



## Small Town Tourism and Marketing: Is a Destination Marketing Organisation the Answer?

### Abstract

This article explores the potential of a Destination Marketing Organization (DMO) to enhance tourism and marketing in small towns, using Philippolis in the Free State province of South Africa as a case study. Small towns often face challenges attracting and sustaining tourist interest due to limited resources and marketing expertise. Through qualitative research involving interviews with key stakeholders in Philippolis, this study identifies critical areas where marketing efforts can be improved in small towns. The findings suggest that a centralised DMO, managed by experienced and knowledgeable individuals, could effectively coordinate marketing strategies, increase media attention, and ensure high standards in tourist facilities. The research highlights the importance of involving the residents and external expertise in marketing efforts and comprehensively promoting all local attractions. Recommendations include targeted, non-repetitive marketing campaigns that leverage social media, television, and radio to increase foot traffic. A relationship with local governments must also be formed and not overlooked in the marketing process of the small town. This study concludes that a well-managed DMO could be a viable solution to the marketing challenges faced by small towns like Philippolis, offering a model that could be replicated in similar contexts.

**Keywords** small town tourism; marketing; destination marketing organisation; Free State; Philippolis

**Eben PROOS\***   
Department of Tourism & Event  
Management, Central University of  
Technology, Free State Bloemfontein,  
South Africa, Email, [eproos@cut.ac.za](mailto:eproos@cut.ac.za)  
**Corresponding Author**

**Bianca de KLERK**   
Department of Tourism & Event  
Management, Central University of  
Technology, Free State Bloemfontein,  
South Africa, Email, [meyerb@cut.ac.za](mailto:meyerb@cut.ac.za)

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### Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the tourism industry harshly around the world and in South Africa. The 2020 Tourism report released by Statistics South Africa indicated a drop of 71% in foreign arrivals from just over 15.8 million in 2019 to less than 5 million in 2020. Developing countries such as South Africa rely on tourism as a method of employment. In South Africa, the tourism industry contributed to 4.5% of total employment in the country in 2018 (STATS SA, 2021). Employment numbers in the tourism industry have witnessed continuous growth, from 100 million jobs in 2008 to almost 120 million in 2017, with a projected 140 million jobs in 2028 (Acha-Anyi, 2018). According to Acha-Anyi (2018), the tourism sector has metamorphosed more prominently than many other economic activities, and the South African government has identified tourism as one of the industries for future economic growth in the country (South African Government, 2022). South Africa has many popular tourist attractions for domestic and international visitors. Popular attractions include Cape Town, the Garden Route, Kruger National Park, Boulders Beach, Victoria & Alfred Waterfront, and Durban's Golden Mile, to mention a few. According to Proos et al. (2017), small towns in South Africa have plenty on offer to tourists; however, these towns do not attract many tourists. Popular small-town tourism destinations in South Africa include Nieu-Bethesda in the Eastern Cape, Dullstroom in Mpumalanga, and Clarens in the eastern Free State (Hoponworld, 2021). According to Proos and Hattingh (2020), the Free State province is one of the provinces in South Africa with the highest unemployment rate. However, small-town tourism could potentially assist with providing much-needed employment opportunities and economic growth to the province. The Free State province has much lesser-known small-town tourism destinations that have the potential to be added to the list of must-visit small towns in the country. These small towns include Philippolis, Bethulie, Deneysville, and Fouriesburg. Unfortunately, these towns are currently being overlooked in marketing initiatives for the province. Marketing in the Free State tends to focus on the eastern Free State, with small towns such as Clarens marketed extensively and other popular destinations including Parys and Bloemfontein.

It is important that the small towns of a region also be included in the marketing initiatives of the National Department of Tourism and local tourism authorities such as the Free State Gambling, Liquor and Tourism Authority (FSGLTA), which is responsible for marketing the Free State. It can, however, sometimes be difficult for small towns that do not have the necessary skilled and dedicated people to approach a tourism authority to get the required attention the small-town tourism and marketing it requires. These small towns are each unique in their own way and offer memorable experiences to tourists. Nevertheless, a strong marketing and management presence is required in these destinations as not many tourists are aware of them and their unique offerings. Thus, it is suggested that research be conducted into small-town tourism and marketing to see the answer to getting these towns on the proverbial tourism map. The researchers suggested an investigation be conducted in one of the lesser-known towns in the Free State province, Philippolis. This paper mainly aimed to assess the marketing of small-town tourism destinations using Philippolis in the Free State province, South Africa, as a case study. The broader aim of the study is to provide guidelines for establishing a Destination Marketing Organisation (DMO) for small towns. It is important to have a better understanding of what is meant by small-town tourism, tourism marketing, DMOs, and the relevant case study area being studied before relevant conclusions and recommendations can be made for relevant role players.



