

## Storytelling for Destination Development: Towards an African Model

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### Abstract

Storytelling is emerging as a growing focus in international tourism scholarship and most especially in respect of the promotion and marketing of destinations. The existing literature is dominated by writings about destinations in the Global North. This article highlights the important need for tourism researchers in the Global South to acknowledge the role of storytelling. The paper offers a conceptual model for storytelling grounded in the African context and in particular with application to small-town destination development. At its core, the ‘story-pot marketing model’ is based on themes, destinations, people, and their local stories. An important research agenda for South African tourism scholars is therefore the collection of these local stories as the foundation for a new approach to destination development.

**Keywords:** Storytelling; destination development; African model; small town tourism; South Africa

### Introduction

Stories and the power of stories are viewed as a central and universal structure of human understanding, communication, and human experience (Moscardo, 2022). Indeed, Hay et al. (2022: 322) point out that stories “are a common part of our lives yet are often overlooked as an essential component of communicating, understanding and making sense of events in the world and storing our memories”. Further, it is maintained that “stories are an essential part of being human, and how we tell and retell the story of ourselves form the basis of an individual’s memory” (Hay et al., 2022: 322). For Li (2014: 9388) stories and the telling of stories are the key to understanding consumers such that story marketing can be “a way to touch people”. The term ‘storytelling’ has been defined as the “sharing and combining of knowledge and experiences through narrative and anecdotes in order to communicate complex ideas, concepts, and causal connections and build connections and associations” (Keskin et al., 2016: 31). Boje (2001:1) contends that stories are alive (akin to the people who tell them), consist of fragments or combined experiences. Nevertheless, it is argued there is a significant difference between stories and narratives and that stories are always the foundation of narratives. According to Boje (2001:2) stories are fluid, broken, and continuous compared to narratives and with a beginning, middle, an end, plot, and characterization. Boje (2001:2) explains that when it

comes to the analysis of a story it seems chaotic, especially in the context of organizations or businesses in relation to the essential differences between a story and its telling. In order to reconcile story and narrative, a "pre-story" or ante-narrative is proposed to allow for the fickle nature of stories.

Over the past three decades, storytelling has been a growing focus of attention in several academic disciplines including management, organizational studies, sociology, psychology, and marketing. According to Moscardo (2022) tourism studies has been a latecomer to the scholarly examination of the role of stories. It is suggested that one factor behind the relative historical neglect of stories in tourism research has been “the influence of twentieth-century modernist, positivist approaches to research and education that continue to dominate as tourism researchers strive to establish some sense of legitimacy within traditional academic institutions” (Moscardo, 2022: 1). By the middle of the 2010 decade, however, it could be asserted that “the benefits of utilizing storytelling at tourism destinations have been widely discussed” (Kim & Youn, 2017: 808). The recent upturn of interest in stories within international tourism scholarship is attributed to the advance of post-modernist thinking and the rise of critical approaches in social sciences that challenge the power of dominant social institutions and facilitated the ‘turn’ to stories in tourism research (Moscardo, 2022). Overall, it can be asserted by Moscardo (2022: 5) that “stories are pervasive in tourism practice, especially in the area of destination promotion, are central to tourist destination perceptions and memorable experiences, and stories have been shown across multiple disciplines to play critical roles in human cognition and social interaction”.

Arguably, the major advances in tourism research about storytelling have been concentrated in scholarship produced in and about the Global North. In recent reviews and scholarly works that have charted the directions of tourism research in the Global South there is minimal or no attention given to the role of storytelling (Rogerson & Visser, 2020; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021a, 2021b; Saarinen & Rogerson, 2021; Tichaawa & Rogerson, 2022). Within African tourism scholarship, some notable exceptions are works by Donaldson (2018, 2021) pinpointing the role of stories in the branding of small-town tourism destinations in South Africa, and by Harris and Botha (2022) on the need to include indigenous story tellers in heritage tourism interpretation in South Africa. It is against this backdrop that the paper seeks to expand and further African debates on the importance of storytelling in tourism. Specifically, the aim of this paper is to highlight the significance of storytelling for destination development with the focus on small-town destinations in South Africa. Issues concerning small-town tourism in South Africa have been extensively reviewed by Donaldson (2018, 2021) and include literature on place branding (Donaldson et al., 2021). A renewed focus on destination development in small-town tourism in contemporary South Africa is particularly appropriate in the uncertain times of the COVID-19 environment and accompanying shifts in consumer travel patterns (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021b, 2021c). As a result of the contribution of tourism to their local economic base, many tourism-dependent small towns in South Africa were vulnerable to the impacts of lockdowns and travel restrictions that were enacted (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020a, 2020b, 2021d). Nevertheless, with changes in consumer preferences an upturn was recorded in the relative fortunes of certain small town tourism destinations across the country (see Rogerson & Rogerson 2022a, 2022b). This window of opportunity for expanding small towns as tourism destinations potentially might be enhanced by the adoption of storytelling as part of adaptive planning and the practice of destination development.

