The Business Model Canvas and Challenges of Volunteer Tourism

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Abstract

Volunteer tourism has grown into a popular sustainable form of niche tourism. There is however limited research on the business model canvas and the challenges that volunteer tourism organisations in heritage settings face. The challenges that these organisations face have a large impact on the structure and functioning of their business. These challenges can be overcome with education, strong relationships with partners, and running an ethical programme. This study investigated the business model canvas and challenges encountered by volunteer tourism organisations in this unique setting in South Africa. An exploratory qualitative approach was followed, involving interviews with managers at seven volunteer tourism organisations. The results were analysed using content and thematic analysis. The results provided an increased understanding of volunteer tourism in South Africa, and provide recommendations for marketing, management and future research. The study is valuable to managers, and contributes to the current discourse on volunteer tourism as an emerging market segment.

Keywords: Volunteer tourism; heritage tourism; business model canvas; challenges

Introduction

Heritage tourism has developed into a significant niche tourism sector and is seen as a form of tourism whereby the participant is able to enjoy the natural, historical and cultural resources at a destination (Gumede & Mdiniso, 2022; Putri & Pratiwi, 2021). Volunteer tourism (VT) has additionally become prevalent in the heritage tourism context which is emerging as an increasingly popular form of tourism (Sin, 2009; Timothy, 2014). VT is defined as a holiday to a specific destination, whereby the tourist participates in organised volunteer activities (McGehee, 2014; Wearing, 2001). VT has become a popular form of sustainable tourism that may bring with it a variety of potential benefits, but this sector is also faced with challenges, such as crises, funding, and being criticised for commodification, greenwashing, exploitation, and being unethical (Richards et al., 2015; Rogerson et al., 2021; Smith & Font, 2014). The business model canvas of VT organisations incorporates essential elements that may contribute to the success of VT programmes (Cilliers et al., 2022)

South Africa has developed as a popular destination for VT. The sector here has been increasingly noticed as a field of research and the current discourse on the sector has incorporated a focus on profiling (Alexander, 2012; Lucrezi et al., 2022), expectations (Boluk et al., 2017; Lucrezi & Cilliers, 2022), motivations (Akintola, 2011; Benson & Seibert, 2009; Lucrezi & Cilliers, 2022; Sin, 2009; Stoddart & Rogerson, 2004; Van Tonder et al., 2017), satisfaction (Boluk et al., 2017; Lucrezi & Cilliers, 2022), and attitudes (Lucrezi & Cilliers, 2022) of volunteers. All the aforementioned studies provide a pivotal snapshot of the current state of VT. However, limited research has been conducted on the business model canvas

(Cilliers et al., 2022) and the challenges (Wheeler et al., 2008) of VT organisations in a heritage setting in South Africa, specifically post Covid-19.

To address this issue, this study investigated the business model canvas and the challenges that VT organisations face in South Africa so as to provide a platform for the future development of the sector. The study specifically, looked at the infrastructure, offerings, customer and financial viability of the VT organisations. As well as the overall challenges faced, impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, and challenges faced post Covid-19. This research is guided by the following research question: What are the lived experiences of VT organisation managers regarding VT in a heritage setting in South Africa?

Literature review
Structure and functioning of volunteer tourism organisations
The business model canvas is an important tool for organisations, which may determine the success of an organisation (Rusu, 2016). It describes the way in which an organisation creates value and how it derives profit from the value created (Kohler et al., 2016). The business model canvas revolves around four main areas of business with nine sub elements (Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2009). These are infrastructure (key partners, key activities and key resources), offerings (value proposition), customer (customer relationships, customer segments and channels), and financial viability (cost structure and revenue streams; Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2009). Limited research has been published on the application of the business model canvas in the tourism industry, more specifically the VT sector (Benson & Henderson, 2011; Cirjevskis, 2019). There has however been a discourse in the application of the business model canvas in conservation focused tourism and VT which is discussed next.