### Small-town tourism

A renewed interest has been placed on small and medium towns, recognised as bridges in the rural-urban development continuum (Ferreira, 2007). Worldwide, rural and small towns are experiencing rapid economic change (Halseth & Meiklejohn, 2009). These small towns are undergoing a decline due to many external factors. According to Donaldson (2018:2), these factors include, 'among other things, declining populations as a product of history and geography; the unstable world commodity market, particularly for communities that have been dependent on mining, fishing and traditional agriculture; growing environmental concerns; changes in technology; changing lifestyle options and consumer habits; low incomes and rising debt levels; a general decline in education and health services; national policies and practices regarding competition; deteriorating infrastructure; and high family-related and business costs'. Small towns also do not receive the required recognition from governments. These factors are also recognised in South Africa. The major share of tourism and its benefits generally flows to metropolitan areas and secondary cities in South Africa (Rogerson, 2016). Fortunately, South Africa has a steady tourism industry that consistently experiences growth (Statista, 2024), and small towns could potentially form part of this growth if marketed correctly. According to Donaldson (2018), a promising trend in small towns is the growth of tourist towns. As a result, research has been conducted on small-town tourism (Halseth & Meiklejohn, 2009; Harshbarger, 2012; Atkinson, 2016; Donaldson, 2018). Nowadays, many small towns rely on tourism as it is the economic lifeblood of these destinations (Harshbarger, 2012). Many small towns pursue tourism opportunities to ensure a more diversified local economic strategy (Halseth & Meiklejohn, 2009). A tourism economy takes advantage of its local assets, including cultural, historical, or physical landscape features visitors want to experience (Halseth & Meiklejohn, 2009). Small-town tourism in South Africa is a growing sector capitalising on its communities' unique cultural, historical, and natural attractions. Reasons identified by Harshbarger (2012:2) include water (the location of towns close to rivers or lakes), art, scenery, history, shops and sales, attractions, events and recreational opportunities, festivals, antiques, and wineries. Current strategies for small-town rejuvenation remain tourism promotion, festivals, and themes (Paradis, 2002). Tourism provides potential benefits such as promoting business, which leads to an improved quality of life and may generate significant income for small towns. According to Kotsiwe and Visser (2019:1344), a destination could attract tourists when appropriate tourism management, aggressive marketing activities, funding for tourism, and good stakeholder relationships accompany a portfolio of tourism products and supporting services. Therefore, effective marketing of small towns should involve combining traditional and digital strategies to reach potential tourists. Small towns must stand out, as competition is extreme amongst these destinations (Morrison, 2019). One potential way to stand out is to possess an effective and efficient DMO. Small towns generally have lots of tourism potential; however, they are less well-known and require excessive marketing. Research related to developing tourism marketing for small towns is challenging but necessary (Amin, 2014). The following section will discuss tourism marketing with a strong focus on Destination Marketing Organisations.

### Tourism marketing and destination marketing organisations

Tourism is a very competitive industry and needs marketing as the clients have different choices to travel to and motivations for travelling. The endorsement of a business's services and products is considered marketing. Tourism marketing is 'the process through which a tourism organisation first anticipates consumer needs, then manages and satisfies those needs to achieve sales (George, 2019; Lumsdon, 1997). Tourism marketing is essential for developing and sustaining destinations, particularly in small towns that may not have the visibility or resources of more prominent, more established destinations. It involves strategic promotion of a destination's offerings, including attractions, culture, heritage, and natural features, all of which are packaged to appeal to potential visitors. Effective tourism marketing leads to higher visitation, longer stays, and increased economic benefits for the community (Morrison, 2019). DMOs are critical in small-town tourism as they centralise marketing efforts and coordinate local businesses to create a unified and compelling destination brand. A DMO is defined as 'any organisation at any level responsible for marketing any identifiable destination' (George, 2019:362; Pike, 2016). A DMO aims to foster collaboration among tourism stakeholders, from accommodation providers to cultural institutions, ensuring their collective efforts are strategic, professional, and impactful. A DMO also positions the town as a tourism destination by developing its brand identity, promoting it in key markets, and managing visitor experiences (Pike & Page, 2014). The roles of a DMO include publicising the destination and its attractions and forming relationships with tour operators and travel agents in key target markets (George, 2019). A DMO's primary function is to develop and maintain a consistent and appealing brand identity for a destination. DMOs also execute marketing campaigns across multiple digital and traditional media platforms. An effective online presence is crucial for small towns in today's digital age. DMOs can manage social media profiles, websites, and online reviews to raise the town's profile. Small towns with limited marketing resources could benefit from such cost-effective digital strategies to reach a wider audience (Mariani et al., 2022). Furthermore, DMOs play a role in organising events, creating tourism packages, and forming partnerships with regional or national tourism bodies, which would help small towns attract more visitors and boost the local economy.

