

## Generating Opportunities For Tourism Businesses Through Information Exchanges with Visitor Information Centres in South Africa

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### Abstract

Information exchange is a process through which information, experience and skills are exchanged among stakeholders. While previous studies acknowledge that Visitor Information Centres (VICs) exchange information with various stakeholders, it remains unclear how this exchange contributes to economic opportunities for tourism businesses. The objective of the study is therefore to ascertain whether the information that VICs and tourism businesses exchanges contributes to economic opportunities. A survey was distributed to tourism businesses listed in the databases of government-owned VICs in South Africa. The results show that VICs and tourism businesses exchange information and that this exchange generates economic opportunities for businesses. The results also identify factors in the information exchange process that are predictors of economic opportunities. Based on the results, VIC staff should use the exchange of information as a platform through which they may generate economic opportunities for businesses. In their exchange of information, VIC staff should understand the information needs of tourism businesses and provide them with visitor-support information that is extensive, useful and according to their preferences. Consequently, staff can contribute to government's plan of improving the lives of businesses in areas in which they operate.

**Keywords:** information, information exchange, economic opportunities, VICs and local tourism businesses

### Introduction

The demand for information during travel has led to the establishment of Visitor Information Centres (VICs) (Chang et al., 2019). Tourism authorities and marketing agencies in many destinations, from developing and developed countries, have made various efforts to develop and implement VICs in order to provide tourism information (Lyu & Hwang, 2015). These information centres have long been part of the tourism landscape despite the extensive changes made to their form and structure over time (Chikati et al., 2020). They are considered important elements of modern tourism, playing a special role in various destinations, as they promote local tourist resources and opportunities (Rubtsov et al., 2019). VICs are perceived as the first points of contact and the main platforms from which visitors obtain information, advice and recommendations about a destination's tourism offering, and other services such as travel bookings and reservations (Ballantyne et al., 2009; Draper, 2018; Rubtsov et al., 2019). Though

some studies acknowledge that the information available in VICs originates with and is exchanged by different stakeholders, such as tourism businesses (Deery et al., 2007; Fallon & Kriwoken, 2003), they focus on the demand side of providing information to visitors, paying less attention to understanding the views of those who supply VICs with information. It is for this reason that Fallon and Kriwoken (2003:289) emphasise the importance of considering the needs of business operators as important stakeholders, as ‘it is not enough to only assess a VIC’s sustainability by its popularity with visitors’. Thus the aim of VICs should go beyond merely providing information to visitors, and include mechanisms through which other stakeholders such as local tourism businesses may be involved in their operations (Alonso & Liu, 2012).

The involvement and the benefits that are likely to accrue to stakeholders involved in a collaborative relationship of exchanging resources are emphasised in the Social Exchange Theory (SET). According to the theory, individuals in a social relationship determine whether to continue or terminate the relationship, based on a comparison of the rewards with the costs for maintaining the relationship (Jeong & Oh, 2017). While the theory has been applied in tourism studies to show that communities are likely to support tourism development if the benefits they receive from the sector exceed the costs, it has not been used to explain exchanges that take place in other areas of tourism, such as the exchange of information that takes place in VICs.

Most of earlier studies on VICs were conducted in developed countries with stronger economies and did not include contextual conditions that may be important in developing countries such as South Africa. Also the studies did not examine how the exchange of information between VICs and local tourism businesses may contribute to economic opportunities for these businesses. This gap in research requires further investigation both in terms of academic and practical perspectives because the generation of economic opportunities for local tourism businesses is an important aspect that the South African government strives to achieve in order to improve the lives of its citizens (South Africa, 2011). For public entities receiving public funds, such as VICs, it is important that their functions also contribute to government’s wider plan of improving the lives of communities, including tourism businesses in their surroundings. Hence, VICs in South Africa were established not to provide tourism information only, but also to assist Small, Medium and Micro Enterprises (SMME) development and to contribute to the local economic development.

The economic contribution of VICs is facilitated by the role they play in promoting local businesses. For example, they can directly facilitate opportunities for local tourism businesses to display locally made products that visitors can purchase as gifts and souvenirs in VICs. Indirectly, staff can help to generate income for local businesses by referring and recommending products that visitors can purchase (Lyu & Lee, 2015). Through the information and advice provided to visitors and the sale of local products, VICs can have a positive impact on the overall visitor experience and influence their behaviour through increased visitor expenditure and duration of stay (D’Ambra & Mistilis, 2010; Deery et al., 2007; Ortega et al., 2014). The failure of VICs in South Africa to contribute to economic opportunities could result in them not fulfilling the purpose for which they were established to address some of the country’s challenges such as poverty alleviation, job creation, skills development, and Small, Medium and Micro Enterprises (SMME) development (National Department of Tourism, 2011).

In light of the above, the purpose of the paper is to ascertain whether the information that government-owned VICs and local tourism businesses in South Africa exchanges contributes to economic opportunities for these businesses. More specifically, the paper aims to investigate the information that VICs and local tourism businesses exchanges and the sources

they use in the exchange process. It also intends to determine the factors in the information exchange process that are predictors of economic opportunities that tourism businesses received. The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: first, a literature review on VICs and information dissemination is discussed. This is followed by a discussion on information exchange in VICs and then economic opportunities emanating from information exchange. Next, the materials and methods used are explained. Finally, the paper provides a discussion of the results and ends by drawing conclusions and providing managerial recommendations and directions for future research.