Potential key partners of the VT organisations include non-profit organisations, for-profit organisations, tourism support services, education institutions, government and research centres (Cilliers et al., 2022; Clemmons, 2013; Wearing, 2001; Wingit et al., 2017). Community engagement, conservation, operations-related, and research projects may form part of the key activities in this sector (Cilliers et al., 2022; Rocha et al. 2020; Roques et al. 2018). Possible key resources involve the local community, staff, equipment, environment, volunteers and external collaborators (Benson & Henderson, 2011; Cilliers et al., 2022; Gray & Campbell, 2007; Kohler et al. 2016; Wingit et al. 2017). Value propositions may include raising awareness, strategies around protection, education, conservation, research, ethical ecotourism, and alleviating poverty (Cilliers et al., 2022). Involving customers as active community members are additionally a potential means to maintain a relationship with potential markets (Kohler et al., 2016).

Social media, websites, newsletters, conferences, and educational institutions are the possible channels through which the VT organisations can communicate with their customers (Cilliers et al., 2022; Roques et al. 2018). Those interested in and who have a passion for conservation, those who are students, gap year takers, those interested in conservation and wildlife research, and ecotourists may form part of the customer segment for a VT organisation (Cilliers et al., 2022; Clifton & Benson, 2006; Coghlan, 2006; Ellis, 2003a; Galley & Clifton, 2004; Gray & Campbell, 2007; Lorimer, 2009; Wood, 2010). The cost structure for an organisation in this sector may include salaries, services and requirements for the customers, rent, equipment, consumable goods, marketing, maintenance and taxes (Benson & Henderson, 2011; Cilliers et al., 2022; Gray & Campbell, 2007; Wingit et al. 2017). The potential revenue streams involve customer fees, donations, product sales, and research funds (Benson & Henderson, 2011; Cilliers et al., 2022; Gray & Campbell, 2007; Wingit et al. 2017).

The business model canvas may provide VT organisations with a structure to manage operations and in turn it serves as an opportunity to identify areas in the operational

management that can be improved and which challenges can be overcome to achieve sustainable growth (Cilliers et al., 2022)

Challenges faced by volunteer tourism organisations
VT organisations are faced with a variety of challenges. VT is often criticised for the commodification of nature and conservation, promotion of dependency, damage to the host culture, greenwashing, the exploitation of local people, and financial leakages (Smith & Font, 2014). For some VT organisations, it is challenging to recruit trained and passionate staff and responsible volunteers (Cilliers, 2022) due to the aforementioned challenges. VT organisations strive to recruit local people, but in certain cases they are forced to employ foreigners (Barbieri et al. 2012). This is primarily due to a lack of specialist skills and knowledge among the local community (Wearing, 2001). On the other hand, VT organisations may also be enticed to attract international volunteers at their organisations, due to their wealthy backgrounds and spending power (Judge, 2017).

Another challenge is a country's negative image which may impact a volunteer's perception of that country and in turn this may result in lower demand by volunteers to travel to the affected destination (Yoda, 2010). Obtaining funds to sustainably operate the VT programme is also a challenge, forcing VT organisations to search for alternative sources of funding (Lyons & Wearing, 2012). VT organisations might also face the challenge of commercialisation, due to increased competition and marketing taking place in the sector (Kainthola et al., 2021). Some volunteers are also concerned about the ethical nature of a VT organisation and whether the activities carried out by these programmes are conducted according to ethical standards and codes of conduct (Richards et al., 2015).

The Covid-19 pandemic has also resulted in VT facing additional challenges, leading to reduced international travel and the closure of some VT organisations (Fotiadis et al., 2020; King et al., 2021; Rogerson et al., 2021). However, on the contrary, Prayag (2020) indicates that the Covid-19 pandemic has created an opportunity for the sector as there is an increase in the number of possible volunteers wanting to help communities post-pandemic.

From the above, it can be seen that VT organisations are faced with a variety of challenges. It is therefore essential to understand the challenges faced my VT organisations in South Africa, to ensure the success of the industry.

Methodology
An exploratory qualitative approach was used to better understand the sustainable development of VT by investigating the application of the business model canvas and the challenges faced by VT organisations in a heritage setting in South Africa. Expert judgmental sampling was employed, targeting one representative manager at the selected VT organisations. The organisations all focused on animal-based VT projects in a natural heritage setting, including terrestrial, primate, avian, reptiles and marine operations. Data was collected by means of semi-structured interviews. The interview schedule included questions on the demographic profile of the interviewee, the business model canvas of the organisation, and the challenges faced by VT organisations. This interview guide in turn was developed based on previous research by Rattan et al. (2012), Alexander et al. (2015) and Cilliers (2022).