In small towns, a DMO could significantly enhance tourism efforts. By unifying marketing activities under one entity, DMOs can overcome the fragmentation that often hampers small-town tourism marketing. The presence of a DMO ensures that the town's marketing strategies are aligned and geared toward attracting a specific audience, whether domestic or international, leisure or business tourists (Rogerson, 2016). Globally, towns like Hallstatt in Austria and Dullstroom in South Africa serve as case studies of how DMOs have transformed tourism landscapes. Hallstatt's DMO, for instance, successfully leveraged its cultural and scenic assets to create an internationally recognised brand, primarily driven by social media campaigns and strategic partnerships with travel agencies (Wang et al., 2020). Dullstroom has similarly harnessed its DMO to



coordinate tourism marketing around its niche offerings like fly fishing, leading to steady tourism growth (Butler & Rogerson, 2016). Despite their potential benefits, DMOs face challenges, particularly funding and community buy-in. Many small towns rely on government funding or contributions from local businesses, limiting the scope of their marketing activities. However, small towns could overcome this by attracting external tourism professionals who bring new perspectives, advanced marketing expertise, and broader networks. Stakeholders have suggested this approach to improve the town's marketing efforts (Park & Yoon, 2009). On the other hand, DMOs present opportunities for small towns to differentiate themselves by targeting niche tourism markets. Philippolis and other small towns could tap into heritage tourism, eco-tourism, and artisanal tourism, thus appealing to a broader range of travellers while ensuring the town remains sustainable and authentic (Tavitiyaman et al., 2021).

### **The case of Philippolis in the Free State Province, South Africa**

You will find the Free State province in the heart of South Africa. The Free State shares its borders with Lesotho on the eastern border, whilst bordering provinces include Northern Cape, Eastern Cape, North-West, Mpumalanga, KwaZulu-Natal, and Gauteng (de Klerk & Proos, 2018; Proos, 2022; Proos & Hattingh, 2020). The province's capital is Bloemfontein (the judicial capital of South Africa), and the province offers open skies, farms, mountains, and widely dispersed towns (Proos & Hattingh, 2020). According to Proos and Hattingh (2020:4), the Free State is a popular weekend destination for Gauteng province tourists. These weekend tourists primarily traverse Parys and Clarens during their visits to the province. Tourists visiting Parys and Clarens can partake in adventure activities ranging from rock-climbing white-water rafting to mountain biking. However, there are other small tourist towns, such as Philippolis, situated within the province that also has the potential to offer adventure activities and much more to tourists. Unfortunately, these towns (such as Philippolis) are not well known to travellers. Philippolis, the oldest town in the Free State province, was built around the Dutch Reformed church and is considered to boast most of its original Karoo architecture. The town was established in 1823 as a mission station for local Khoi. Reverend Dr John Philip represented the London Missionary Society and was the founder, hence the name Philippolis. The town became a municipality in 1862 (Nienaber & le Roux, 1982:19; Proos, 2019:53; van der Merwe, 2012:79). Philippolis has the most historical monuments in the Free State, just after Bloemfontein and Bethlehem (LeMaitre, 2017). Philippolis is also referred to as the gateway to the Karoo. Philippolis has much to offer tourists and is close to Bloemfontein and Colesberg, just off the N1 highway, making access easy for tourists. Tourists interested in heritage can, for example, partake in dark tourism whilst visiting Philippolis, where many dark tourist attractions relate to the South African War (previously the Anglo-Boer War) (Proos & Hattingh 2020). Tourists can also explore the local eateries (Emily's and the Karoo Artist Café) and brewery (Karoo Ale Craft Brewery) in Philippolis. Small towns in the Free State, such as Philippolis, could potentially provide tourists with a getaway, especially those in larger metros in South Africa, such as Bloemfontein, Johannesburg, and Durban. According to Harshbarger (2012), booming tourism depends on analysing and understanding the marketing motivations of a target audience. It is thus essential to assess the marketing effectiveness of small towns in the Free State province, such as Philippolis, South Africa.