## **Literature review**

### ***VICs and information dissemination***

VICs generally perform a multitude of functions, depending on the environment in which they operate. Pearce (2004) identifies four basic functions that most VICs perform: First, the marketing and access function involves the active promotion of an area or a product. It entails providing information about activities such as what to do, how to get there, and where to stay, as well as booking services. Second, the enhancement and information provision function focuses on improving the quality of the visitor experience and enhancing the visitor's appreciation of the destination. Third, the control and filtering function helps to reduce visitor pressures on resources. Through this function, VICs play a role in reducing visitors' impact on fragile or environmentally sensitive locations by providing guidelines for visiting attractions or sensitising visitors to their potential impact. Fourth, the substitution function, which involves a VIC serving as a substitute for attractions and activities that may be inaccessible or difficult to experience. A VIC can therefore provide an experience based on recreated feature displays and elements of the attraction. In addition to these basic functions, VICs also perform other functions, such as community integration, providing facilities of convenience to visitors, allowing them to use restrooms and to stretch their legs inside the VICs while taking a break from travelling (Ballantyne et al., 2009). VICs have also transitioned from reactive providers of information to centres of more proactive commercial, sales, and service-led business generation. They are involved in the sale of local products, refreshments, merchandise, gifts, and souvenirs (Lyu & Hwang, 2015) and also play a role as booking or reservation centres, including providing ticketing services for tours and events (Draper, 2018).

Through the marketing and access function, VICs disseminate information in a wide variety of travel-related areas, such as accommodation, restaurants, attractions, events, travel routes, safety, road conditions, water, and petrol services (Araña et al., 2016). They serve as important sources of information for visitors when deciding what activities to engage in before taking a trip. They provide an opportunity for visitors to learn about things which they might not have been aware of prior to reaching their destination or en route to it. At the destination, VICs provide information on tourism products and services that visitors might want to visit or access. They also provide information on features of the local community, such as interpreting the flora, fauna, history, and culture that visitors might visit and experience (Draper, 2018).

In disseminating information, VICs use a range of information sources, including traditional and online sources (Draper, 2018). Various types of brochures and media as well as personnel services are used to satisfy visitors' needs (Chang et al., 2019). Traditional information sources such as maps, travel guidebooks, magazines, and brochures on local attractions and activities are used on-site to provide information through face-to-face communication (Draper, 2018). Information sources such as desktop computers, touch screens, and online kiosks are used on-site, while telephones, emails, and mailed brochures are often used to reach remote visitors. In the modern technological world, steered by the proliferation of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), online platforms, and mobile

devices, VICs are encouraged to have more of an online presence in order to avoid becoming relics of the past (Lyu & Hwang, 2015). These technologies play a critical role in the process of searching for information and trip planning in areas such as choosing destinations, booking accommodation and transport, online buying and paying for trips, and booking and reserving tickets for different events and activities (Karamehmedović, 2019). They also provide a convenient platform to share information and optimise communication between tourism businesses and visitors (Khatri, 2019).

Although many visitors have access to the Internet, a new demand arises when they arrive in the destination to get information that is only known to local communities such as safer places, faster paths and more interesting trips. This kind of information is only available from a VIC (Tavares, Neves & Sawant, 2018). Chikati et al. (2020) found that while ICTs in VICs can assist in the dissemination of tourism information, their adoption and use in Gauteng VICs is still limited. In fact, there is extensive adoption and use of traditional ICTs such as email and websites, which are not interactive. The most widely used social media platform is Facebook while Twitter and Instagram are not extensively used and TripAdvisor even less used. Despite this limited adoption, there is awareness of the value and benefits of modern ICTs as well as willingness to use them in future.

While numerous benefits are associated with the use of online sources, such as ubiquity, convenience, immediacy, personalisation, information access, pragmatism, money saving, innovation, planning capacity, and entertainment (Ko, 2018), several challenges are also noted. The trustworthiness, credibility, reliability, legitimacy, and accuracy of online content are some of the challenges associated with online information, since it can be easily created and altered by anonymous authors, and is not subject to the traditional forms of gatekeeping (Liu & Park, 2015). The challenge is therefore to use credible information sources that will provide consistent, impartial, extensive, useful and current information on tourism products (Ispas et al., 2014).

The effectiveness of VICs in fulfilling their roles is however determined to a large extent by information-related factors such as the quality, accuracy, relevance, and usefulness of the information they provide (Minghetti & Celotto, 2014; Wong & McKercher, 2011). While visitors like to obtain customised, real-time, and accurate information from VICs (Ballantyne et al., 2009) the main priorities of transmitted information are comprehensibility, credibility, and usefulness (Chang et al., 2019). Providing accurate and relevant information about tourism products is considered one way to help visitors to deal with the uncertainty they may experience during their travel, the risk associated with travel, especially for visitors who know very little about destinations they would like to visit (No & Kim, 2015).

Similarly, Draper (2018) mention that credible and useful sources in which visitors can trust may be the basis to get potential visitors' interest and drive them to a destination. Draper (2016) found VIC website and visitors guide as important and useful information sources to help plan and decide on decisions to visit destinations. Mistilis and D'Ambra (2008) found that visitor experience at the Sydney VIC was explained by the perceived quality of information resources such as understandability, reliability, and usefulness of these resources.

Information-related factors such as usefulness and easy to use VIC information resources are likely to increase the frequency and probability to visit and use VICs (Lyu & Hwang, 2015). By providing information and using information resources characterised to be accurate, relevant, useful, reliable and easy to use, VICs may contribute to their economic development and general development of the local economy (Ballantyne et al., 2009). In this sense, how effectively VICs serve the needs of their stakeholders such as tourism businesses depends to a large extent on the quality, accuracy, relevance, and usefulness of the information they provide and information sources they use (Arãna et al., 2016; Minghetti & Celotto, 2014;

Wong & McKercher, 2011). The information-related factors such as extensiveness, frequency, usefulness and satisfaction were adopted in the study to measure information exchange between VICs and tourism businesses and the sources they use in the exchange process.