Two major sections of material follow. The next section provides an overview of key issues and debates concerning the role of storytelling in tourism and especially for destination branding and marketing. The review highlights the significance of a theoretical model

developed out of research on Nordic destinations (Mossberg et al., 2010). This model is anchored upon the view that stories can make up constituent parts of destination marketing and development and shows that storytelling must be understood as a multi-actor, multi-level process which leads to destination development (Mossberg et al., 2010). In the second section, the focus turns to South Africa and to the presentation of a parallel conceptual model which has been developed from and specifically grounded within the local African experience. The building of this African model is traced and the important influence of the Nordic work by Mossberg et al. (2010) is acknowledged. It is contended that this South African-based marketing model alongside its practical guidelines offers a novel tool for researchers and destination managers in the African setting.

### **Storytelling and destination development: Northern perspectives**

It is evidenced that destinations provide “an amalgamation of tourism products and services, which are consumed under the brand name of the destination” (Pereira et al., 2012: 82). Keskin et al. (2016: 31) maintain that while the approach of storytelling is often invoked in the marketing literature, especially at the level of corporates and products, “it has received little attention in the travel and tourism marketing context”. During the early 2000s, however, an international trend observable in the experience industry was “to build an entire business or parts of a business around a story” and this was applied to a single product, an organization or a destination (Mossberg, 2008: 195). Chronis (2012) claims that stories have the power to change a destination's image through marketing and into attractive tourist destinations. The development of storytelling practices has emerged as an increasingly significant issue for the management of tourism destinations and ultimately for destination development. With increased competition among places for tourists, destination managers recently have been encouraged to market places as brands. Further, within an increasingly fierce competitive climate, many tourism destinations use stories to build a competitive edge and thereby attract visitors (Kim & Youn, 2017). Among others, Korez-Vide (2017) suggests that storytelling has become now one important element in sustainable tourism management. Youssef et al. (2019: 696) aver also that the activity of storytelling “has become an integral part of communication strategies in the tourism industry in order to promote and differentiate destination brands online”.

As indicated earlier the extant international scholarship on storytelling and issues of destination development is concentrated upon developed countries or the Global North. Here it is observed that “storytelling should be regarded as an influential and valuable technique” for destination branding (Keskin et al., 2016: 31). Indeed, for some observers, storytelling is considered to be at the heart of how brands are shaped (Woodside, 2010). Donaldson (2018) stresses that whilst branding is an essential tool in marketing strategies a clear distinction must be drawn between place branding and destination marketing. The complex process of forging a brand for a destination is associated variously “with the desirable image of the destination, the experience of the destination, and consequent differentiation between destinations” (Pereira et al., 2012: 82). Place branding is concerned with the image and reputation of a locality or in other words communications relating to place identity often through the use of slogans. Place branding is essentially the sum of all beliefs, ideas, and impressions that people have and associate with a particular place (Keskin et al., 2016). By contrast, destination marketing is viewed as concentrated upon the attraction of day visitors or tourists and mainly is centred upon advertising (Donaldson et al., 2021). In order to brand a place as a tourist destination often a story must be told about the place. It is cautioned that there is a need for a coherent branding theme or single message in the story that resonates with potential visitors rather than

making the mistake of having too many stories and “something for everyone” (Donaldson, 2018: 46).