### **Materials and methods**

This study made use of the case study research design. Case study research involves a detailed and intensive analysis of a particular event, situation, organisation, or social unit, typically a small number (Schoch, 2020; Welman et al., 2005). This study was based on a philosophical stance of interpretivism and follows a qualitative research approach. The data for the study was collected using semi-structured interviews. According to Schoch (2020), the sample size in case studies is typically small. The selection of samples is evident due to the uniqueness of the person. For this study, the sample was thus key tourism role players/stakeholders in the small town. Qualitative researchers seek out individuals, groups, and settings where the specific processes are studied (Strydom et al., 2002). The researcher travelled to Philippolis to compile a preliminary list of the potential tourism role players/stakeholders that could be included in the sample. The interviews were conducted on the weekend of 24 – 26 May 2024 and were compiled in English. Data was collected from five participants at various tourist establishments, including accommodation, restaurants, a museum, and an artisanal brewery. After the five interviews, data saturation was achieved. Interviews lasted, on average, 40 minutes and were conducted at a location most convenient to the participants (i.e. in the product owner's offices). The interviews were recorded after obtaining consent from the participants.

Theme identification is one of the most fundamental tasks in qualitative research (Welman et al., 2005). Through the interaction with the data obtained through the interviews and the immersion in the raw data, themes could emerge, which is the essence of inductive qualitative data analysis (Schoch, 2020). The researcher utilised thematic content analysis to analyse the data. The interview's research notes and voice recordings were examined to identify common themes from the participant's feedback (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017; Miller & Gatta, 2006; Polkinghorne, 1995). As a result, an in-depth description of the phenomenon occurred through the eyes of people who have experienced it first-hand (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010:142). In case study research, the research question drives the data to be collected. The research questions determine the questions to be asked during the interviews. Interviews require a list of questions and prompts, as this will ensure the consistency of the interviews across the individuals being interviewed (Schoch, 2020). The interview guide consisted of three sections: Section A captured the participants' demographics. Section B assessed the effectiveness of marketing in Philippolis. Section C required the participants to make recommendations towards improving marketing in Philippolis.

### **Results**

This study section presents the results, which will later be used as guidelines for making relevant recommendations for small-town tourism and marketing. All the participants were male, and only one had no formal management training. However, the



management training the participants received mainly was not in the tourism or hospitality industry. The participant's positions in the establishments ranged from the owner, co-owner, and museum employee and have, on average, 21 years' experience in the tourism industry. Facilities offered at the various establishments that formed part of the interviews include a swimming pool, restaurants, a coffee shop, an art gallery, accommodation, a museum, a beer garden and a conference hall. The responses gathered enabled the researcher to construct a detailed list of attractions in and around Philippolis. The list was augmented by relevant literature (Nienaber & le Roux, 1982:19; Proos & Hattingh, 2019:8; van der Merwe, 2012). The list of tourist attractions located in and around Philippolis identified by the participants includes: 'The Transgariëp Museum; Tomkins Koppie where the British were stationed during the South African War 1899 – 1902; Emily Hobhouse Monument/garden; Graves in the municipal cemetery; The Dutch Reformed Church; The Karoo Ale Craft Brewery; Karoo Artist Café; Tiger Canyon; Job House, Gariëp Dam, and Vanderkloof Dam'. Please refer to Table 1 for the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the current marketing of Philippolis as identified by the participants.

**Table 1: Strengths, weakness, opportunities, and threats of the current marketing of Philippolis**

Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social media marketing</li> <li>• It is currently taking place.</li> <li>• Marketing takes place regularly.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The marketing is only done by one resident in town.</i></li> <li>• <i>Not all establishments get the same exposure.</i></li> <li>• <i>Not much is done to market the town.</i></li> <li>• <i>Different opinions.</i></li> <li>• <i>Not everyone is on board with what is currently being done.</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Making use of other media such as newspapers.</li> <li>• Establishing a DMO.</li> <li>• Utilising the history of the town in marketing.</li> <li>• Hosting more events/different activities to attract different people.</li> <li>• Collaboration</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People who are not knowledgeable.</li> <li>• Lack of union amongst different people.</li> <li>• Small-town syndrome.</li> </ul>

It can be deduced from Table 2 that all the participants in Philippolis currently do their marketing. The theme that emerged was social media marketing.

**Table 2: Own marketing is done by the establishment**

Theme	Explanation and participant extract
Social media	<p><i>Social media includes marketing platforms such as Facebook and Instagram</i></p> <p><i>'I make use of social media'. (Participant 1)</i></p> <p><i>'Social media is the go-to'. (Participant 4)</i></p> <p><i>'Social media as it focuses the attention on yourself'. (Participant 5)</i></p>

All participants highlighted that Philippolis currently has no DMO. Most participants indicated they would like to see a DMO established for Philippolis. However, one participant mentioned that they would not be interested in a DMO as they do not see the benefits of belonging to a DMO. Below, some of the participants' remarks on why they felt it was essential to establish a DMO for the town are highlighted:

'The town will benefit from a DMO, as will the tourism and hospitality industry in Philippolis. We would also potentially see some socio-economic growth for the region. Participant 1

'The people in this town rely on tourism to make a living, and a DMO could make more tourists aware of the town'. Participant 3

'We require uniformed marketing to see the potential benefits from tourism, and a well-organised DMO could see this happening'. Participant 4

The following section indicates some of the remarks from the participants concerning the guidelines for establishing a DMO:

'I would suggest incorporating a membership fee and establishing a committee of knowledgeable individuals to run the DMO'. Participant 1

'Please have someone who knows the town and could be a good leader. ' Participant 2

'Have a knowledgeable individual in charge, focus on all the tourism products, and have a strong social media presence'. Participant 3

'Someone to take the initiative, with a knowledgeable committee in charge'. Participant 4

The above section explains that guidelines are crucial to formulating a DMO, and a theme emerges from the participants' feedback. These guidelines/themes that emerge include making use of knowledgeable individuals who understand marketing, tourism, and Philippolis, organising a strong, knowledgeable committee that would be in charge of the DMO, including a strong leader, and having a solid social media presence. Participants indicated they are willing to pay a membership fee to a DMO at an average monthly rate of R250.00. The benefits the participants would like to see from their DMO membership include more foot traffic, more marketing for the establishment and town, and keeping tourist facilities up to standard. The participants felt strongly that one DMO should be responsible for Philippolis's marketing. The most prominent theme that emerged was the importance of getting more foot traffic to the town and ensuring that the facilities are of good quality. Recommendations provided to improve marketing in Philippolis are illustrated in Figure 1.

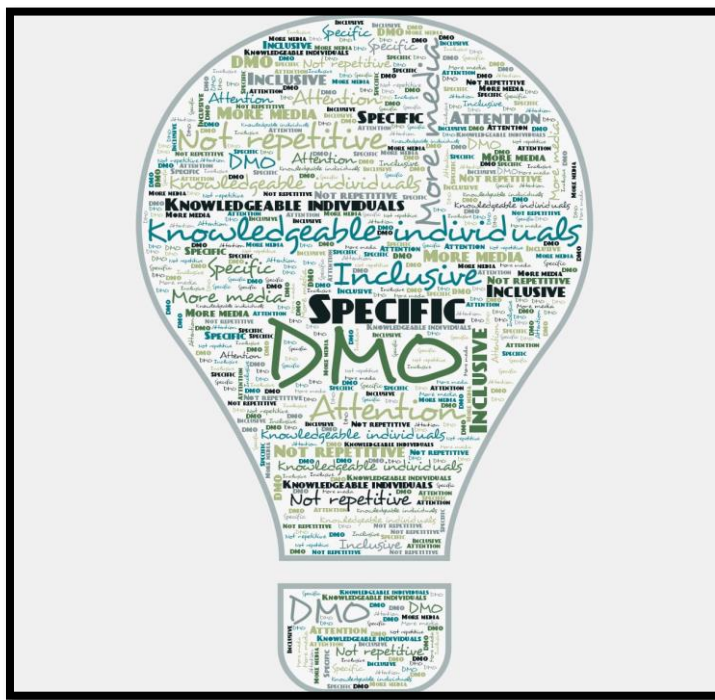


Figure 1: Recommendations to improve marketing in Philippolis

Figure 1 shows that participants feel strongly that more media attention is required for Philippolis (social media, television, radio, etc). Knowledgeable individuals should also be approached (could be from outside the town) and involved in the town's marketing, whilst the marketing should be more specific, not repetitive, and showcase what the town has to offer. A recommendation that emerged very strongly is that marketing should include all the products/services offered in the town and that a DMO be established for Philippolis.