Data collection started on 22 August 2022 and ended on 27 September 2022 once theoretical saturation was achieved (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In total, seven managers were interviewed at seven different VT organisations. Interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams, in English and were 30 minutes in duration on average. The interview sessions were recorded for transcription purposes with the permission of the participants.

The demographic data were analysed in Microsoft Excel. The data for the business model canvas were analysed using conceptual content analysis as proposed by Creswell and Creswell (2018) and Nieuwenhuis (2019). The level of analysis included words, phrases and sentences. Codes were applied using inductive open coding and in vivo coding. Codes were applied for existence and not frequency of concepts. Thus, meaning that codes were applied only once, even if a concept appeared more than once in the text. Concepts were coded as the same when they appeared in different forms, and codes were applied to words that imply and state the concepts. The data for the challenges were analysed using thematic analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Nieuwenhuis, 2019). Firstly, the recordings were transcribed verbatim into seven separate Microsoft Word documents and entered into Atlas.ti for analysis. Secondly, the seven Word documents were carefully explored and meaningful analytic units were applied using inductive open coding and in vivo coding. Thirdly, themes were established and assigned to the codes that shared commonality. Finally, the data were interpreted and reported following a well-ordered structure. Valuable quotes were also identified from the data to be included in the results.

Results

The analysis uncovered that the business model for the VT organisations in South Africa had certain similarities and differences. The VT organisations in South Africa are also faced with a variety of challenges (Figure 1). The results section is presented in three sections, initially describing the demographic profile of interviewees, business model canvas of the VT organisations, and finally the challenges faced by these organisations.

Demographic profile of participants

Table 1 represents the profile of the participants in this study.

Table 1. Profile of each participant

ID	Age	Gender	Education	Country of origin	Length worked at organisation	Method of employment	Participated in VT	Existence of VT programme
M1	39	Male	Dip/Deg	SA	3 years	Appointment	No	18 years
M2	28	Male	PG	ASTL	4 years	Volunteered	Yes	20 years
M3	67	Female	Dip/Deg	SA	6 years	Founder	No	4 years
M4	29	Male	Dip/Deg	SA	5 years	Appointment	Yes	17 years
M5	70	Female	HS	UK	6 years	Founder	No	1 year
M6	49	Female	PG	UK	4 years	Volunteered	Yes	24 years
M7	33	Female	Dip/Deg	SA	7 years	Appointment	No	13 years

Note. M1 – M7: Manager1 – Manager 7; Dip/Deg: Diploma / Degree; PG: Postgraduate; HS: Completed High School; SA: South Africa; ASTL: Australia; UK: United Kingdom.

From Table 1 it can be seen that the youngest manager that participated in this study was 28 years old and the oldest manager was 70 years old. There were similar proportions of male to female managers in the sample. The highest level of education among participants were a postgraduate qualification, but the majority had a diploma or degree, implying all has post-school qualifications. The managers mainly originated from South Africa and most had been working at the organisations between three and seven years. Most of the managers were appointed and did not participate in VT before they started working at the organisations. Those that did volunteer beforehand, volunteered with communities and animals. Whereas the rest only worked with volunteers previously. The majority of the VT programmes have been in existence for more than ten years, with the oldest one being 24 years and the youngest one being 1 year.

Business model canvas

The results for the content analysis are displayed in Table 2. The table displays the overall business model canvas of the VT organisations in South Africa. The business model canvas is divided into four main sections 1) infrastructure: key partners, key activities and key resources; 2) offer: value proposition; 3) customer: customer relationships, channels and customer segments; and 4) financial viability: cost structure and revenue stream. The items in each component are listed according to popularity. The items mentioned the most are on top and those mentioned the least are at the bottom. The frequency of VT organisations that mentioned each item is indicated in brackets next to the items.

The results for the business model canvas are divided into four groups: 1) all the VT organisations (which includes items mentioned by all seven VT organisations, 2) most of the VT organisations (which includes items mentioned by five to six VT organisations), 3) some of the VT organisations (which includes items mentioned by three to four VT organisations), and 4) few of the VT organisations (which includes items mentioned by one to two VT organisations).