### ***Information exchange in VICs***

Information exchange is identified as a transformational phenomenon that deals with the flow of data and information within or across organisations (Žabkar & Arslanagić-Kalajdžić, 2014). Inter-organisational collaboration, and increased interdependencies are important to offering competitive services (Sigala & Chalkiti, 2015). Moreover, Gebauer, Worch and Truffer . (2012) mention that competitive advantages and innovativeness can no longer rely on internal information only, but also originate from the absorption of external information. In VICs, staff collaborate and exchange information with different community stakeholders (Alonso & Liu, 2012). They act as intermediaries in the information exchange process, with consumers and suppliers exchanging information using different information sources. As information consumers, visitors seek different types of information. The information can be categorised into a hierarchy of priorities relating to the geographic location of the VIC, with information on the immediate region being the most sought after, followed by information on the surrounding regions and lastly, inter-provincial information (Deery et al., 2007). Information suppliers are classified as primary or secondary, depending on their familiarity with the VIC environment. Primary suppliers such as individual business operators, sector groups or associations, other VICs, and government agencies supply VICs with information such as schedules, rates/prices, availabilities, product descriptions, and commissions. In addition to supplying information, local tourism businesses in particular are also consumers of VIC information as they seek out information on visitors in order to assist them to make bookings and reservations (Deery et al., 2007). In this regard, VICs work with different local tourism businesses such as those in transportation, accommodation, food and beverage services, recreation and entertainment, and travel agencies to promote local activities, products, and services (Fallon & Kriwoken, 2002). With regard to information sources, VICs use different information strategies and sources to exchange information. Brochures, personal contact, familiarisation visits, and, where applicable, electronic reservation systems are sources used by VICs to obtain information from suppliers and in turn disseminate it to visitors (Deery et al., 2007).

### ***Information exchange and economic opportunities in VICs***

Effective information exchange requires organisations to realise that cooperation, collaboration, and value creation are key elements in fulfilling their missions and goals (Wu et al., 2014). Moreover, information exchange becomes important when collaborating organisations are able to identify the potential benefits and the target audiences who would benefit from such collaboration (Cavallo et al., 2014). Collaborative relationships can contribute to the long-term sustainability of VICs (Araña et al., 2016) Through the exchange of information, VICs can play a role in promoting tourism businesses, events, and community services and ensure that they are empowered in order to boost the local economy (Fallon & Kriwoken, 2002). They contribute, both socially and economically, in order to boost the local economy (Chikati et al, 2020). They can create employment and volunteer opportunities for local communities (Smith & Holmes, 2012) and contribute to the local economic development of the region through facilitating higher spend by visitors to the area (National Department of Tourism, 2011). They can also directly facilitate economic impacts for businesses through the sale and promotion of their goods and services to the world market (National Department of Tourism, 2011) and display of locally made products that visitors can purchase as gifts and



souvenirs in VICs. Indirectly, staff can help to generate income for local tourism businesses by referring and recommending products that visitors can purchase. However, staff are prohibited from providing recommendations to visit particular tourism businesses such as restaurants and accommodation establishments. To generate economic opportunities, VICs need to forge closer cooperation with local tourism businesses (Lyu & Lee, 2015) by directing and encouraging visitors to visit and use the products of local tourism businesses (Draper, 2018).

## Methods

This study adopted a quantitative research design to collect data by using surveys which was conducted in 2017. The sample for the survey consisted of local tourism businesses listed in the databases of 18 government-owned VICs in South Africa. VIC staff were requested to provide a list of local tourism businesses listed in VIC databases. Some VIC staff however raised concerns of sharing contact details of their stakeholders to third parties. In the absence of a pre-existing list of local tourism businesses or actual business population figures, it was not feasible to compile a sampling frame from which to draw a representative sample and so give each an equal opportunity to participate in the study. As a result, a non-probability purposive and convenience sampling technique was used to request staff to solicit the participation of local tourism businesses who were willing and available to participate in the study.

An online link was created in Qualtrics to invite tourism businesses to complete the survey. A total of 46 usable questionnaire were completed online. Owing to a low response rate, ethical clearance was sought to use traditional access methods to complement the online survey. Staff were requested to distribute paper-based questionnaires to local tourism businesses listed in their database to improve participation. This approach yielded 29 usable questionnaires, which resulted in participation of 75 local tourism businesses (46 completed online and 29 completed through hard copies) in the survey. The traditional access methods were useful in addressing some of the limitations associated with Internet-mediated access, such as excluding those without Internet access.

A self-completed and structured questionnaire with close-ended or forced-choice questions, which provided a number of alternatives from which local tourism businesses were asked to choose, was used as a measurement instrument to elicit quantitative data. Taking into consideration the limited studies related to information exchange and economic opportunities in VICs and that no existing scales were deemed appropriate for use, the survey questionnaire was developed from the literature (Ballantyne et al., 2009; Cropanzano et al., 2017; Deery et al., 2007; Draper, 2016; Draper, 2018; Lyu & Hwang, 2015; Lyu & Lee, 2015). The main constructs measured are highlighted in the different sections of the questionnaire and are as follows:

- Information received from VICs with regard to its extensiveness, usefulness and frequency of receiving it.
- VIC information sources usage with regard to usefulness and satisfaction.
- Preferred VIC information and sources to receive information.
- Information supplied to VICs with regard extensiveness and frequency of supply.
- Economic opportunities presented by information exchange