### Discussion

The above findings from the case study area (Philippolis) will now be concisely discussed, and their implications/recommendations will be used as guidelines for small-town tourism and marketing. Through insight into the current state of marketing of small-town tourism destinations such as Philippolis, focused marketing guidelines can be identified and suggested to assist small-town tourism destinations with their marketing. Effective and efficient marketing could potentially assist small towns in becoming must-visit destinations on travellers' radars. According to Davis (2023), marketing is a dynamic, constantly developing field, and further, in marketing, experience is essential to ensure business growth. Similarly, Elsey (2022) highlights the importance of experience in any business. Echoing the sentiments of Davis (2023), all the participants highlighted this, as they feel that without experienced marketing and experience within the tourism industry, they do not see a positive future for small-town tourism. The participants are experienced individuals with an average of 21 years of experience in the tourism industry (however, they do not have formal management training in the tourism or hospitality industry specifically). Participants indicated that they currently use social media marketing (Facebook), highlighting their experience with marketing their establishments. However, the participants did highlight that some residents have limited knowledge about tourism and marketing. It is important for a small town who would want to invest in tourism to establish the current experience available in the town limits. A list could be created of who the current expertise in the town is and their input cannot be overlooked once tourism is considered as a tool for local economic development. Their different expertise can also be listed to know who can be utilised where once tourism development and marketing are considered. However, it is also important to know which facilities are currently available in the small town if tourism is being considered. According to the UNWTO (2024), a tourism destination is a physical space with or without administrative and/or analytical boundaries where visitors can overnight. Products, services, activities, and experiences can be found at a tourism destination. This correlates with what Pike and Page (2014) stated when they mentioned that a destination represents an amalgam of a diverse and eclectic range of businesses and people. These guidelines can be applied to establish whether a small town could be considered a tourism destination and if the possibility exists for tourism as an economic development tool. Philippolis can thus be considered a tourism destination as it consists of a variety of products (such as a craft brewery), services (such as accommodation restaurants), activities (such as hiking), experiences (such as Tiger Canyons) and people (different product owners). The following section will allude to the marketing SWOT analyses of Philippolis. Recommendations for other small town tourism destinations are also provided.

Philippolis uses social media as a primary marketing tool, with regular updates and engagement on Facebook. This modern approach allows for real-time interaction with potential visitors and the sharing of timely and relevant content, which can boost the town's visibility and appeal (al Asheq et al., 2019). It is also important for other small towns to ensure a social media presence to assist with marketing. This correlates with what George (2019:595) stated, 'destinations are increasingly



using social media to promote their services and reach consumers more interactively'. However, the strength of social media is lessened by marketing efforts being centralised around a single resident, creating a bottleneck and limiting the diversity of perspectives and creativity in promotional activities. This concentration of effort can also lead to inconsistent messaging and unequal exposure for various establishments, which could otherwise benefit from a more distributed approach (Khan & Abir, 2021). The reliance on one individual for marketing efforts highlights several weaknesses. Firstly, the marketing scope is limited to what one person can manage, often resulting in unequal exposure for different businesses within the town. Secondly, the lack of variety in marketing channels restricts the audience reach. While Facebook is a powerful tool, it does not capture the entire potential market, especially older demographics or those who prefer traditional media (Viglia et al., 2018). Additionally, the divergence in residents' opinions and their varying levels of support for current marketing efforts can lead to fragmented and less effective promotional strategies (Khan & Abir, 2021). Thus, it is recommended that small-town tourism marketing efforts be more distributed as concentrated marketing efforts hamper successful marketing and could be considered a weakness. The list of knowledgeable individuals within the town will potentially be helpful at this stage as they can be identified and assist where possible with the town's marketing (taking the pressure of one individual).

However, small towns such as Philippolis have several opportunities to address these weaknesses. Diversifying marketing tools to include newspapers and other traditional media can reach a broader audience. Establishing a DMO could centralise efforts, ensuring more structured and professional marketing strategies are implemented. A DMO can foster collaboration among residents and businesses, leading to more unified and powerful marketing campaigns (Shuyi et al., 2024). Leveraging the town's rich history and hosting more events can attract various visitors and enhance the town's profile as a unique and vibrant destination (Tavitiyaman et al., 2021). DMOs can establish a solid social media presence and use sites such as Facebook, X (previously Twitter), and Instagram to consolidate the small towns' digital marketing strategy. A social media presence could potentially build strong relationships with visitors, stimulate website traffic, and trigger tourists' actions (George, 2019). Small-town DMOs can utilise travel blogs to compare the competitiveness of a destination and utilise social media sites such as X to connect with domestic and international tourists. Digital marketing platforms help promote destinations like small towns to the global tourism market (George, 2019). Thus, A DMO is crucial for small-town tourism and marketing and should not be overlooked, as highlighted throughout this paper. Despite these opportunities, small towns like Philippolis face significant threats. Some residents' limited knowledge about tourism and marketing can hinder practical promotional efforts and strategic planning. Additionally, the lack of unity and cooperation among residents can lead to conflicts and inefficiencies in marketing efforts. The 'small-town syndrome,' characterised by resistance to change and innovation, poses a further threat, potentially stifling growth and adaptation to new marketing trends and visitor expectations (Park & Yoon, 2009). While Philippolis has made strides in social media marketing, there is a pressing need to diversify and professionalise its marketing strategies through a collaborative and unified approach, possibly under the guidance of a DMO (as suggested by participants). As mentioned, it is thus recommended that a DMO is established for small towns to ensure unity, education, and dedicated tourism marketing of the destination.