Table 2. Business model canvas of volunteer tourism organisations in South Africa

Key partners	Key activities	Value propositions	Customer relationships	Customer segments
- Tourism support services (7) - For-profit organisations (6) - Non-profit organisations (5) - Government (4) - Educational institutions (2) - Private partners (2)	- Fauna conservation (7) - Training / education (6) - Community engagement (4) - Research (3) - Flora conservation (2) - Maintenance and cleaning (1) - Tourism related (1)	- Conservation (6) - Education (6) - Protecting (5) - Research (4) - Unique experience (4) - Raising awareness (2)	- Updates about animals / programmes (7) - Building personal relationships (2)	- Interested and passion for conservation (6) - Students (6) - Gap year takers (4) - International volunteers (4) - Local volunteers (4) - Looking for experiences (4) - Different holiday experience (3)

	Key resources		Channels	
	- Staff (7) - Volunteers (5) - Animals (4) - Consumable goods (3) - Environment (3) - Equipment (3) - Infrastructure (3) - Key partners (3) - Community (2)		- Social media (7) - Telephone / WhatsApp (5) - Website (5) - Newsletter (4)	

Cost structure			Revenue stream			
- Advertising (7) - Salaries (6) - Animal care (5)	- Consumable goods (5) - Maintenance (4) - Infrastructure (3)	- Equipment (2) - Services and requirements for volunteers (6)	- Donations (7) - Volunteer fees (5) - Fundraising (4)	- Selling of items (4) - Grants (3)	- Tourist fees (3) - Founder's funds (1)	

All the volunteer tourism organisations

All seven of the VT organisations considered tourism support services (e.g. travel agents / sending organisations) as their key partner. "It is their marketing ability and the ability to generate volunteers for us, and the exposure that they are giving us…" (M2). Fauna

conservation, which include "rescue, rehabilitate and release of injured orphaned wildlife" (M1) was seen as a key activity. Staff was considered as a key resource and M4 summarised it as follows; "because the whole volunteer experience is based on the people that teach them, make them feel at home, and make them feel comfortable… You have to have good people working for the volunteer program that are also ethical".

Furthermore, updates about the animals and programmes are a way to maintain a customer relationship. "… we let the volunteers know when certain cases are released, because the only reward really that the volunteers get is knowing what they do ends up in a happy success" (M5). Social media was identified as an important channel to communicate with customers, due to its economic advantages, M7 indicated that "(it is) not costly and actually free". Advertising is seen as an important cost structure, which is essential in order to "have a presence in the marketplace" (M3). An important additional revenue stream, includes donations, "it does not matter how small the amount, as long as it is a consistent amount every month" (M5).

Most of the volunteer tourism organisations

Most of the VT organisations indicated that their key partners included for-profit organisations, such as "veterinary partner that we can take animals to and will help us" (M3), and non-profit organisations (NGOs), who are a "big part of the conservation that we do" (M4). Key activities included training and education, such as "hands on training" (M5) and where the volunteers "take the information that they have learnt from us and help educate students" (M4). Key resources included the volunteers, who are the "core workforce of the programme" (M2). They considered conservation, education and protecting as value propositions. "The key purpose is to provide a safe forever home for the animals…and to educate people in an interesting way about the natural word, in the hopes that they will maybe think about it a little more in their day to day lives" (M6).

Moreover, telephone, including "private WhatsApp groups with close volunteers and people who tend to donate more money" (M2), and websites that is "updated regularly with any new programmes and developments" (M3) are seen as the predominant ways to communicate with customers. Those interested and "passionate for conservation and the environment" (M6), and students "who need to complete certain tasks in order to qualify for graduation" (M1) are considered the primary customer segment. The cost structure includes "salaries for the team" (M7), services and requirements for volunteers, such as "food because it is all inclusive in the price that they pay… transfers from the airport to the reserve, it is also included in the volunteer cost" (M4), animal care, such as "veterinary costs" (M1) and "animal food" (M5), and consumable goods and services, which includes "electricity and water" (M1). The "volunteers paying to be out here" (M7) is an essential revenue stream.

Some of the volunteer tourism organisations

Some of the VT organisations mentioned that their key partner included the government, whereas others indicated that they "do not receive any government funding or support" (M6). Although most staff in volunteer organisations may be recruited internationally (Barbieri et al. 2012; Wearing, 2001) the participants in this study did indicate a strong drive towards activities associated with community engagement, such as "working with youth from the immediate community" (M7), and "research projects with Universities" (M4). Key resources included the "animals in the centre" (M2), consumable goods, including the "water and electricity, which are extremely important for the animals" (M1), the environment, which includes the "forest…and the land that the sanctuaries are based on" (M6), "equipment" (M7), infrastructure, such as "our buildings" (M7) and key partners, "who supply our animal feeds"

(M1). They considered "research" (M4) and a "unique experience with the animals" (M2) as value propositions.

