

## Cultural Tourism in South Africa: A Case Study of the Experiences of Employees

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### Abstract

Cultural tourism has become an important research topic. In particular, authenticity issues and the commodification of local cultures have seen significant research attention. Despite this type of research's growth, many locations in the Global South require investigation. This paper attempts to address this dearth by investigating the experiences of people employed at the Matsamo Cultural Village in the Mpumalanga Province of South Africa. Data was collected through a survey questionnaire and qualitative interviews. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, and collected data were analysed using content analysis. Major themes that emerged from the content analysis are the growth of tourist visitation at Matsamo Cultural Village and the motivation of employees to promote cultural tourism. While the Matsamo Cultural Village arguably authentically represents the local people and their Swati culture, it is contended that as the sector grows, employees will perceive cultural tourism as an economic means to an end rather than a cultural exposé celebrating Swati culture. These issues are untangled in the paper.

**Keywords:** cultural tourism; authenticity; southern Africa; Swati culture

### Introduction

Cultural tourism has become a significant focus of investigation in tourism and hospitality research over the last three-quarters of a century (Richards, 2019; Timothy, 2023). One of the most voluminous themes within cultural tourism has been the authenticity of cultural tourism experiences, which has seen widespread academic attention over the past two decades (Park et al., 2019; Ramkissoon & Uysal, 2010). For the most part, the study of authentic experiences has, by and large, been reported on from the perspective of the tourist (Tiberghien et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2021), with the perspectives of the tour operators or the experiences of people employed in cultural tourism being significantly understudied in comparison. There are some exceptions to this lack of research, such as the work of Halewood and Hannam (2001) and Buntin (2008), which highlights the commodification of cultural tourism experiences and the consequent threat to perceived authenticity from the respective perspectives of employees. While the issue of authentic experiences of tourists has been studied extensively by Ivanovic (2008, 2014), in the South African context, the views and experiences of employees in cultural tourism experiences still need to be obtained.

This paucity of understanding of employees' views is in spite of the fact that cultural tourism in southern Africa is considered an effective development tool that creates employment opportunities in impoverished rural communities (Morais et al., 2018; Saarinen, 2007). Indeed, the recognition of cultural tourism in southern Africa as a strategic economic driver has led to increased debates about the challenges faced by the sector (Manwa et al., 2017). Cultural villages established for tourists are the attractions most frequently visited by tourists wanting to learn about indigenous communities' arts and crafts, heritage and traditions (Moswete et al., 2009). However, cultural villages are intended to align with the local culture they represent. Yet many cultural villages in southern Africa are instead purpose-built to attract tourists and satisfy their expectations, often with little consideration for the local people whose culture is a central theme (Jansen van Veuren, 2001). Indeed, Ndlovu (2021) further added that cultural villages are reproducing stereotyped western views of indigenous people.

The overall argument can be made that most of the extant literature on cultural tourism focuses on the representation and authenticity of cultural villages, with little mention of the people who work in cultural villages. Therefore, this study is tasked to investigate the employees' cultural tourism experiences at the Matsamo Cultural Village in the Mpumalanga Province of South Africa. To achieve this research aim, the following research objectives were set out: to determine employees' perceptions of cultural tourism, and to investigate employees' perspectives on the product's authenticity regarding the local culture.

### Literature review

The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) defines cultural tourism as a tourism activity in which visitors learn, discover, experience and consume cultural products at a destination (UNWTO, 2017). Indeed, cultural tourism presents the opportunity to promote tourism growth and diversify tourism economies (Christie et al., 2014). Therefore, cultural tourism is developed following the sociocultural, economic and environmental aspects and traditions of the destinations they represent (Moswete et al., 2015). To understand why people engage in cultural tourism, many scholars have highlighted the learning experiences provided at various cultural tourism destinations as critical motivators for cultural tourists (Packer & Ballantyne, 2016). Cultural representation is also a significant issue in cultural tourism destinations, especially where the representation of minority cultures is significant (Yang, 2011). Prentice (2004) argues that although reasons for visiting cultural attractions are culturally motivated, cultural tourism is a supply-driven sector. Often the authenticity of the destination determines the decision to visit cultural attractions. Throughout the literature, there is consistent evidence that the authenticity of cultural attractions plays a vital role in the growth of cultural tourism across many regions around the globe.