The first section of the survey questionnaire asked the socio-demographic profile of respondents in terms of gender, age, population group, educational qualification, positions in the business and tourism sub-sector to which the business belonged. The next section focused on information provided by VICs to local tourism businesses as well as sources used to provide information. Respondents were asked to rate the type of information they received in terms of

its extensiveness and usefulness as well as frequency of receiving it. They were also asked to rate the information sources used by VICs in terms of their usefulness and overall satisfaction with them. In addition, they were asked to indicate the level of agreement or disagreement with information they would like to receive from VICs as well as the sources they would like VICs to use to provide them with information. Following this section were questions related to rating information that local tourism businesses supplied to VICs with regard to its extensiveness and frequency of supply. The last section focused on asking respondents about economic opportunities they received from exchanging information with VICs. They were asked to rate the level of agreement or disagreement with statements relating to economic opportunities they received. Items in the questionnaire were measured on a five-point Likert- scale ranging from 1-5. Extensiveness was measured on a scale from 1=not extensive to 5=very extensive, frequency with 1=never and 5=always; usefulness with 1=not at all useful and 5=very useful; satisfaction with 1=very dissatisfied and 5=very satisfied and agreement with 1=strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree.

Data analysis included a number of techniques. First, the socio demographic profile of respondents is supplied. Second, because scales were developed from the literature, they were subjected to an exploratory factor analysis (EFA). Principal axis factoring and promax rotation were used to determine the dimensionality (the underlying data structure of the observed data) of each of the factors. The scores from the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy were above the recommended threshold of 0.5 (Hair et al., 1998), and those from Bartlett's test of sphericity were statistically significant ( $p < 0.001$ ) in all the factors, indicating that a factor analysis was appropriate for each of the factors. The factor analysis was based on the criterion of eigenvalues greater than 1 (Field, 2013). Third, a multiple linear regression analysis was used to determine whether relationships exist between information-related factors (identified in the EFA) and the economic opportunities that local tourism businesses received. Due to the small sample size, the only independent variables that were included in each of the regressions were those with a Pearson Correlation Co-efficient above 0.2. The analysis process involved including all the independent variables in the model that qualified. Based on the results, the variables with the highest p value were taken out of the analysis and the regression model was recalculated. The best-fitting regression model produced was the model with the highest adjusted  $R^2$  and  $F$  values, indicating the set of information-related factors that best predicted the economic opportunities that local tourism businesses received. In addition, the best-fitting model was used to interpret the statistically significant predictors of economic opportunities.

## Results and discussion

### *Sample description*

More than half (54.7%) of the respondents were females, while 45.3% were males. Their population groups indicate that 38.6% were Whites, followed by 36.0% Blacks, 14.7% Coloureds, and 10.7% Indians. The educational level of the respondents showed a relatively high educational attainment, with the category with the highest percentage of respondents (40.0%) holding a Diploma/Certificate after Grade 12, followed by 29.3% with a Grade 12 certificate, 28.0% with a university qualification, while two (2.7%) respondents had some high school education.

With regard to the tourism sub-sector classification of businesses, 45.3% of the respondents operated in the accommodation sub-sector, 16.0% in tourist guiding, 10.7% in food and beverage, 8.0% in transport services, 6.7% in business tourism/MICE, and 5.3% in tour operating. The remaining 8.0% were in other sub-sectors such as crafts and fashion design. Of the 56 respondents that indicated their positions, 48.3 % were business owners, followed by 26.8% in management or supervisory positions, 12.5% were tourist guides, 3.6% were drivers,

and 3.6% were general staff members. There was only one receptionist (1.3%), caterer (1.3%), crafter (1.3%), and tour operator (1.3%).

### ***Frequency analysis***

#### ***Information businesses received from VICs***

##### ***Extensive VIC information***

The majority of businesses reported having received extensive information on the local area (86.7%), the operations of VICs (73.3%), business training courses (58.7%), and bookings/reservations (57.4%), while the information received on business funding opportunities (66.6%) and visitor statistics (61.4%) was reported as being not extensive. For the information on business services, 42.7% of businesses indicated that this information was not extensive while the same proportion (42.7%) remained neutral.

##### ***Frequency of receiving VIC information***

Just more than half (50.7%) of the businesses indicated that they often received information on the local area, followed by bookings/reservations (49.3%). The majority indicated that they rarely received information about business services (85.3%), visitor statistics (72.0%), and business funding opportunities (57.3%). Around half (50.7%) reported having sometimes received information about business training courses. Similarly, 44.0% sometimes received information about the operations of VICs. Responses with regard to information about business training courses were quite even on both sides of the scale, with 25.3% indicating that they often received the information and 24.0% receiving it rarely. Furthermore, 32.0% indicated that they often received information on the operations of VICs, while 24.0% received it rarely.

##### ***Useful VIC information***

The majority of businesses found information about the local area (85.4%), the operations of VICs (84.0%), bookings/reservations (70.7%), and business training courses (58.6%) to be useful, while the modal category indicated that information about business funding opportunities (48.0%), business services (40.0%), and visitor statistics (33.4%) was not useful. Responses with regard to business services showed that, while 40.0% indicated that this information was not useful, an almost equal number remained neutral in their responses (42.7%). With regard to information about visitor statistics 40.0% found this information useful while 33.4% reported this not being the case.

##### ***Preferred VIC information***

The results show that the majority of the businesses agreed that they would like to receive information about the local areas (98.7%), followed by business training courses (94.6%), business funding opportunities (94.7%), visitor statistics (89.3%), the operations of VICs (78.6%), and bookings/reservations (76.0%) from VICs. However, 63.0% disagreed that they would like to receive information about business services.