The advance of storytelling as a destination marketing tool can be supported by new technologies and is viewed as related to the destination’s creative potential (Korez-Vide, 2017). The work of Gravili and Rosato (2016) examines actors, processes and relations as well as analysing critical aspects associated with the generation of story-telling content and the narration of territories. In addition, these authors point to the paucity of local empirical research in storytelling in writings on destination development. In an influential contribution Hay et al. (2022) argue that destination branding often overlooks the internal stakeholders of destinations, and as a result brand identities do not reflect the meanings and emotions that residents attach to localities or places. This points to the need for ‘co-creation’ in initiatives for place branding which can be achieved through storytelling (Stoica et al., 2022). In turn, this demands a more participatory approach to destination branding which might acknowledge residents' sense of place and embrace local residents' place stories. Arguably, through storytelling “residents construe different facets of the place identity that is the foundation of destination brand identity” (Hay et al., 2022: 319). This said, the issue arises as to “whose stories” should be told as an element of destination marketing. Hay et al. (2022: 319) point out that tourism destinations often are in a position where “the place’s internal stakeholders, particularly residents, feel alienated and disengaged from the destination’s created brand identity”. Underpinning this situation is often the application of a top-down approach with “an exclusive process to destination brand development and management that typically prioritizes the interests of external stakeholders” (Hay et al., 2022: 319).

The lesson is clear that destination branding should involve all stakeholders and in particular local residents who have a vested interest in the place brand. One further shortcoming is that in the main “destination branding practices continue to regard places as products to be marketed, disregarding the place’s social character and identity” (Hay et al., 2022: 320). To address this shortcoming and move toward a more inclusive branding process there is an imperative to engage with residents and their stories in the community as a participatory process of destination branding. For strategic destination branding, the significance of a bottom-up approach to ‘place identity and sense of place is stressed in works by Campelo and colleagues (Campelo et al., 2014; Campelo, 2015, 2017). Hay et al. (2022: 326) point out that what is distinctive about places “is that there are multiple stories waiting to be told by the people who live and make a living in the place”. In contrast to the branding of products the “branding of places is shaped by a multitude of diverse storytellers, from residents to local businesses and private enterprises” (Hay et al., 2022: 326). This said, there exist only a handful of research investigations that have explored local narratives in tourism localities. This knowledge gap points to a need for empirical research which is targeted to collect local stories as a basis for integrating them into destination branding processes.

A major advance in tourism scholarship surrounding storytelling and destination development is the work undertaken by Mossberg et al. (2010) under the auspices of the Norwegian Innovation Centre on the marketing of destinations with a narrative or ‘story touch’. This study’s objective was to investigate the possibilities and drawbacks of using storytelling as a means of developing and marketing Nordic tourism destinations. A five-country study that encompassed Norway, Denmark, Iceland, Sweden, and Finland was undertaken. Using selected case studies this study provides fresh insight into “the ways in which storytelling is practiced and how stakeholder cooperation unfolds and seeks to determine the prerequisites for using storytelling as part of a destination development strategy” (Mossberg et al., 2010: iii). Building upon the literature on storytelling as well as inter-organizational relations theory Mossberg et al. (2010) construct a theoretical model that confirms the importance of stories

and explains how destinations are interwoven with stories that are untold yet wait to be exploited for marketing purposes. The theoretical model is anchored and revolves around four closely interrelated elements, namely the types of stakeholders involved, the stages of the storytelling process, the outcome of the storytelling process, and destination development. It is argued that a story on which a storytelling approach is based must be accepted by those involved in the storytelling process, be location-based and, importantly be subject to commercialization.

The central message is that stories potentially exist in which a storytelling approach to destination development can be rooted. From all five countries under empirical scrutiny, the evidence was disclosed of the potential “for innovative destination development through a storytelling approach” (Mossberg et al., 2010: v). Several findings and recommendations for future studies are put forward as an outcome of this study. First, the story approach for the development and marketing of tourism destinations is a long-term process with multiple role players who are involved at different levels albeit the core is and remains that a continuous theme must be maintained by all role players. Second, in order to achieve success with the narrative or story model, the process must be carefully managed and regular contact sessions between stakeholders facilitated. Third, a degree of theatrical expertise is essential to successfully present and convey the message both verbally and visually in order to contribute to the interaction between visitors and storytellers. Finally, Mossberg et al. (2010: v) offer the important observation that storytelling may contribute to local community building which can be a strength for destination development. A number of recommendations emerge for tourism practitioners. Among the most important are that if stories can communicate the core values and attributes of a destination they can function as a framework for coordinating and packaging local tourism products. In so doing the story becomes “a verbal and visual metaphor” which signals the total offering of a destination (Mossberg et al., 2010: v). In addition, local enterprises can communicate and collaborate with each other more readily in a network that is established around the storyline. Overall, therefore, it is asserted that the storytelling approach can build the competitive advantage of destinations.

