pigeon-racing/

South Africa. National Department of Tourism. (2022). *Stimulating Sector Demand and Supply Through Niche Tourism Development: The Case of Rural Tourism in Selected Provinces.* Available at https://tkp.tourism.gov.za/ResearchRepo/Shared%20Documents/Stimulating%20sector%20demand%20and%20supply%20through%20niche%20tourism%20development%20the%20case%20of%20rural%20tourism%20in%20selected%20provinces.pdf [Accessed 10 October 2025].

South Africa National Pigeon Organisation, S.A.N.P.O. (2024). SANPO Nuusblad/News, Issue 3. https://www.sanpo.co.za/Public/pubHome.aspx [Accessed 26 April 2024]

Spronk, K. & Fourie, A. (2010). South African Mega-Events and Their Impact on Tourism. Retrieved October, 26. https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/6547053.pdf

Taks, M., Green, B. C., Misener, L. & Chalip, L. (2018). Sport Participation from Sport Events: Why It Doesn't Happen? *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, *36*(2), 185-198. http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/MIP-05-2017-0091

Turco, D. M., Swart, K., Bob, U. & Moodley, V. (2003). Socio-Economic Impacts of Sport Tourism in the Durban Unicity. South Africa. *Journal of Sport Tourism*, *8*(4), 223-239. https://doi.org/10.1080/1477508032000161537

Vadhera, N. (2018). Impact of Title IX on Women's Participation in Sports: A Drastic Revolution in the Arena of Sports. *International Journal of Physiology, Nutrition and Physical Education*, *3*(2), 512-519