

**A BEST PRACTICE FRAMEWORK FOR VISITOR INFORMATION CENTRES IN GAUTENG
PROVINCE, SOUTH AFRICA**

by

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ABSTRACT

Globally, Visitor Information Centres are increasingly recognised touchpoints contributing to the success of tourism destinations. In Gauteng, South Africa, their numbers continue to decline. The service level of these remaining VICs differ across and fall below expectation. Furthermore, most models of operation are obsolete, with these centres having minimal exposure to best practices. Limited research focuses on the supply side, namely the staffing and management of centres.

The study focuses on Gauteng VICs and the best practices that could improve future effectiveness. An exploratory design was followed which commenced with a concise review of best practice literature, global case studies and examples on the operation of effective VICs. An empirical study then reported on the opinions of 25 VIC staff and eight managers from eight Gauteng VICs regarding the current situation and future needs. A two-tiered approach was used to gather data via two custom-designed surveys with Gauteng VIC staff and managers respectively. A snowball sample of 25 staff members and a purposive sample of eight key informants were obtained. Data were analysed quantitatively using SPSS and qualitatively using thematic content analysis; and presented in three parts. The literature, the findings and the researcher's recommendations culminate in a best practice framework for Gauteng VICs. The framework advocates for an integration of traditional and new media services and platforms in the dissemination of tourism information based on the funding available to a particular VIC. It is envisaged that if managers implement the best practice framework, it could avert further decline in the number of VICs. Moreover, it could improve their effectiveness in meeting the needs of the technologically-savvy and the traditional visitor, thereby ushering the Gauteng VICs into the 21st century.

KEY TERMS

Tourism, visitor information centre, visitors, social media, information dissemination, best practice framework, knowledge management, visitor behaviour.

OKUCATSHANGIWE

Emhlabeni jikelele, izikhungo zolwazi zabavakashi (VICs) ziya ngokuya ziqashelwa njengamaphuzu okuxhumana abamba iqhaza ekuphumeleleni kwezindawo zezokuvakasha. EGauteng, eNingizimu Afrika inani labo, liyaqhubeka ngokwehla. Amazinga okusebenza kwalokho kwama-VIC asele ahluka ezindaweni zonkana futhi awela ngezansi kokulindelekile. Ngaphezu kwalokho, izinhlobo eziningi zezifanekiso zomsebenzi azisetshenziswa, nalezo zikhungo nokuba nokubanakaliswa okuncane nemikhuba ephambili. Ucwango olulinganiselwe lugxile ohlangothini lokunikezela, okuyizikhungo zabasebenzi nokuphathwa.

Lolu cwango lugxile kuma-VIC aseGauteng kanye nemikhuba ephambili engase ithuthukise ukusebenza ngokuzayo. Umklamo oyisibonelo walandelwa okuyinto eyaqala ngokubuyekeza okufingqiwe okuhamba phambili kwezincwadi, izifundo zomhlaba nezibonelo zokusebenza ngempumelelo kwama-VIC. Ucwango lomdlandla lwabika ngemibono yamalungu abasebenzi abangama -25 beVIC nabaphathi abayisishiyagalombili abavela kuma-VIC ayisishiyagalombili aseGauteng mayelana nesimo samanje kanye nezidingo esikhathini esizayo. Izindlela ezimbili zokuhlaziya zasetshenziswa ukuqoqa imininingwane ngokusebenzisa izinhlobo ezimbili ezenziwe ngokwezifiso nabasebenzi be-VIC eGauteng nabaphathi ngokulandelana

Isampula yokudluliselwa (*snowball sampling*) kwamalungu abasebenzi abangama-25 kanye nesampula yokwahlulela ekhethayo (*purposive sampling*) yabafundisi abamqoka abayisishiyagalombili yatholakala. Imininingwane yahlaziywa ngokufanelekile kusetshenziswa iSPSS (*Statistical Package for the Social Sciences*) futhi ngokufanelekile kusetshenziswa ukuhlaziywa kwezindikimba okuqukethwe futhi yethulwa izingxenye ezintathu. Imibhalo, okutholakele kanye neziphakamiso zomcwango zifinyelele emkhubeni ophezulu wohlaka lwama-VIC aseGauteng. Uhlaka lummela ukuhlanganiswa kwendabuko futhi ukusebenzisa kwezokwazisa ngezinkundla ekusabalalisweni kolwazi lwezokuvakasha kusekelwe ngokuxhaswa ngezimali okutholakala ku-VIC ethile. Kucatshangwa ukuthi uma abaphathi beqalisa umkhuba ophambili wohlaka, kungase kugweme ukwehla okwengeziwe kwenani lama-VIC. Ngaphezu

kwalokho, kungase kuthuthukise ukuphumelela kwabo ekuhlangabezaneni nezidingo zobuchwepheshe zokwenza izinqumo ezinhle kanye nesivakashi sendabuko, kanjalo kubonise ama-VIC ku-21st Century.