Furthermore, newsletters are a way to communicate with customers, and it "is usually aimed more to the older sectors of support" (M3). "Gap year takers" (M6), "volunteers from all around the world" (M2), "South African volunteers" (M6), those looking for "real world experience" (M6) and to "experience a different kind of holiday" (M2) are their customer segment. "Maintenance" (M4) and infrastructure, such as "electric fencing" (M2) are seen as a cost structure. "Fundraising" (M5), selling of items, such as "indigenous plants, and fruit and vegetable seedlings" (M1), "grants for educational purposes" (M1) and tourist fees from those "visiting the sanctuaries and paying for tours" (M6) are seen as a revenue stream.

Few of the volunteer tourism organisations
Few of the VT organisations considered educational institutions, such as "universities that send their students to us" (M1), and "private partners" (M2) as their key partners. Flora conservation, such as "rescuing plant life" (M3), "maintenance and cleaning" (M7) and tourism related activities, which include "assisting clients" (M7) was seen as key activities. The "community" (M6) was considered as a key resource, and they considered "raising awareness" (M5) as a value proposition. They further indicated that "the staff that live with the volunteers… and get to know them really well" (M4) are a way to maintain customer relationship. "Equipment" (M3) is seen as a cost structure, and the "founder's funds" (M3) as a revenue stream.

Challenges faced by volunteer tourism organisations
Three themes with regards to the challenges faced by VT organisations in South Africa emerged from the narratives with the managers who participated in this study (Figure 1).
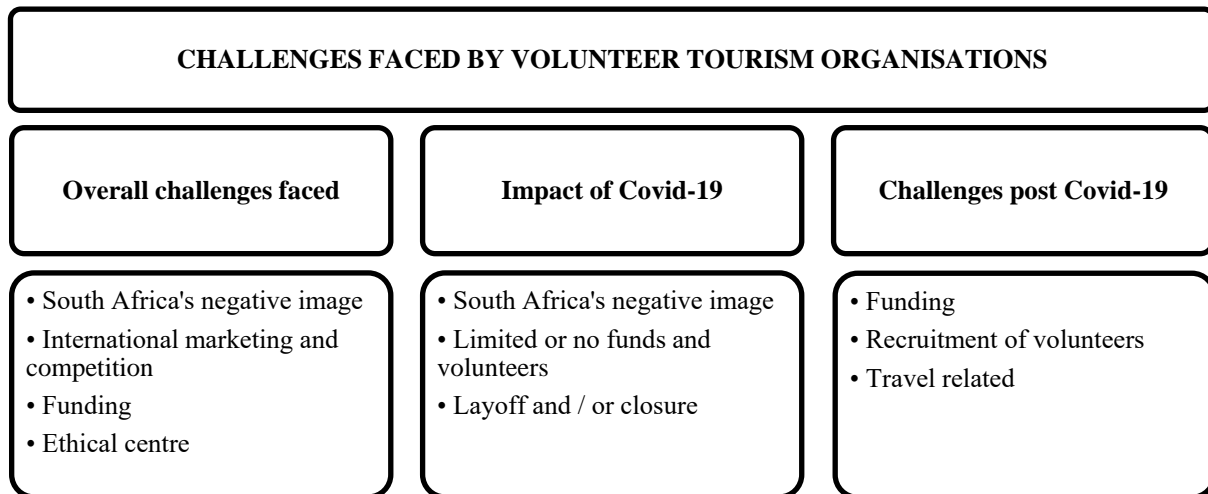
CHALLENGES FACED BY VOLUNTEER TOURISM ORGANISATIONS

Overall challenges faced	Impact of Covid-19	Challenges post Covid-19
• South Africa's negative image • International marketing and competition • Funding • Ethical centre	• South Africa's negative image • Limited or no funds and volunteers • Layoff and / or closure	• Funding • Recruitment of volunteers • Travel related

Figure 1. Challenges faced by VT organisations in South Africa

Overall challenges faced
The "public perception overseas about South Africa" (M6) and the "misperceptions about crime in South Africa" (M7) has a large impact on the perception of South Africa among volunteers. The crime situation in South Africa was seen as something that "deters people from coming through to South Africa" (M1). With that said, the travel advice issued by foreign embassies to citizens for travel to South Africa constantly mentions undesirable situations related to safety and security such as "hijacking, carjacking, shootings, and protests" (M6) which adds to the negative image of South Africa. It is important that international volunteers

"leave thinking highly of South Africa, because if they just read the newspapers, they might not" (M6).