#### ***Sources used by VICs to provide businesses with information***

##### ***Useful VIC information sources***

The majority of businesses mentioned personal face-to-face contact (96.0%), telephone calls (88.0%), printed brochures (77.3%), the Internet (76.0%), and magazines (60.0%) as useful sources that VICs use to provide information to their businesses. A third to almost half reported that visitor notice boards (49.3%), television/radio (48.0%), electronic touch screens (34.6%), and audio-visual presentations (30.7%) were sources that they found not useful. Responses on the usefulness of audio-visual presentations were quite even on both sides of the scale, with



31% indicating these sources to be useful and 33.3% not useful, while 36.0% remained neutral. Furthermore, businesses were neutral (modal category) in their opinions on the usefulness of electronic touch screens (61.3%), mobile applications (54.7%), social media (49.3%), and visitor notice boards (46.7%).

#### *Satisfaction with VIC information sources*

The majority of businesses indicated that they were satisfied with personal face-to-face contact (96.0%), telephone calls (86.7%), printed brochures (78.7%), the Internet (70.3%), and magazines (58.6%) as sources used by VICs to provide them with information. An equal number of businesses were dissatisfied with visitor notice boards (44.0%) and television/radio (44.0%) as sources used to provide them with information, followed by electronic touch screens (34.6%). Responses on satisfaction with audio-visual presentations were quite even on both sides of the scale, with 32.0% indicating that they were satisfied and 29.3% that they were dissatisfied, while 38.7% remained neutral. Furthermore, businesses felt neutral (modal category) about their satisfaction with electronic touch screens (61.3%), mobile applications (60.0%), visitor notice boards (49.3%), and social media (42.7%) as sources used by VICs to provide information to their businesses.

#### *Preferred VIC information sources*

All businesses agreed that they prefer to receive information through personal face-to-face contact (100%), followed by the Internet (97.3%), printed brochures (93.4%), social media (92.0%), telephone calls (92.0%), and audio-visual presentations (89.4%). More than half disagreed that electronic touch screens (62.7%); visitor notice boards (62.6%) and television/radio (58.6%) are sources through which they prefer to receive information. The results show that 46.7% of businesses agreed that they prefer to receive information through mobile applications, while 34.7% disagreed, and the remaining 18.7% felt neutral. Similarly, just less than half (49.3%) agreed that they prefer to receive information through magazines/newspapers, while 26.7% disagreed, and 24.0% were neutral in their responses.

#### *Information supplied by businesses to VICs*

The majority of businesses reported that they have supplied VICs with extensive information about their local areas (90.6%), while their information about safety (63.5%), travel bookings and reservations (64%), and emergency numbers (62.1%) was not extensive. Nearly a quarter (24.3%) of businesses were neutral about the extensiveness of both the safety information and the emergency numbers they supplied. Almost three-quarters (73.3%) indicated that they often supplied VICs with local area information, while information about emergency numbers (85.3%), safety (77.4%), and travel bookings and reservations (70.7%) was rarely supplied.

#### *Opportunities presented by information exchange*

With regard to information exchange, the results show that the majority of respondents indicated that the exchange presented opportunities for businesses to connect with diverse visitors (94.6%), list businesses in VIC databases (91.9%), access potential visitors (89.2%), attend business training courses (75.7%), network with other businesses (63.5%), have visitors returning to their businesses (60.8%), recommend businesses to friends/relatives (57.6%), exhibit business products at tourism events (54.0%), and share local knowledge with diverse visitors (50.0%). However, the exchange did not present opportunities to receive funding to grow businesses (85.2%), market businesses on VIC websites (71.6%), obtain VIC visitor statistics (68.9%) or increase visitor bookings (54.1%) and use of business products/services (49.3%). Responses about opportunities to have visitors spending more money at their

businesses were quite even on both sides of the scale, with only 36.5% agreeing that the exchange of information presented this opportunity, while 33.8% disagreed, and 29.7% remained neutral.

While the results reveal that the exchange of information generated several economic opportunities for businesses, several researchers (Ballantyne et al., 2009; Draper, 2018; Lyu & Hwang, 2015) mention that to generate these opportunities, the information that VICs provide and information resources they use should be accurate, relevant, useful, reliable and easy to use. For this reason, it was deemed important to determine the factors in the information exchange process that are statistically significant predictors of opportunities that local tourism businesses received. An Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) and multiple linear regression analysis were therefore conducted.

### ***Exploratory factor analysis (EFA)***

Table 1 shows the EFA that was conducted on items of each of the 10 constructs, using principal axis factoring and promax rotation to determine their dimensionality. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was above the recommended threshold of 0.5 (Hair et al., 1998) and Bartlett's test of sphericity was statistically significant ( $p < 0.001$ ) for the items in all constructs, indicating that a factor analysis was appropriate for each of the constructs. The total percentage variance explained for all constructs varied between 52.26% and 80.81%, indicating an acceptable total amount of variance explained. A total of 23 factors were extracted from the EFA of the 10 constructs. The factors were based on the eigenvalue criterion of eigenvalues greater than 1.0 (Field, 2013). To measure the internal consistency (reliability) of the factors – i.e., the manner in which local tourism businesses responded to similar questions in similar ways that measured a particular construct – the Cronbach's alpha of each factor was determined. Although a good reliability score (alpha) is considered to exceed a threshold of 0.7, a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.5 is generally accepted in exploratory studies (George & Mallery, 2003). Hence Cronbach's alpha values between 0.5 and 0.6 were deemed important and still acceptable values, as the study was exploratory in nature (George & Mallery, 2003). However, where the Cronbach's alpha value was lower than 0.5, the factors were discarded, as they were considered unacceptable. The alpha coefficients ranged between 0.519 and 0.892.

Table 1 also shows that the mean scores for the factors ranged between 1.7133 and 4.2756. The lowest mean score of 1.7133 ( $SD = 0.91597$ ) was for the factor: frequency of supplying safety and emergency information while the highest score of 4.2756 ( $SD = 0.616040$ ) was for the factor: preferred online information sources. The scores indicate that businesses did not supply VICs with safety and emergency information frequently and that they preferred to receive information more through online sources than other sources.