The term *authenticity* in tourism is disputed and brings about numerous debates on the practical and theoretical aspects of the tourist experience (Moore et al., 2021). Authenticity is a multi-faceted concept in tourism research but is often debated in binary terms (Cohen & Cohen, 2012), which some would argue is too simplistic. It encapsulates broad-ranging issues such as behaviour, commodification, identity, interaction and sustainability of the tourism experience, to name just a few themes (Rickly, 2022). Despite the abstract nature of this debate, Knudsen et al. (2016) maintain that there is inherent value in exploring authenticity in tourism research if tourists are allowed to imagine and perform their tourist experiences.

Notwithstanding the increased literature on cultural representation, misrepresentation of minority cultures remains a concern for destinations (Yang, 2011). Indeed, Smith and Robinson (2006) and Santos and Yan (2008) noted that local communities – especially those in the Global South – revealed that most public cultural attractions that represent a traditional way of life are adjusted to meet the visitors' expectations. Aside from concerns about the

adjustments made to attract and satisfy tourists, culture is dynamic and therefore is difficult to display in a way that is both consistent and authentic (Veleepini & Martin, 2019). It is important to note that globalisation has negatively impacted the cultural tourism sector in terms of authenticity, as the interconnectedness of global society has increased uniformity towards the modern lifestyle at the expense of traditional norms and values (Prideaux et al., 2008; Sofield & Li, 2007). Nevertheless, Richards (2018) believes that cultural tourism allows local communities to strengthen their identity by promoting their cultural values.

### ***Cultural tourism in Southern Africa***

Southern Africa has untapped potential to develop cultural tourist destinations because of its diverse range of cultures (Monare et al., 2016). Although many countries in the region have done well to acknowledge the socio-economic potential of cultural tourism through policies, implementation still needs to be improved (Moswete et al., 2015). In southern Africa, by creating employment opportunities cultural tourism is seen as a tool to develop rural communities through cultural attractions such as cultural villages (Spenceley, 2012). Furthermore, cultural attractions such as cultural villages do not require significant infrastructure development, which is advantageous for resource-stretched destinations (Jansen van Veuren, 2001). There is a need to improve the spatial distribution of cultural sites in the region, as this would mean that diverse societies benefit more from their cultural assets (Khumalo et al., 2014; Masilo & Van der Merwe, 2016). Mohale et al. (2020) emphasised the need for governments to upskill key personnel at cultural enterprises – enabling people to manage their businesses sustainably rather than be owned externally. This approach exemplifies the development of sustainable cultural tourism through knowledge empowerment and participation (Mgonja et al., 2015; Saarinen et al., 2009).

Just as cultural villages in other parts of the world have been critiqued, so can those in southern Africa be looked at with a critical eye. For example, despite being purpose-built to attract tourists through alignment with local cultures, they are often not an authentic representation of the local community whose culture is used as a central theme (Mearns et al., 2006). A central critique of cultural villages in southern Africa has been the commodification of local cultures (Boonzaaier & Wels, 2017; Mokoena, 2019). Many scholars believe cultural villages are superficial in their representation of local cultures, as their simulation of the day-to-day activities of a specific cultural grouping has been transformed for the benefit of tourists (Ndlovu-Gatsheni & Ndhlovu, 2013). This perceived superficiality is often worrying to cultural tourism employees who are required to misrepresent their cultures daily (Engeset & Elvekrok, 2015). In essence, cultural villages are often the only employment opportunity for residents; therefore, out of economic desperation, employees will misrepresent their culture to make ends meet (Di Giovine, 2008; Saarinen, 2007).

While there has been a growth in research on the authenticity of cultural tourism in southern Africa (see Mbaiwa, 2011; Moswete et al., 2015; Uduji et al., 2019), few researchers have considered cultural village employees' perspectives as crucial individuals with first-hand experience in cultural tourism. Hence, this study aims to provide another dimension in the continued research on cultural tourism by investigating their cultural tourism experiences at the Matsamo Cultural Village. The following section provides a detailed overview of the research methodology employed in this investigation.

### ***Study area: Matsamo Cultural Village***

Matsamo Cultural Village is situated on Jeppe's Reef in the Nkomazi local municipality of Mpumalanga Province (Sithole et al., 2018). The village was established as a cultural centre and tourism enterprise in 2014 to preserve and celebrate authentic Swati culture. The village

was named after Chief Matsamo, a prominent Shongwe chief who was the first member of the Eswatini monarchy to permanently reside in the former KaNgwane homeland (Netshakhuma, 2017). The homeland was reintegrated into South Africa as part of Mpumalanga Province in 1994 and still falls under the jurisdiction of the Matsamo Tribal Authority (King, 2007). Figure 1 shows the location map of the Matsamo Cultural Village study area.