Another challenge faced by VT organisations is "to be able to market to an international audience" (M1), and "getting a reputation that is reliable" (M4). If VT organisations are "not set up with the right connections and with the big agencies, they would have a big challenge in driving the volunteer numbers" (M2). It is also challenging to recruit "the right volunteers" (M5), someone who will "get something out of being with us and are not just doing it as a summer visit" (M5). Another challenge is the competition "not only in South Africa, but from the rest of Africa, and from the rest of the world" (M3). Funding for the VT organisations is a major challenge. There are not a lot of VT organisations that receive government funding, those that do, usually "are dealing with endangered animals" (M2). It is difficult to maintain the organisation "when there are no volunteers or when there are seasonal volunteers" (M3). "It is essential to keep your cost low at the beginning" (M4) until one has a good reputation and receives a lot of volunteers from overseas. This is due to the reason that the majority of the VT organisations "generate funding through their volunteer fees" (M2). Being an ethical centre is extremely important, however, "some volunteer organisations are not what they seem to be" (M3). Volunteers have indicated that "they have heard stories that there is a lot of centres that are not ethical" (M2). Some people are specifically "questioning the ethics around volunteering in South Africa" (M7).

Impact of Covid-19

"The South African variant" (M6) and how people indicated that it originated from South Africa resulted into a "negative stigma" (M2). Potential volunteers were discouraged from travelling to the country as "they had seen so much in the news about how bad Covid-19 was in South Africa" (M2) that they did not want to volunteer here until they were vaccinated. This also "reduced the confidence in people wanting to come to South Africa" (M2). On the other hand, "how the pandemic was dealt with by the South African government" (M6) gave a positive perception to potential volunteers.

The lockdown and associated travel restrictions completely restricted people from travelling to South Africa. "Which meant a lot of volunteers instead of coming here, went to other programmes in other countries… where they could enter more freely during the lockdowns" (M2). This resulted in going "from a 70% to 80% booking rate down to zero overnight" (M1). Covid-19 had a large impact on the tourism industry. "There was no funding or help from the government… if it was not for donations from past volunteers, we would have shut shop" (M4). Some volunteer programmes were so successful that they did not need another revenue stream, "but then Covid-19 happened and that revenue stream dried up" (M2). Those organisations that were driven primarily by the profit motive were forced to close their doors and faced with limited revenue which impacted their economic sustainability. "But non-profits had to keep going, and that put a big strain on somebody like ourselves" (M3). It was harder to run the volunteer programmes due to not having "the funds" (M4) and not having the "human resources and hands on the ground to really make it possible" (M4). Volunteer programmes had to start obtaining funds in different ways, such as fundraising and YouTube videos. This "was essentially the only thing that kept the centre running through last year, because there was no funding coming in with volunteers" (M2). The tourism industry is still recovering, which means that "finances are still not where they were pre Covid-19" (M7).

Covid-19 resulted in "staff that were retrenched" (M7), "because there was no income coming in" (M1). "Some organisations closed down" (M3). Other companies who rely on tourists had to "shut their doors" (M1), because there were "zero income coming through" (M1).

Challenges post Covid-19

Those organisations that survived Covid-19 would be able to continue and be successful, because "people are quite desperate to travel" (M4). However, the major challenge is "getting the starting capital and getting some money to run a program for the volunteers" (M4). This means that there are still some limited resources in terms of employment. Say for example, "a team of five were retrenched, all five of them are not necessarily employed again" (M7). It is still challenging for volunteer programmes to operate and make money, especially if they do not "have a commercial fundraiser or commercial sponsor" (M2).