Expanding on the suggestion that external tourism and marketing experts manage a DMO for small towns brings advantages and potential challenges. External experts bring a wealth of experience and a fresh perspective that can invigorate marketing strategies. They are likely to possess a deeper understanding of current tourism trends, digital marketing tactics, and strategic planning, which are crucial for positioning a small-town tourism destination such as Philippolis effectively in the competitive tourism market (Shuyi et al., 2024). Additionally, they can establish broader networks and resources that local individuals might not have access to, potentially attracting a more diverse and extensive visitor base (Tavitiyaman et al., 2021). These tourism and marketing experts could include academics, knowledgeable individuals in the tourism industry with relevant experience, and local and national government officials. However, this initiative should be accepted by the local community in the small towns. It is vital to foster transparent communication and demonstrate the benefits of having external experts. Building trust with the local community is crucial; this can be achieved by involving local stakeholders in advisory roles or regular consultations to ensure their voices are heard, and their unique insights about the small town are incorporated into the marketing strategies (al Asheq et al., 2019). This way, while the management remains external, there is a sense of local ownership and alignment with community values. It is important to highlight that a DMO can only flourish with local buy-in in a small town. Moreover, the suggested DMO should aim to educate and involve the local community in understanding the long-term benefits of professional tourism marketing. Workshops and informational sessions can be organised to showcase increased tourism's potential economic and social benefits, such as job creation and enhanced local business revenues (Medina et al., 2023). Doing so makes the community more likely to support and collaborate with outside experts, leading to a more cohesive and successful marketing effort. Establishing a DMO is crucial for the potential success of marketing small towns such as Philippolis and establishing these small towns as small-town tourism destinations. The researchers thus suggest the establishment of a DMO for small towns. Guidelines for establishing a DMO in a small town like Philippolis could include defining the vision, mission, and goals, establishing a Governance Structure, developing a comprehensive marketing plan, fostering collaboration and partnerships, ensuring sustainable tourism practices, and monitoring and evaluating the performance. The below guidelines could potentially be applied to small-town tourism destinations worldwide to assist in establishing a DMO:

### ***1. Vision, mission and goals:***

It is essential to define a clear vision and mission that reflect the unique attributes and potential of the small town. The vision should capture the long-term aspirations of making the small town a recognised and attractive tourist destination, while the mission should outline the strategic approach to achieve this vision (Shuyi et al., 2024). Specific, measurable, achievable,



relevant, and time-bound (SMART) goals should be set for the small town. These SMART goals could include increasing tourist arrivals by a certain percentage, improving visitor satisfaction ratings, and enhancing the town's visibility through targeted marketing campaigns. The vision, mission, and goals for small towns and DMOs could be developed by knowledgeable individuals in consultation with locals.

## **2. Establishing a governance structure:**

A leadership team of knowledgeable individuals with a strong background in tourism and marketing for the small town (the recommendation of the participants emphasised this) should be formed. A diverse board of directors comprising stakeholders such as local business owners, tourism experts, and representatives from the municipality should be included to provide balanced oversight and strategic direction (al Asheq et al., 2019). The involvement of relevant government officials cannot be overlooked at this stage. Mechanisms for transparency and accountability, such as regular reporting and stakeholder meetings, that foster trust and ensure that all activities align with the DMO's mission and goals should be implemented (Tavitiyaman et al., 2021).

## **3. Developing a comprehensive marketing plan:**

Thorough market research to understand the small town's target audience, preferences, and trends should be conducted. This data informs marketing strategies and campaigns that could showcase the small town as a small-town tourism destination (Medina et al., 2023). It is important too utilise a mix of traditional and digital marketing channels. While social media is crucial, incorporating print media, local newspapers, and tourism fairs can diversify reach. Highlighting unique aspects of the small town, such as its history and local events, can attract different segments of tourists (Park & Yoon, 2009). Create a solid and unified brand identity for the small town that resonates with potential visitors, which includes developing a logo, slogan, and consistent visual and messaging elements across all marketing materials (Shuyi et al., 2024). Ongoing communication with residents in the small town is required at this stage, as their buy-in is key to any form of tourism development for a region.

## **4. Collaboration and partnerships:**

Engage local businesses in collaborative marketing efforts, including joint promotions, package deals, and cooperative advertising. These partnerships can amplify marketing efforts and create a more comprehensive visitor experience (Medina et al., 2023). Offer training and workshops for local businesses and residents to enhance their understanding of tourism and marketing that can improve the overall quality of services offered to visitors and ensure that everyone is on board with the DMO's objectives (al Asheq et al., 2019). Residents can also be empowered at this stage if they form part of the collaboration and partnership. They will also see the potential benefit of developing tourism in the small town, and their buy-in to the process can be solidified in this manner. They could even potentially identify new entrepreneurial opportunities for them to form part of the tourism development in the small town. Collaboration and partnership with local government are also crucial as they could clarify many related issues. Government involvement at this stage could also assist with developing and maintaining relevant tourism infrastructure, such as roads etc, in the small town.