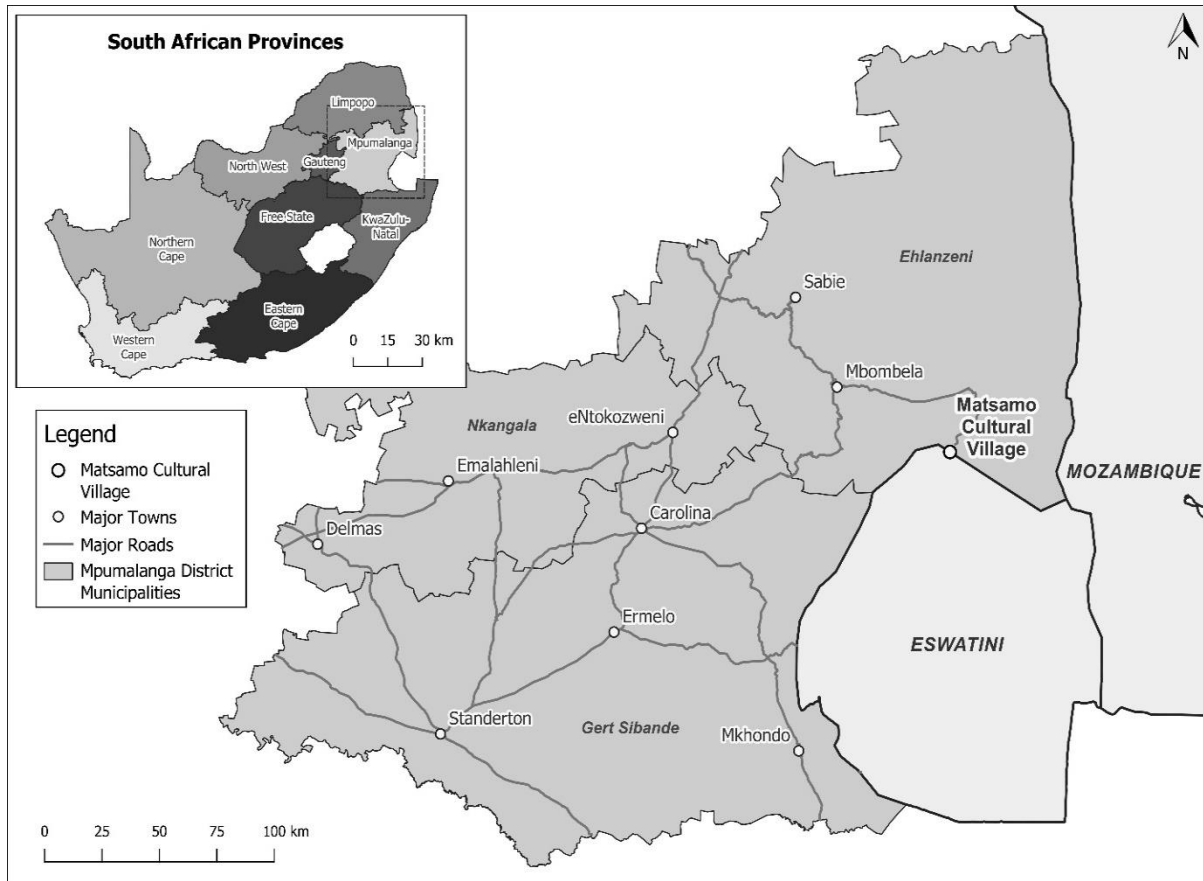


Figure 1: Location map of the Matsamo Cultural Village study area

### ***Village organisational structure and product offerings***

Matsamo Cultural Village has over one hundred employees, and it is jointly managed by a team comprising four managers for the village, marketing, public relations, and the restaurant, respectively (Matsamo Customs, 2018). The village is purported to exemplify a traditional Swati homestead with its ten Nguni huts (*boguca sithantaze*), kraals (*tibaya*), and a variety of Swati cultural activities, which in the view of Ndlovu (2018) can be regarded as authentic. Like many other cultural villages in South Africa, the Matsamo Cultural Village entertains and educates visitors about the Swati culture through various traditional activities (Pato, 2018).