**Table 1: Information exchange and economic opportunities**

Construct and information-related factors	Mean	Factor items	Factor item loading	Cronbach's Alpha
<b>Extensive VIC information received</b>				
Factor 1: Extensive visitor support information received	3.5233	Local area information	0.595	0.646
		VIC operations	0.650	
		Bookings/reservation	0.494	
		Business training	0.568	
Factor 2: Extensive business support information received	2.3511	Business services	0.559	0.617
		Visitor statistics	0.470	
		Business funding	0.731	
<b>Useful VIC information received</b>				
Factor 1: Useful visitor support information received	2.7822	Business services	0.922	0.635
		Business funding	0.355	
		Business training	0.648	
Factor 2: Useful business support information received	2.1123	Local area information	0.530	0.555
		VIC operations	0.434	
		Visitor statistics	0.598	
		Bookings/reservation	0.438	
<b>Frequency of receiving VIC information</b>				
Factor 1: Frequency of receiving visitor support information	3.1433	Local area information	0.548	0.653
		VIC operations	0.682	
		Bookings/reservations	0.619	
		Business training	0.448	
Factor 2: Frequency of receiving business support information	1.9067	Business services	0.821	0.646
		Visitor statistics	0.498	
		Business funding	0.506	
<b>Preferred VIC information</b>				
Factor 1: Preferred visitor support information	3.9200	Operations of the VIC	0.735	0.604
		Visitor statistics	0.737	
		Bookings/reservation	0.719	
Factor 2: Preferred business support information	4.1947	Business funding	0.904	0.778
		Business training	0.857	
<b>Useful VIC information source</b>				
Factor 1: Useful electronic information sources	2.4267	Electronic touch screens	0.804	0.701
		Visitor notice boards	0.979	
		Television/radio	0.386	
Factor 2: Useful traditional printed information sources	3.6267	Printed brochure/pamphlets	0.783	0.789
		Magazines/Newspapers	0.868	
Factor 3: Useful online information sources	3.2267	Internet	0.691	0.648
		Social media	0.603	
		Mobile Applications	0.619	
		Audio-visual presentations	0.399	
<b>Satisfaction with VIC information source</b>				
Factor 1: Satisfaction with electronic information sources	2.5022	Electronic touch screens	0.813	0.735
		Visitor notice boards	0.856	
		Television/radio	0.642	
Factor 2: Satisfaction with printed information sources	3.6133	Printed brochure/pamphlets	0.816	0.771
		Magazines/Newspapers	0.806	
Factor 3: Satisfaction with online information sources	3.2000	Internet	0.707	0.665
		Social media	0.739	
		Mobile Applications	0.440	
		Audio-visual presentations	0.406	
<b>Preferred VIC information source</b>				
Factor 1: Preferred online information sources	2.8000	Internet	0.647	0.668
		Social media	0.802	
		Audio-visual presentations	0.558	
Factor 2: Preferred electronic information sources	4.2756	Mobile Applications	0.842	0.655
		Visitor notice boards	0.605	
<b>Extensive information supplied</b>				
Factor 1: Extensive information supplied	2.1486	Safety information	0.930	0.796
		Emergency numbers	0.791	

Construct and information-related factors	Mean	Factor items	Factor item loading	Cronbach's Alpha
		Travel booking/reservations	0.627	
<b>Frequency of supplying information</b>				
Factor 1: Frequency of supplying safety and emergency information	1.7133	Safety information	0.938	0.892
		Emergency numbers	0.901	
<b>Economic opportunities</b>				
Factor 1: Access to diverse and potential visitors	4.0270	Access to potential visitors	0.808	0.779
		Connect with diverse visitors	0.886	
Factor 2: Access to visitor statistics and business networking	1.9189	Receive VIC visitor statistics	0.880	0.561
		Network with other businesses	0.764	
Factor 3: Database listing and business growth	2.6959	Business is listed on VIC database	0.328	0.818
		Increased visitor bookings	1.000	
		Increased visitors' use of products	0.820	
		Increased visitors spend at business	0.596	
Factor 4: Product exhibition and visitor loyalty	3.0395	Products exhibited at tourism events	0.428	0.794
		Visitors returned to business	0.738	
		Business recommendation to friends/relatives	0.966	
Factor 5: Business marketing and funding	3.2084	Business marketed on VIC website	0.461	0.519
		Received funding to grow business	0.686	
		Attended business training course	0.372	

### **Multiple linear regression analysis**

Multiple linear regression modelling was used to determine factors that are statistically significant predictors of economic opportunities that local tourism businesses received from exchanging information with VICs. Five models were run, one each for the factors associated with 1) Access to diverse and potential visitors, 2) Access to visitor statistics and business networking, 3) Database listing and business growth, 4) Product exhibition and visitor loyalty and 5) Business marketing and funding. In addition, regression modelling was conducted to determine the best fitting model, i.e. the model that maximises the adjusted R square, by deleting the predictor with the highest p value until the adjusted R square stops to improve. However, the main aim of the analysis was not prediction, but to determine which predictors have a statistically significant relationship with economic opportunities. Results are shown in Table 2. From the it is evident that a number of factors are statistically significant predictors of economic opportunities that local tourism businesses received from exchanging information with VICs. The results reveal that, Extensive visitor support information (e.g., local area attractions, operations of VICs, booking/reservations services) predicted businesses' access to diverse and potential visitors. Extensive visitor support information, useful VIC electronic information sources (e.g., electronic touch screens, visitor noticeboards) and satisfaction with VIC online information sources (e.g., the Internet, social media, mobile applications and audio-visual presentations) predicted businesses' listing in databases and their growth. Extensive visitor support information, preferred visitor support information (e.g., visitor statistics, bookings/reservations), and satisfaction with VIC online information sources predicted businesses' access to visitor statistics and networking opportunities. Extensive business support information (e.g., business services, business funding opportunities) predicted



businesses’ marketing and funding opportunities. Satisfaction with online information sources predicted product exhibition opportunities and visitor loyalty to businesses.