### **Towards an African model**

Although the principles of stories and the telling of stories and histories form a cardinal part of the marketing of tourism destinations, the tourism industry in Africa in general and South Africa, in particular, has not yet realized or exploited its full potential. Indeed, whilst there are several examples of destinations that base their identity on a story, such as Bloemfontein the Rose City, the potential that stories offer are underdeveloped and their potential is not fully maximized. Arguably, therefore, the power and possibilities surrounding the art of storytelling as a marketing driver in the tourism industry in South Africa require further exploration and documentation.

### ***Context and methods***

In seeking to build an African model of story marketing the focus is on small-town destinations in South Africa. At the outset, the research was influenced by and based on the model of Mossberg et al. (2010) as part of a comprehensive literature study seeking to isolate the key components of storytelling marketing models in the contemporary practice of destination marketing in small-town South Africa. Several of the recommendations made by Mossberg et al. (2010) were investigated in depth to address gaps in the South African literature. The study, therefore, sought, *inter alia*, to supplement the lack of literature on storytelling and destination marketing in South Africa, to define the communication process of storytelling and more specifically the recording process of the stories as well as the development of a good and



appropriate story; to incorporate a cultural-historical approach around the region-specific stories, and show the collaboration process between all the role players around a specific theme.

The model was elaborated and refined in the empirical setting of the Drakenstein Local Municipality which is centred around the two towns of Paarl and Wellington in South Africa's Western Cape province. As is shown elsewhere tourism is a key component in the local economy of this municipality with the tourism base heavily oriented around leisure visitors (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021c). A mixed methodology was adopted with quantitative as well as qualitative research pursued in this municipality and particularly in the town and surrounds of Wellington. The research on which this study is based involved four phases. The initial phase of the research focused on the historical literature sources on destination marketing, story or narrative marketing models, and cultural and historical facts and stories about the specific municipal area. The second research phase focused on the collection of quantitative data from tourism role players in the area, including the municipality and small-to-medium sized businesses across different sectors in the tourism industry. The role players include the 52 surrounding wine farms and non-profit organizations such as the Breytenbach Centre and the Wellington Museum, a decisive role player in the local tourism landscape.

Phase three involved conducting focus groups formed with leading or expert role players, who are directly or indirectly involved in the tourism industry of the municipality. Finally, in the last phase of the study in-depth interviews were conducted with key stakeholders and local stories collected from the area. A combination of phenomenology (Jackson et al., 2018) and grounded theory (Gilgun et al., 1992; Goulding, 2005; Birks & Mills, 2015) was used to analyze the data. Following this approach, the study and problem statement were adjusted as the data were collected. The refinement and testing of the data and hypothesis took place through the application of research literature as well as focus group and in-depth interviews. The theory was subsequently modified following the new information gathered by the analysis. A comprehensive description of the methodology followed is provided in de Beer (2020).

### *A story-based African model*

This section turns to outline the conceptual model which is reflective of an African setting and therefore inevitably marks a departure from the Mossberg et al. (2010) theoretical model which evolved out of research and storytelling in Nordic countries. This model was not developed to follow traditional approaches albeit its aim is to progress toward a locally rooted marketing model with practical guidelines for implementation by researchers and destination managers.

The African model is anchored on a local symbol, namely a tripod pot which is a black cast iron pot that stands on three legs (Figure 1). Although the three-legged pot has European origins, the pot has a right to be a symbol in sub-Saharan Africa, thanks to nomadic farmers, missionaries, and transport drivers. The three-legged pot represents food, togetherness, and abundance. It is precisely because of the symbolism of the three-legged pot and what it represents in the multi-cultural context of South Africa that the story destination marketing model developed in this study is based on it. The food cooked in the tripod pot is *potjiekos* or directly translated, pot food. For the tripod pot approach to make sense, it is essential to understand how *potjiekos* is prepared and cooked, and the assembly of the ingredients (see Van Zyl, 1983). The tripod-pot story marketing model, like *potjiekos*, needs certain steps to be followed, preparation to be taken, and a person responsible for its success. The potjie pot-story-based marketing model depicts tourism as a cooking pot, used over a fire as is African tradition. In this pot all the story elements are added and stirred together, creating a stew of stories. In the preparation of pot food, Van Zyl (1983: 6) indicates that a recipe does not have to be followed slavishly and that sometimes it is necessary to work with what is available. Timing is

important. Apart from the time the pot needs to be cooked, priority should be given to the time required for the wood to become charcoal. In most cases, therefore, the fire must be started long before the cooking begins.