Volunteers have become increasingly nervous to travel far from home, and as a result they are "looking for opportunities closer to their home country" (M6). Marketing the volunteer programme through distribution channels such as travel agents or promoting volunteer opportunities by means of an organisation's websites are also more challenging. "They have got no space for new programmes to take on board" (M3). VT organisations need to ensure that their volunteer programmes are noticed, but the "marketing budget is not necessarily what it was pre Covid-19" (M7). This results in VT organisations having to "start off with a clean state… go about recruiting again, especially on your overseas market" (M3). On the other hand, some VT organisations indicated that "once everything settled down with Covid-19, it was almost business as usual" (M4), and that they "have experienced a boom post Covid-19" (M1). This means that for some VT organisations, "it is difficult to get people across" (M1), but "everything is returning back to normal" (M2).

There has been a lot of price increase post Covid-19, and "travel is a lot more expensive now from when it was three years ago" (M5). On the other hand, there are a lot of logistic issues, and some have "experienced volunteers having to change their flights three or four times" (M1). The "safety and security issue and the cost of living issue" (M6) are also a challenge, people would rather volunteer somewhere cheaper and safer.

Discussion

This study set out to investigate the business model canvas and the challenges that VT organisations in South Africa face. The challenges that an organisation face have a large impact on their business structure and functioning. This can be seen in this study. The image of a destination has an impact on international collaboration and partnership (Saliu, 2017). Key partners are essential for the successful operation of VT organisation (Wearing, 2001). South Africa's negative image internationally due to high levels of crime, safety and security and the manner in which the Covid-19 epidemic was managed had a large impact on the relationship that the VT organisations have with their international key partners. This has resulted in partner organisations decreasing their willingness to associate themselves with the VT organisations. For example, tourism support service who do not want to market the VT organisations on their websites or for-profit organisations and non-profit organisations who do not want to donate money or provide grants to the VT organisation. Another example is educational institutions who do not want to collaborate with the VT organisation on research projects. This can potentially lead to reduced programmes, funding and closure of the VT organisations (Anuar et al., 2022). It is essential that VT organisations meet the needs of their key partners, and maintain a good relationship with their key partners, especially international key partners (Ellis, 2003b). This will ensure that they remain successful in the future, and assist with international marketing and obtaining an advantage point over their competitors (Ellis, 2003b). Tourism support services and educational institutions for example can recommend the VT organisation to potential volunteers, which can lead to increased funding and growth of the VT organisations.

Key resources allow VT organisations to operate successfully, offer unique opportunities, and are crucial to ensure repeat volunteers (Debarliev & Mitrovska, 2016). Staff members are important for VT organisations to monitor, train and facilitate the volunteers (Eckardt, 2022). These staff members also ensure that the animals are taken care of, and ensure that the VT organisation continues to operate. Hence the reason why the Covid-19 pandemic and the resulting layoff off staff had such a large impact on the VT organisations. This is also one of the reasons why some of the VT organisations had to close down. Adding to that, the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in limited funds and no volunteers, which are essential for the operation of the VT organisations (Kungwansupaphan, 2021). The limited funding also resulted in the VT organisations struggling to care for the animals, obtain consumable goods, and maintain equipment and infrastructure. With that said, the community members, previous volunteers and key partners played an essential role during the Covid-19 pandemic to ensure that some of the VT organisations continued to operate (Kungwansupaphan, 2021). This is why a good relationship with key partners are essential (Ellis, 2003b).

VT organisations offering a variety of activities are more likely to attract volunteers and be successful (Benson & Henderson, 2011). VT organisations should ensure that the activities are unique and memorable, and meet the needs of the volunteers (Wingit et al. 2017). The value propositions that VT organisations offer to volunteers should focus on the protection and preservation of ecosystems and species (Gray & Campbell, 2007). This should also be in line with the satisfaction, experience and attitudes of the volunteers, and should motivate volunteers to continue to contribute to conservation in the future (Apps et al. 2018; Goldberg et al. 2018). On the other hand, VT organisations should ensure that they run an ethical centre and follow codes of conduct (Roques et al. 2018). They should educate the volunteers on ethical VT and "ethical blind spot" where volunteers want to have a unique experience and are not aware that it is unethical (Moorhouse et al., 2017). This would result in the restoration of the environment, high quality science, and alleviation of poverty (Goodwin, 2011; Wearing, 2001).