Amagama asemqoka:

Ezokuvakasha, Isikhungo solwazi lwezivakashi, Izivakashi, Ezokwazisa, Ukusabalalisa ulwazi, Imikhuba ephambili yohlaka, Ukuphathwa kolwazi, Ukuziphatha kwesivakashi.

OPSOMMING

Besoekersinligtingsentrums word wêreldwyd toenemend erken as kontakpunte (*touchpoints*) wat tot die sukses van toerismebestemmings bydra. Die aantal besoekersinligtingsentrums in Gauteng, Suid-Afrika, toon 'n afname. Die diensvlakke van die oorblywende sentrums verskil en voldoen nie aan verwagtinge nie. Die bedryfsmodelle van die meeste van hierdie besoekersinligtingsentrums is ook verouderd en die betrokke sentrums het minimale blootstelling aan beste praktyk. Beperkte navorsing fokus op die aanbodkant, dit wil sê, die personeelvoorsiening en bestuur van besoekersinligtingsentrums.

Hierdie studie fokus op besoekersinligtingsentrums in Gauteng en die beste praktyke wat hulle doeltreffendheid in die toekoms kan verbeter. Die navorser het 'n verkenningsontwerp gebruik, beginnende met 'n bondige oorsig van literatuur oor beste praktyk, wêreldwye gevallestudies en voorbeelde van die werkswyse van doeltreffende besoekersinligtingsentrums. Die navorser het daarna in 'n empiriese studie verslag oor die menings van 25 personeellede van besoekersinligtingsentrums en 8 bestuurders van 8 besoekersinligtingsentrums in Gauteng rakende die huidige stand en toekomstige behoeftes van die sentrums gelewer. Die navorser het 'n tweevlakkige benadering gevolg om data in te win deur twee aangemete opnames te gebruik om data van onderskeidelik personeellede en bestuurders van besoekersinligtingsentrums in Gauteng te bekom. 'n Sneebalsteekproef van 25 personeellede en 'n doelbewuste steekproef van 8 sleutelrespondente is bekom. Data is kwantitatief met behulp van die Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) en kwalitatief deur middel van 'n tematiese inhoudsanalise ontleed en in drie dele aangebied. Die literatuur, die bevindings en die navorser se aanbevelings het op 'n raamwerk van bestek praktyk vir Gautengse besoekersinligtingsentrums uitgeloop. Ingevolge hierdie raamwerk moet tradisionele en nuwe mediadienste en -platforms geïntegreer word na gelang van die befondsing wat tot 'n bepaalde besoekersinligtingsentrum se beskikking is. Daar word voorsien dat indien sentrumbestuurders die bestepraktyk-raamwerk implementeer, dit 'n verdere afname in die aantal besoekersinligtingsentrums kan verhoed. Daarbenewens kan die raamwerk lei tot 'n verbetering in Gautengse

besoekersinligtingsentrums se vermoë om in die behoeftes van beide tegnologies bedrewe en tradisionele besoekers te voorsien, en sodoende daartoe bydra dat die sentrums by die 21ste eeu aanpas.

SLEUTELTERME

Toerisme, besoekersinligtingsentrum, besoekers, sosiale media, verspreiding van inligting, bestepaktyk-
raamwerk, kennisbestuur, besoekersgedrag.

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DECLARATION

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A best practice framework for Visitor Information Centres in Gauteng Province, South Africa.