The village offers conference facilities and special tours where visitors participate in activities such as milking cows and grinding maize (Matsamo Customs, 2018). Visitors can observe Swati dance performances. The Swati cuisine offered in the village includes sour porridge made of fermented cornmeal (*incwancwa*), pumpkin porridge mixed with cornmeal (*sidvudvu*), cooked pumpkin leaves mixed with peanuts (*umbidvo wetintsanga*), and traditional beer (*umcombotsi*) (Nyane, 2019).



## Sampling method and data analysis

The investigation employed a survey questionnaire and qualitative interviews to collect data at the Matsamo Cultural Village. Purposive sampling was used, with 25 participants completing the survey questionnaire, which included close-ended and open-ended questions. The close-ended questions consisted of multiple answer options to understand participants' perceptions of cultural tourism. The questions were divided into multiple themes to align with the study objectives. Some of the statements used in the questionnaire were selected and modified from Moswete et al. (2015) and Saarinen's (2016) studies. Furthermore, six participants were identified as key informants, consisting of two members of the cultural village management and four experienced employees. The key informants participated in the structured interviews conducted in siSwati and were audio-recorded, and a transcript was completed in English.

The data were entered into Microsoft Excel, and basic descriptive statistics were used to analyse participants' responses to the close-ended questions. Moreover, open-ended questions in the survey questionnaire were analysed using content analysis. Content analysis was also used to analyse the data collected from structured interviews, and the responses were presented as excerpts with translated Swati text. Before commencing interviews, all participants were informed that participation was voluntary and that their identity would be kept confidential. A limitation is that the participants participated in the study while at work, which may have prevented interviewees from being unencumbered in their responses.

## Results and discussion

### *Demographic profile of participants*

Of the 25 participants that completed the survey, 13 of the respondents identified as female, 11 as male, and one chose not to disclose. Fourteen participants were aged between 18 and 30 years of age, seven were between 31 and 40, three were between 41 and 50, and one was between 51 and 60. All 25 respondents indicated that siSwati is their home language. In terms of education, three participants had some primary school education, 20 had completed high school, and two had completed tertiary education. In terms of the number of years working at Matsamo Cultural Village, 16 participants indicated that they had worked there for more than five years, and nine had worked for less than four years.

Specific knowledge-based statements were used to determine participants' understanding of cultural tourism. Respondents felt that they have a good understanding of the meaning of the concept of 'cultural tourism' (Table 1).

Table 1: Participants' knowledge of cultural tourism (N= 25)

Statements	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
Cultural tourism provides opportunities for tourists to experience other cultures	0	0	0	6	19
Cultural tourism contributes to the conservation of cultural resources	0	0	0	0	25
Cultural tourism has increased the demand for cultural tourism-related activities	0	0	10	12	3
Cultural tourism means giving tourists access to one's traditional norms and values	0	0	0	14	11
Cultural tourism encourages greater preservation of cultural knowledge	0	0	0	1	24

All 25 participants agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that 'cultural tourism provides opportunities for tourists to experience other cultures'. All 25 respondents indicated that they strongly agree with the statement that 'cultural tourism contributes to the conservation of cultural resources'. However, 15 respondents agreed or strongly agreed, and ten chose to





remain neutral with the statement that ‘cultural tourism has increased demand for cultural tourism-related activities’. These responses emphasise the different perceptions that participants have when it comes to cultural tourism activities. In addition, most respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that ‘cultural tourism means giving tourists access to one’s traditional norms and values’ and ‘cultural tourism encourages greater preservation of cultural knowledge’.

***Perceived authenticity of the cultural product***

Four statements were provided to gauge respondents’ perceptions of the authenticity of the cultural product offered at Matsamo Cultural Village. Most respondents perceived the Matsamo Cultural Village as an authentic representation of the Swati culture (Table 2). All 25 respondents strongly agreed with the statement that ‘the cultural product; music, songs, dances and rituals offered at the cultural village are authentic to the local culture’. Twenty respondents agreed, while five disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement ‘there is greater involvement of the local community in the cultural village’.

Table 2: Perceptions of the authenticity of the cultural product (N= 25)

Statements	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
The cultural products (music, songs, dances, rituals, and customs) offered at the cultural village are authentic to the local culture	0	0	0	0	25
There is greater involvement of the local community in the cultural village	1	4	0	20	0
Local people feel a sense of belonging when visiting the cultural village	0	0	0	8	17
Tourists are more informed about the Swati culture after visiting the cultural village	0	0	0	3	22

In response to the statement ‘local people feel a sense of belonging when visiting the cultural village’, all 25 participants agreed or strongly agreed. Additionally, the statement ‘tourists are more informed about the Swati culture after visiting the cultural village’ was responded to by 25 respondents who agreed or strongly agreed.