## **5. Sustainable tourism practices:**

These sustainable practices could include encouraging eco-friendly accommodations, promoting local produce, and minimising the environmental impact of tourism (Tavitiyaman et al., 2021). The local cultural heritage of the small town must always be respected and preserved. It is important to ensure that tourism activities do not disrupt the local way of life but rather complement and enhance it (Park & Yoon, 2009). Once again, local residents' involvement is key as they could advise accordingly.

## **6. Monitor and evaluate performance:**

Establish Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to monitor and evaluate the DMO's performance regularly. Metrics could include visitor numbers, economic impact, marketing reach, and visitor satisfaction (Shuyi et al., 2024). The DMO can measure the results of social media campaigns. Reach, views, referrals, members, and engagement could all be utilised by the DMO as measurement tools (George, 2019). Implement feedback mechanisms such as visitor surveys and stakeholder consultations to gather insights and continuously improve the DMO's strategies and operations (Medina et al., 2023). The residents in the small town could also be approached, and their feedback on the performance of the DMO could be evaluated. These monitoring and evaluation could occur annually. It is important to work on the weaknesses and correct them going forward if the DMO wants to continuously be successful in promoting the small town.

Implementing the abovementioned guidelines could potentially assist in establishing a successful DMO for small towns, potentially assisting in ensuring the town is a thriving small-town tourism destination. Key takeaways are local resident involvement, including knowledgeable individuals, utilising social media, and continuously evaluating the performance of the DMO.

## **Conclusion**

Small towns rely on tourism more and more to ensure economic growth. However, this is not always achieved as many factors play a role, as identified in this paper. One way for small towns to flourish potentially is through dedicated marketing initiatives.



Thus, effective marketing of small-town tourism destinations is crucial to the survival of these destinations. This paper aimed to assess small-town tourism marketing using Philippolis as a case study. The findings suggest that a centralised DMO, managed by experienced and knowledgeable individuals, could effectively coordinate marketing strategies, increase media attention, and ensure high standards in tourist facilities in small towns. The research highlights the importance of involving external expertise in marketing efforts and comprehensively promoting all local attractions at small-town tourism destinations. Recommendations include targeted, non-repetitive marketing campaigns that leverage social media, television, and radio to increase foot traffic to small towns. Including local residents is crucial and a factor that cannot be overlooked in small towns.

This study concludes that a well-managed DMO could be a viable solution to the marketing challenges faced by small towns like Philippolis, offering a model that could be replicated in similar contexts. Establishing a DMO for a small town could build relationships with relevant government entities, which are crucial in marketing small towns. These relationships can be fruitful in the long run and ensure that small towns get the required exposure they deserve. A DMO could also ensure that marketing occurs at a consistent professional level on all platforms. A DMO could also track the level of engagement from tourists and monitor what is working and where changes are required. The guidelines to establish a DMO for a small town include defining the vision, mission, and goals, establishing a Governance Structure, developing a comprehensive marketing plan, fostering collaboration and partnerships, ensuring sustainable tourism practices, and monitoring and evaluating the performance. The guidelines outlined in the study could be used as a starting point for establishing a DMO and could be altered according to different destination needs. Effective marketing of the town could bring much-needed benefits to small towns such as Philippolis and potentially ensure its longevity as a small-town tourism destination. Thus, a DMO could potentially be the answer for small-town tourism and marketing.

### Limitations of the study

The use of Philippolis as the case study for this paper has certain limitations, and interpretation and inference from this research have been done with caution and with suggestions in mind. While the sampling for this study is low, with only five participants, more research will be needed in the future, including a broader range of small towns. The qualitative nature of the study, relying on semi-structured interviews, limits the ability to quantify the identified challenges and opportunities, thus making generalisation to other contexts difficult. Additionally, conducting interviews only in English may have excluded non-English-speaking stakeholders, which could have limited the diversity of perspectives. The focus on Philippolis alone means that the recommendations and conclusions may not fully apply to other small towns with different tourism dynamics. Despite these limitations, this research provides valuable basic information about small-town tourism and marketing. It offers a guideline for establishing a DMO for small towns, something that was previously unavailable. However, the study does not address the specific financial or operational challenges of implementing such a structure. Future research could explore a larger population of small towns throughout South Africa, using diverse data collection methods and examining the operational aspects of DMOs to strengthen the findings and ensure broader applicability.

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