I declare that this Master's dissertation, which I hereby submit at the University of South Africa, is my own work and that all sources that I have used, or from which I have quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

Date:

Signature:

LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ADSL	Asymmetric Digital Subscriber Line
CRM	Customer Relations Management
CVBs	Conventional Visitor Bureaux
eWOM	electronic Word Of Mouth
DMO	Destination Marketing Organisation
GTA	Gauteng Tourism Authority
ICTs	Information and Communication Technologies
IUCN	International Union for Conservation of Nature
KIR	Key Informant Respondent
KIS	Key Informant Survey
KM	Knowledge Management
LTO	Local Tourism Organisations
NDT	National Department of Tourism
OBS	Online Booking Service
Q	Question
RTO	Regional Tourism Organisations
SALGA	South African Local Government Association
SM	Social Media
SPSS	Statistical Package for Social Science
SR	Staff Respondent
SRO	Secondary Research Objective

SS	Staff Survey
STO	State Tourism Organisation
TAFE	Technical and Further Education Training College
TEQ	Tourism and Events Queensland
TCA	Thematic Content Analysis
TIC	Tourist Information Centre
UGC	User-Generated Content
VIC	Visitor Information Centre
VIN	Visitor Information Network
UNWTO	United Nations World Tourism Organisation

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO VISITOR INFORMATION CENTRES

1.1 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The tourism industry is regarded as one of the world's largest industries, which grows consistently every year (Jadhav & Mundhe, 2011; United Nations World Tourism Organisation, 2017; Wray, Dredge, Cox, Buultijens, Hollick, Lee, Pearlman & Lacroix, 2010; World Travel & Tourism Council, 2018). Tourism supports 307 million jobs globally that generates 10,4% of global gross domestic product (United Nations World Tourism Organisation, 2017; World Travel & Tourism Council, 2018). UNWTO (2017) observed that nearly all individuals in the western world take some sort of annual holiday away from their usual home, although the number of days differ across and within countries. Therefore, tourism brings obvious economic gains, as well as creating job opportunities. For many regions, tourism is the lifeblood to the economy. Today, tourism is still promoted by numerous developing and developed countries, as a viable option to diversify their economies, especially in times of economic crisis. This is also true for less-developed countries as well as for rural and regional areas in developed countries (Adeyinka-Ojo, Khoo-Lattimore & Nair, 2014; Pease & Rowe, 2005; Sayira, 2015).

Tourism is important to the global economy, and its potential to stimulate growth has been demonstrated globally. Tourism in South Africa directly contributed R 136.1 billion in 2017. This figure constituted 2.9% of the total Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2017. In addition, the tourism sector supports 726 500 jobs, which represent 4.5% of the total employment in the country (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2018). It has been predicted that the number of jobs created will increase to 980 000 jobs in 2028 translating to 5.2% of total employment. The total contribution of tourism is projected to increase from R412.5 billion in 2017 to R598.6 billion in 2028 (World Travel & Travel Council, 2018). The South African government has declared tourism as one of the six pillars of economic growth over a period of eight years, until 2020 (National Department of Tourism, 2016), (NDT).

1.2 THE IMPORTANCE OF VISITOR INFORMATION CENTRES IN THE TOURISM INDUSTRY

Most tourism products are simultaneously produced and consumed; therefore, tourists have no time to sample the products or physically investigate the components they wish to buy. Consequently, tourists initially purchase an image of what they expect (Qian, Hu & Zhang, 2015; Pawlicz, 2010). The image is as a result of the information that they obtain from various information sources. Accordingly, information is the life-blood of the tourism industry (Deery, Jago, Daugherty, Carson & Adams, 2007; Minghetti & Celotto, 2013).

To this end, Visitor Information Centres (VICs) play an important role in the dissemination of vital information which can enhance decision-making for the tourists. Besides the dissemination of tourism information, VICs play a role in the marketing and promotion of tourist destinations, which have the potential to increase tourism activity (Arana, Carmello, Carballo & Gil, 2015; Qian *et al*, 2015). Therefore, provision of information is a vital part of the marketing process; and it adds to the destination image (Bhat & Shar, 2014; Ispas, Rada & Sava, 2014; Intervistas, 2010; Tan & Chen, 2012; Tena & Raquel, 2014).

Tan and Chen (2012) further add that tourists are likely to visit a destination for which they possess a positive image. Therefore, timely and accurate information relevant to tourists' needs is often the key to visitor satisfaction and destination success (Bedard, Louillet, Verner & Joly, 2008; National Department of Tourism, 2011; Wray, Lebski & Fox, 2016).