**Table 2: Predictors of economic opportunities**

Information-related factors	Original Model 1	Best fitting Model 2
<b>Access to diverse and potential visitors</b>		
Extensive visitor support information received	0.502***	0.512***
Frequency of receiving visitor support information	137	-0.145
Preferred business support information	0.109	0.125
Satisfaction with online information sources	0.125	0.116
Extensive information supplied	-0.270*	-0.312***
Frequency of supplying information	-0.057	
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.263	0.272
F (p value)	5.390 (0.000)	6.527 (0.000)
<b>Access to visitor statistics and business networking</b>		
Extensive visitor support information received	222	0.184*
Frequency of receiving visitor support information	-0.113	
Frequency of receiving business support information	0.349	
Preferred visitor support information	0.097	0.322 ***
Preferred business support information	0.127	0.150
Useful online information sources	-0.145	
Satisfaction with online information sources	0.360	0.229 **
Preferred electronic information sources	-0.025	
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.236	0.263
F (p value)	3.856 (0.000)	7.616 (0.000)
<b>Database listing and business growth</b>		
Extensive visitor support information received	0.403	0.382***
Frequency of receiving visitor support information	-0.075	
Frequency of receiving business support information	0.176	0.156
Preferred visitor support information	0.073	
Useful electronic information sources	-0.175	0.254**
Useful online information sources	0.005	
Satisfaction with electronic information sources	0.090	
Satisfaction with online information sources	0.222	0.234**
Preferred electronic information sources	-0.029	
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.333	0.373
F (p value)	5.097(0.000)	12.018 (0.000)
<b>Product exhibition and visitor loyalty</b>		
Extensive visitor support information received	0.103	
Extensive business support information received	0.124	
Frequency of receiving visitor support information	0.066	
Frequency of receiving business support information	0.209	
Preferred visitor support information	0.031	
Useful electronic information sources	0.214	
Useful online information sources	0.032	
Satisfaction with electronic information sources	-0.011	
Satisfaction with online information sources	0.4196	0.396***
Preferred online information sources	-0.212	
Preferred electronic information sources	-0.077	
Frequency of supplying information	-0.026	
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.356	0.405
F (p value)	4.410(0.000)	9.387(0.000)
<b>Business marketing and funding</b>		
Extensive business support information received	0.390	0.369**
Frequency of receiving business support information	-0.033	
Useful visitor support information received	0.195	0.193
Useful online information sources	-0.270	
Satisfaction with online information sources	0.190	0.163
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.251	0.271
F (p value)	5.948 (000)	10.166 (000)

- Results of standardised betas are presented. Statistical significance is indicated with \*( $p < 0.10$ ), \*\* ( $p < 0.05$ ), \*\*\* ( $p < 0.01$ ).
- No multicollinearity was detected (All VIF values were below 10).
- For the best fitting models, the adjusted R<sup>2</sup> values ranged between 0.263 and 0.405, indicating weak to moderate explanation of the variation in the dependent variable,
- The F test for regression is statistically significant for all models (The beta coefficient do differ significantly from zero – p values all < 0.001).
- The standardised beta values and associated significance indicate independent variables that were statistically significant.



These results show that the more businesses agreed that visitor and business support-related information were part of the exchange of information process, the more they agreed that economic opportunities were generated for them. In addition, economic opportunities were generated when information sources they perceived to be useful and they were satisfied with, were used to exchange information. It is interesting to note that even though businesses did not supply VICs with extensive information, opportunities were still generated for them to access diverse and potential visitors, to exhibit their products, and to encourage visitor loyalty. These results should be encouraging to VIC staff to strengthen their information provision and exchange activities in an effort to generate economic opportunities for local tourism businesses and thus contribute to government's wider plan of improving the lives of people in the vicinity of areas in which they operate.

## Discussion

The purpose of the paper was to ascertain whether the information that VICs and local tourism businesses exchanges contribute to economic opportunities for these businesses. In particular, the paper aimed to investigate the information that VICs and local tourism businesses exchanges and the sources they use in the exchange process. Furthermore, it aimed to determine the factors in the information exchange process that are predictors of economic opportunities that tourism businesses received. The results show that there is an exchange of information between VICs and tourism businesses. Businesses reported to have received extensive information on local area and bookings/reservation often, found this information useful and would like to receive it in future. With VICs' main function involving the dissemination of information on local tourism products and services and providing travel bookings and reservations (Draper, 2018), it is expected that they would have provided businesses with extensive and useful information on local areas and bookings/reservation often. Chang et al. (2019) also confirm that comprehensibility, credibility, and usefulness are the main factors determining quality of brochure information dissemination in VICs. Moreover, this level of information is what determines their effectiveness in fulfilling their roles (Minghetti & Celotto, 2014). The information-related factors on extensiveness, frequency and usefulness can therefore serve as a reference for VICs in improving the provision of information. While businesses supplied extensive information on their local areas often, there was a less extensive and low frequency of supplying emergency numbers and safety information. A plausible explanation for these results could be that businesses did not feel that it was their responsibility to supply some of this information, as it is often the obligation of law enforcement agencies to produce and distribute it.