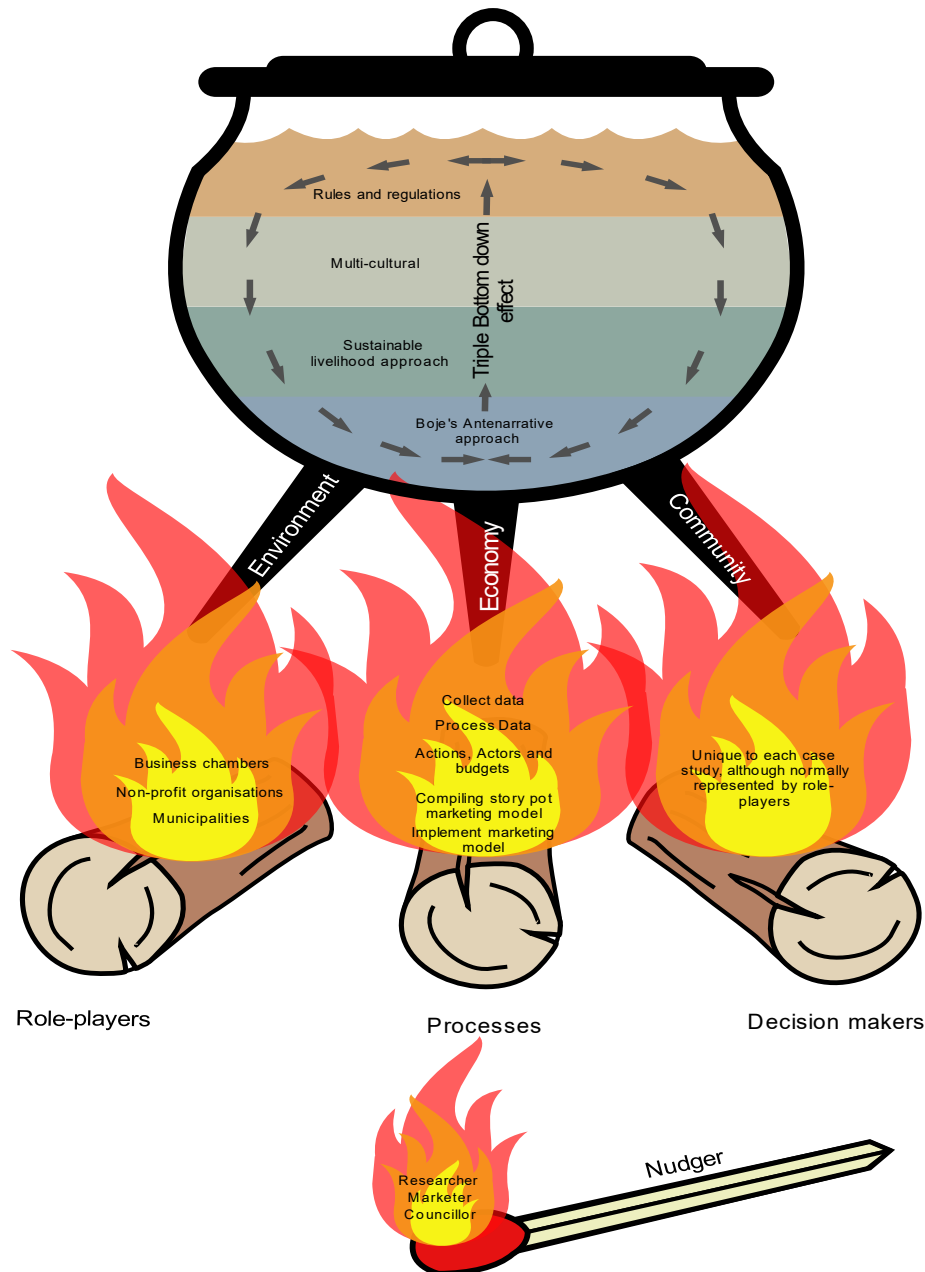


Figure 1. An African Story Pot Marketing Model (Source: de Beer, 2020)