Maintaining a relationship with the volunteers can assist with improving the VT programmes, establishing long term relationships, obtaining repeat volunteers, and marketing the VT programmes, which is important for managing the VT organisations and programmes (Del Rio Olivares et al. 2018; Kohler et al., 2016). Communicating, marketing and maintaining a relationship with the volunteers are done through different marketing channels, depending on the customer segment (Benson & Henderson, 2011). VT organisations have a different customer segment when compared to mass tourism (Wearing et al. 2010). It is therefore essential that VT organisations identify a meaningful customer segment, and maintain a relationship with them, in order to ensure effective targeting, recruitment and retention of volunteers (Wearing et al., 2010). This can allow the VT organisations to change the perception of volunteers about South Africa's negative image. Which will attract more volunteers to South Africa instead of other competing countries. The VT organisations will be able to recruit the volunteers by sharing the positive aspects of South Africa and about their programme. The VT organisations can also offer assistance with travel logistics, crisis management, and ensuring the volunteers that they will be taken care off in South Africa.

The majority of the VT organisations are dependant on the funds from the volunteers, to cover their operating expenses and ensure that the organisation and projects continue to be sustainable (Bath-Rosenfeld, 2014). VT organisations may charge higher prices in order to be financially successful. This can be done through increased transparency by means of indicating exactly what the VT organisation does with the funds they receive from the volunteers, and explaining how it is used towards conservation and protection (Bath-Rosenfeld, 2014; Coren & Gray, 2012). Some volunteers are willing to spend money on conservation and the protection of wildlife (Casey & Schuhmann, 2018; La Manna et al. 2020; Murphy et al., 2018; Roberts et

al. 2017; Lopes & Villasante, 2018). Ensuring that the volunteers are satisfied when they leave can result in re-participation intention, loyalty, repeat visits and word of mouth (Chua et al., 2021; Ding & Tseng, 2015; Kim et al. 2016; Sharma & Sahni, 2017). The VT organisations can also pursue alternative avenues to obtain funding.

From the above, it can be seen that the challenges that VT organisations face have a large impact on their day to day functioning and success. It is essential that the VT organisations educate the volunteers on conservation, ethical VT, and South Africa as a country. This will create a positive image of VT in South Africa. The VT organisations should develop and maintain relationships with key partners, which will ultimately result in funding, marketing and future growth. VT organisations should meet the needs of the volunteers to ensure re-participation intention, loyalty, repeat visits and word of mouth. The VT organisations can openly share their ethical codes of conduct and financial expenses with the volunteers. This will allow volunteers to understand how the VT organisation operates and contributes towards conservation and wildlife protection. This can contribute towards the sustainable development of VT in South Africa.

Conclusion

This study investigated the business model canvas and challenges that VT organisations in South Africa face. In particular, the study looked at the infrastructure, offer, customer and financial viability of the VT organisations. As well as the overall challenges faced, impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, and challenges faced post Covid-19. From the results it can be seen that the business structure and functioning are impacted by the challenges that these VT organisations face. These challenges can be overcome through proper education, building and maintaining strong relationships with partners, running an ethical VT programme, meeting the needs of the volunteers, and through honesty and transparency with the volunteers. This will result in positive word of mouth, repeat visit and loyalty, increased funding and enhanced conservation and protection. VT organisations could also enhance their collaboration with key partners, identify additional key resources, and improve their key activities. They can further promote their value propositions, strengthen their relationships with the volunteers, use additional communication channels, and attract more ethical volunteers. VT organisations can improve their revenue stream, and reduce their cost structure.

Practitioners and academics could use the results to overcome the challenges faced by VT organisations in a heritage setting and enhance their business model. Complementary research of this kind will provide a more holistic picture of VT in a natural heritage tourism setting, the function and structure of VT organisations, and the challenges that they face, especially post Covid-19. This study provides important contributions to the VT literature. First, this study fills the gap in literature with identifying and discussing the business model canvas and challenges that VT organisations in South Africa are facing. Second, the study includes opinions from managers at different VT organisations in heritage settings. Finally, essential recommendations are made for management and future research regarding the future development of VT. The following limitations were faced during the research. 1) The researchers were only able to collect data through Microsoft Teams and not face to face. Face to face data collection could have enhanced the quality of the data. 2) Although data saturation was achieved, data were only collected from seven VT organisations. Additional data may have strengthened the data collected. 3) The subjectivity of the researchers may have affected the way that the final data were analysed and interpreted.

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