***Benefits of cultural tourism to the local community***

The responses provided by the participants reflect a concerning trend toward the perceived benefits of the Matsamo Cultural Village to the local community (Table 3). All 25 respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that ‘cultural tourism creates employment opportunities for the local community’. However, the statement that ‘cultural tourism creates revenue which is a worthwhile investment for the local community’ had diverse views, as 21 respondents indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed. At the same time, four disagreed or held a neutral stance. Twenty respondents held a neutral stance, four agreed and one strongly disagreed with the statement that ‘cultural tourism encourages giving back to the local community through donations to the poor’.

Table 3: Participants’ perception of the benefits of cultural tourism to the local community (N= 25)

Statements	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
Cultural tourism creates employment opportunities for the local community	0	0	0	0	25
Cultural tourism creates revenue which is a worthwhile investment for the local community	0	1	3	20	1
Cultural tourism encourages giving back to the local community through donations to the poor	1	0	20	4	0
Cultural tourism has attracted other businesses	1	2	7	15	0
Cultural tourism benefits the local community	0	0	3	22	0

In addition, 15 respondents agreed or strongly agreed, seven participants held a neutral stance, and three disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement ‘cultural tourism has attracted other businesses’. Moreover, 22 participants agreed or strongly agreed, and three chose to remain neutral when asked if ‘cultural tourism benefits the local community’. The positive responses to this statement contrast with those generated in other statements, as shown in Table 3 above. This difference in participants’ responses shows that while the cultural village benefits the local community by providing employment opportunities, more can still be done to develop the local community further through the revenue generated from tourists visit at the Matsamo Cultural Village.

### ***The overall perception of cultural tourism***

The six key informants were asked to share their overall perception of cultural tourism in the structured interviews. In response to this question, the keywords that arose were ‘pride’ (*kutigcabha*), ‘appreciation’ (*kutibongela*), ‘joy’ (*intfokoto*), ‘opportunities’ (*ematfuba*), ‘employment’ (*imisebenti*), and ‘youth’ (*bantfulabasha*). Most of the responses demonstrated the respondents’ appreciation for authentically and accurately representing Swati culture. It became apparent from their responses that participants value the opportunity to be involved in the cultural tourism sector for various reasons. It was acknowledged by the respondents that more investment is necessary to improve cultural tourism initiatives in South Africa. Some respondents argued for more cohesive collaboration among various stakeholders to take advantage of the country’s diverse cultures by creating more cultural tourism destinations. For example, the following responses were recorded:

Respondent 1: ‘For me, cultural tourism is a platform through which I can celebrate my culture and do so with pride. I am representing something far greater to the entire world. They see how amazing the Swati culture is, and I appreciate the opportunity to do what I love.’

Respondent 2: ‘Well, for me, it is a privilege to be involved in this sector, and besides being my source of income, it also serves as a daily reminder of the Swati traditions and values I would have taken for granted if I was not involved in cultural tourism.’

Additionally, Respondent 3 shared that being involved in the cultural tourism sector means honouring the Swati people by representing them with respect, as it is one of the critical values of the Swati culture.

Respondent 3: ‘Personally, cultural tourism means staying true to my cultural norms and values and ensuring that I represent the Swati people with the respect they are renowned for.’

Indeed, these responses speak to the Seyfi et al. (2019) contention that workers in cultural tourism play a significant role in enhancing the cultural tourism experience for tourists. While this may be their core responsibility as people employed in cultural tourism, Respondents 4 and 5 added to the points of Respondents 1 and 2 by demonstrating their commitment to cultural tourism development in South Africa with the following responses:

Respondent 4: ‘This is a difficult question to answer but what I would say from my experience is that the cultural tourism sector has so much to offer in South Africa, but due to a combination of factors (lack of accountability, corruption, lack of cohesive

collaboration among South Africans) we are still far from enjoying the fruits of cultural tourism's capabilities.'

Respondent 5: 'This initiative can be explored more than it is now, especially now that our country has a problem with unemployment. We are a remarkably diverse country. Why do we not use this advantage to create job opportunities and display our diverse cultures to the world? Yes, we cannot have cultural sites in every community, but we can still create cultural parks where young people can put their talents to effective use.'

While Respondent 5 highlights the problems and challenges faced by the tourism cultural sector, it can be deduced that the respondents feel that there needs to be more potential in South Africa in terms of cultural tourism. For example, Respondent 6 shared that the cultural village has created a space where individuals can experience the Swati culture, allowing them to connect with people from different societies.