On how to make *potjiekos* Van Zyl (1983: 8) sets out certain steps to guide potjie chefs. Although the steps are explained chronologically they are only guidelines as each chef will have their own style albeit the concepts, tools, and environment tend to be generic and can be utilized to prepare almost any type of *potjiekos*. Critically the key to success is the adoption of a systematic approach with different layers and much patience. As with the *potjiekos* method, so too with the story marketing model, the packaging of the story must be done in layers. The same applies to the processes that go along with it. Just as it is essential to monitor the cooking process and not add too much liquid and also not stir excessively, so it is with the storytelling

model. The necessary elements and people must be put in place and monitored, but the process must not be disturbed. Analogous to the preparation of the *potjiekos*, there are several elements that need to be considered and prepared for the tripod-pot storytelling approach to make sense and ultimately to flow smoothly. In order to obtain information regarding the development of a story-based marketing model, a profile of the relevant role players in the tourism industry of the specific area must be drawn to populate the story marketing model. This is not an instant approach and must be conducted with patience and compassion. Indeed, in order to develop a successful storytelling marketing model for a destination, the key factors are the ‘stories behind the stories’ not just the stories of the destination and attractions, but local stories and memories of the people who work and live in and around the destination.

The three legs of the pot are conceptualized to represent the community, the economy, and the environment. Arguably, the community forms the backbone of most destinations, and without the insight and participation of the community in a story motif approach to the marketing of a destination such an initiative cannot be successful. The second leg of the tripod pot model is represented by the environment - natural and cultural-historical – which are impacted by tourism and within which tourism development takes place. In addition to the community, the environment is crucial for a place to be called a destination. Both the community and the environment contribute to the formulation of an appropriate storyline; a story that will fit the intended marketing model. In the case of the environment, it is the task of destination managers and marketers to conduct thorough research regarding the environment in and around the particular destination. This would include not only the geographical context patterns but also myths and legends told through tradition about the specific place. The economy is, of course, the pivot around which tourism revolves and is the critical third leg of the tripod pot. Arguably, in small towns in general – and in small-town South Africa in particular – the local tourism economy is made up of small, medium, and micro-enterprises. It is precisely the small and micro-businesses that need to be active participants in the development and application of the story-marketing model and processes because they would be its prime beneficiaries. Therefore, it is crucial that destination managers involve the small businesses from the outset and become part of the story motif approach which potentially can be done through the vehicle of local business forums or business chambers.

Importantly, during every aspect of the development of the story marketing model, sustainability must be emphasized. If sustainability is disregarded or lacking in any of the tripod pot approach's structure or ingredients, the story marketing model cannot succeed. Further, it must be acknowledged that because stories are alive, as represented by the community, there is a constant flow of new and fresh stories. Over time this would affect the model and therefore the stories must be listened to continuously to make the story of the destination relevant. The story pot marketing model is thus not just a one-time exercise rather it is an ongoing process that needs to be monitored. Following Boje (2001) is the imperative for an ante-narrative approach to be applied to each element of the tripod pot approach. In respect of the community, environment, or the economy, the importance of a historical understanding and perspective is essential in story-telling.

Finally, as regards the implementation of the model, it is shown in Figure 1 that a number of stakeholders must be involved in a collaborative process. A significant role in implementation is assumed by the ‘nudger’ in terms of instigating and managing the process. It will be the task of the nudger to identify and bring together the necessary role players and decision-makers. The role players include (but are not limited to) the local community, businesses, non-profit organizations, and local authorities. Arguably, a successful storytelling approach requires the active engagement of a ‘nudger’ who might be a local councillor or an external person such as a researcher. In the analogy with the cooking of *potjiekos*, the nudger



is the individual whose role it is to light the fire and subsequently manage the cooking process in terms of gathering, collation of information, and it's processing for the unfolding of the tripod-pot story marketing model.

## Conclusion

Notwithstanding “the widespread acceptance of stories as a core element of human experience very little research attention has been paid to stories within tourism research” (Moscardo, 2022: 4). This observation made in the context of the broad international research in tourism is especially pertinent with respect to urban tourism scholarship in the Global South (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021a). This paper has sought to address a knowledge gap about the potential role of storytelling in enhancing small-town destination development in South Africa. Building upon the work of Mossberg et al (2010) it develops a conceptual model and approach which is an African-centred multi-actor and multi-level layered approach for destination development. The model has evolved around the tourism development landscape of small-town South Africa. At its heart, the story-pot marketing model is based on themes, destinations, people, and their local stories. An important research agenda for South African tourism scholars is the collection of these local stories as the foundation for a new approach to destination development.

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