Traditional sources such as personal face-to-face contact, telephone calls, printed brochures and the Internet were found to be useful, and respondents were satisfied with them as information source. However, they found sources such as visitor notice boards, electronic touch screens, and television/radio not useful and not particularly relevant to them, as they are mostly available on-site for visitors to use when they visit the VICs. Interestingly, while respondents felt neutral about their satisfaction with online information sources such as social media and mobile applications, they still indicated that they preferred to receive information through these sources. This corroborate the results of Chikati et al. (2020) that while there is limited adoption of social media platform such as Twitter and Instagram in Gauteng VICs, staff mentioned that they would like to use them in future.

Through the exchange of information, businesses received several economic opportunities, an area not addressed in previous studies. While some studies (Deery et. al., 2007; Sheldon, 1997), acknowledged that there is an exchange of information between VICs and tourism businesses, they have not paid attention to economic opportunities that businesses

may derive from this exchange process. Similarly, while the marketing and promotional function of VICs exposes tourism businesses to potential visitors (Araña et al., 2016) and the referrals that staff make through selling and recommending local products generate economic opportunities for businesses (Lyu & Lee, 2015), it is not clear whether these opportunities were derived from the exchange process. Even so, the studies did not identify factors that are statistically significant predictors of economic opportunities generated for tourism businesses within the VIC environment. Our results show that the exchange of information presented economic opportunities for businesses to connect and access potential visitors, network with other businesses, list businesses in VIC databases, exhibit business products at tourism events, recommend businesses to friends/relatives and encourage visitors to return to businesses they had previously visited. Moreover, the multiple regression analysis show that the more businesses agreed that information-related factors such as extensive visitor and business support information, useful electronic information sources and online information sources with which they are satisfied to receive information were part of the exchange of information, the more economic opportunities were generated for them.

The results show that to contribute to the economic development of tourism businesses, the information that VICs provide and information resources they use should be extensive and useful. These results corroborate those from previous studies that information-related factors such as quality, accuracy, relevance, reliability are critical in the dissemination of information at VICs (Araña et al., 2016; Draper, 2016; Draper, 2018; Lyu & Hwang, 2015). Similarly, Chang et al. (2019) confirm that comprehensibility, credibility, and usefulness are the main factors determining quality of information dissemination in VICs. As emphasised by the SET, information exchange is important when collaborating organisations are able to identify the potential opportunities generated by the exchange (Cropanzano et al., 2017). This is also important to encourage collaborating organisations to continue exchanging information (Savage & Bergstrand, 2012). For VICs, the information that they exchange with tourism businesses should become a strategic factor that supports the local economy financially and also contribute to the social and economic well-being of local communities, including tourism businesses (Ballantyne et al., 2009).

## Conclusion

The paper makes a theoretical contribution to the research gaps identified in the exchange of information. As opposed to previous studies acknowledging the exchange of information between VICs and tourism businesses (Deery et al., 2007), our results show that the exchange presents economic opportunities for these businesses. In addition, the paper identifies information-related factors such as extensive visitor and business support information, useful electronic sources and satisfactory online sources as significant predictors of economic opportunities for tourism businesses. While the SET has been applied widely in tourism studies to emphasise the generation of economic opportunities (Afthanorhan et al., 2017; Capistrano & Weaver, 2017; Jani, 2018; Maruyama et al., 2019; Woo et al., 2018), it has not been used to explain exchanges that take place in other areas of tourism, such as tourism information exchange in VICs. The paper therefore contributes to the VIC literature by considering the applicability of SET in the context of information exchange in VICs and identifying information-related factors such as extensive visitor and business support information, useful electronic sources and satisfactory online sources as significant predictors of economic opportunities that tourism businesses derive from the exchange of information that takes place in VICs.

Managerial implications are also made for VIC staff to use the exchange of information as a platform through which they may generate economic opportunities for businesses. The

results should be encouraging to VIC staff to strengthen their information provision and exchange activities in an effort to generate economic opportunities for local tourism businesses and thus contribute to government's wider plan of improving the lives of people in the vicinity of areas in which they operate. It is therefore important that, in their exchange of information, VIC staff should understand the information needs of tourism businesses and provide them with visitor-support information that is extensive, useful and that they prefer to receive. Such information is important to help businesses to access potential visitors and to support and serve visitors' needs. In the same vein, VICs should use online information sources with which businesses are satisfied and that they perceive to be useful to provide and receive information. These results corroborate previous studies that the provision of information and usage of information sources that are perceived to be accurate, relevant, useful, reliable and easy to use, form the basis to contribute to economic development of tourism businesses and general development of the local economy (Draper, 2018).

Despite several noteworthy findings, limitations are evident. These limitations may inspire and inform an agenda for further research. Although the exchange of information presented businesses with several economic opportunities, these may differ across VICs. The findings are also limited to tourism businesses listed in the databases of VICs and their marketing agencies. The lack of a sampling frame affected the response rate for the online survey, as the researcher could not follow up or send reminders to encourage participation. Furthermore, the lack of a sampling frame did not enable representivity and generalisation of findings to other local tourism businesses such as those owned by the private sector. Hence the findings are prone to bias and subjective judgement and should be interpreted with caution. Future research is therefore recommended on a bigger sample to focus on the exchange of information in and between other types of VICs, such as privately owned VICs and government-funded VICs that offer a membership programme to local businesses. Other businesses not considered to be primary in the tourism sector such as law-enforcement agencies and health related organisations but exchanging information with VICs may also be considered in future research. The research should examine how VICs exchange information and other resources with different types of local businesses, as well as the opportunities generated by such exchanges. The results could provide valuable lessons and best practice solutions for other VICs. Despite the study's limitations, the findings are invaluable to enable VICs to become relevant to empowering and generating economic opportunities for tourism businesses in their vicinity, thereby boosting local economies in which they operate.

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