Respondent 6: 'I think I speak for all the employees here at Matsamo when I say cultural tourism means more than just being able to provide for our families but it also serves as an opportunity for us to connect with people who are knowledgeable about the Swati culture and those that are not, making them feel comfortable as they experience our culture.'

From the respondents' comments, it could be argued that The Matsamo Cultural Village could be seen as a 'blueprint' for future cultural tourism development.

### ***The benefits of cultural tourism to the local community***

Saarinen (2007) stated that cultural villages must have a close relationship with the local community whose culture they represent to ensure that their activities authentically represent the complex socio-economic and traditions of the cultural group. Keywords such as 'community' (*umphakatsi*), 'talent' (*likhono*), 'collaboration' (*kusebentisana*), 'development' (*intfutfuko*), and 'empowerment' (*kuphiwa emandla*) were mentioned by the informants when asked to share their views on the benefits of cultural tourism to the local community. Most respondents emphasised the importance of the curio shop in the cultural village, as they believe it has created a space for women's empowerment in the community. The respondents further added that they hope that the success of the curio shop will transform people's views about the role of women in cultural tourism growth and societal development. These beliefs align with the findings by Moswete and Lacey (2014) that community-based cultural tourism opportunities have significantly increased women's empowerment across many rural communities. Makandwa et al. (2022) added that despite the limited opportunities, rural women had demonstrated outstanding entrepreneurial skills in the cultural tourism industry. While the Matsamo Cultural Village demonstrated commitment towards the progression of women from passive to active participants in cultural tourism, much more needs to be done to overcome the many barriers that continue to hinder women's empowerment (Makandwa, 2021).

However, the respondents also shared that some of the products sold at the curio shop are not necessarily made locally but are bought from artisans in other communities. Buying products from elsewhere is said to be due to the low availability of local Swati products to sell at the shop. While the respondents mentioned that the products are all authentic to the Swati culture, the village would play a better role in promoting development in the local community if all the products were made locally. This would help improve the standard of living for the people in the community, as local artisans could get income by selling their crafts. Furthermore,



respondents shared that they see opportunities for further growth and development in the community owing to the strong relationship between the management team of the cultural village and members of the local tribal authority.

## Conclusion

Cultural tourism is being pressured by the increased interconnectedness of the global society, as this has raised arguments against the mis- and underrepresentation of minority cultures and threatens apparent authenticity (Diekmann & Smith, 2015; Timothy, 2023). The increased economic importance of cultural tourism for countries in the Global South has resulted in the establishment of cultural villages, which are spaces aimed at promoting the development of rural communities through community-based tourism and heritage conservation (Butler & Ivanovic, 2016). Therefore, this study has aimed to investigate the experiences of people employed in cultural tourism at the Matsamo Cultural Village. Investigating employees' experiences has been achieved through two objectives: determining employees' perceptions of cultural tourism, investigating their perspectives on the authenticity of the product offered about the local culture.

In terms of the perceptions of cultural tourism, most participants were found to know the concept of cultural tourism. Moreover, the cultural tourism sector is continuously evolving, and a considerable challenge is that more people employed in cultural tourism are likely to have diverse perceptions depending on their context. The findings from this investigation show that respondents have an overall positive attitude towards the perceived authenticity of the product offered at Matsamo Cultural Village about the Swati culture, which is the local culture. This was supported by most respondents who agreed or strongly agreed that the songs, dances, rituals and customs offered at the cultural village authentically represent the Swati norms and traditions. Furthermore, most respondents also agreed that members of the local community feel a sense of belonging when visiting the cultural village. This demonstrates that the local culture needs to be transformed to meet the needs of tourists, but instead, the village has used the beauty of the Swati culture to attract tourists.

The study found that respondents had contrasting views on the benefits of cultural tourism to the local community. Most respondents agreed that the local community has benefited from revenue generated through cultural tourism. The exact number of participants chose to hold a neutral stance when they were asked to share if cultural tourism encourages giving back through donations to the poor in the local community. While there was a division among respondents on the benefits of cultural tourism, the positive in this is that the cultural village has created job opportunities for members of the local community, as shared by the majority of respondents. Despite acknowledging cultural tourism as a strategic tool for rural development in South Africa, more investment has yet to be made to grow and develop the sector (Ivanovic & Saayman, 2013). This needs to be addressed through cohesive collaboration among various stakeholders.

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