Tourists require detailed information on each destination they intend to visit (Arturo, Gomez & Consuegra, 2010; Ispas *et al*, 2014). The specific elements of the information need to include where to sleep and eat (De Ascaniis, Gretzel & Mistilis, 2012; Ortega & Rodriguez, 2007). This at-destination information has a positive economic impact on the local destination (DiPietro, Wang, Rompf & Severt, 2007; Mistilis & Gretzel, 2014a; Rompf, DiPietro & Ricci, 2005); since it determines the length of stay and the level of expenditure (Ballantyne, Hughes & Ritchie, 2009; Tena & Raquel, 2014; Tourism & Research Australia, 2011, 2013, 2015; Zeng, 2017). Therefore, information that is current and matches the needs and wants of the visitor is key to meeting tourism demand (Mari, 2012).

Information search can be divided into the internal and the external search. This search begins internally, when 'visitors' use their long-term memory to list their product alternatives. If this information is sufficient to make a decision, the evaluation phase begins. However, if the internal memory cannot provide sufficient information, people turn to external sources. An external information source is information from the market place (DiPietro *et al*, 2007; Ballantyne *et al*, 2009). Some visitors even

postpone their decisions until they arrive at the destinations, in order to use local information sources (DiPietro *et al*, 2007; Mistilis & D'ambra, 2008; Hwang & Fesenmaier, 2011).

Inversini, Sit and Pyle (2016) and Tourism Research Australia (2015) identify the sources of this vital information; and they regard these sources as destination 'touchpoints'. A review of the literature of touchpoints consistently highlights phrases, which describe when a visitor interacts, connects, engages, or has a point-of-contact with a business, organisation or brand. Various scholars (Lyu & Hwang, 2015; Tena & Raquel, 2014; Tourism Research Australia, 2011, 2014) offer more details regarding the context of the touchpoint.

A destination touchpoint can be defined as any point of contact a visitor uses to find out about a product or service, or to make a booking or a purchase. Inversini *et al* (2016: 537) synthesized various definitions of touchpoints taking note of the advantages and limitations of each. Moreover, they proposed a comprehensive definition of touchpoints as, "any interaction, engagement or point-of-contact that a consumer has with a business, a brand or a service provider – before, during and after the service or product consumption journey". For the purposes of this study, this definition has been adopted; as it denotes a touchpoint as an interaction with a business, or a brand, and represents a unique experience within the customer experience journey. Therefore, a number of touchpoints come into play as the visitor experience journey begins – before, during and after the consumption stages. Ensuring that each touchpoint meets the visitors' needs is vital to deliver a value-added experience in the visitors' journey.

A number of platforms fit into this definition, including websites, word of mouth from other travellers and locals, and Visitor Information Centres, which are regarded as peculiar amongst many. The VIC is peculiar in two aspects. Firstly, a VIC is a major provider of information for visitors prior to, during and post-visit. Therefore, a VIC has the capacity to curate several touchpoints. Secondly, it serves as a direct engagement with visitors regarding their experiences. Therefore, the VIC is the most recognised external source of information, especially at the destination (Arana *et al*, 2015; Ballantyne *et al*, 2009; Deery *et al*, 2007; Li, Hwang & Fesenmaier, 1994; Lyu & Lee, 2015; Lyu & Hwang, 2015; Mistilis & D'ambra, 2010, 2008; Schliephack, Moyle & Weiler, 2013; Swart, 2016). A VIC is defined as a clearly labelled, publicly accessible, physical place, with personnel providing predominantly free-of-charge information to facilitate travellers' experiences (Pearce, 2004). This definition has been largely corroborated by several scholars (Arana *et al*, 2015; Ballantyne & Hughes, 2004; Ispas *et al*, 2014; Minghetti & Celotto, 2013; Tena & Raquel, 2014; Tourism Research Australia, 2016; Swart, 2016) and it is, therefore, used for the purposes of this study.

The information-seeking process is one of the integral stages in the decision-making process, on which marketers can capitalise to encourage visitors (Inversini *et al*, 2016). The process moves through the stages of dreaming, planning, booking, experience to post-trip evaluation. Intervistas (2010) and Ispas *et al* (2014) noted that VICs are used by visitors mainly for after sales support. That is to say, the visitor has already chosen the destination, but is looking for extra information on the product, in order to enhance the destination experience. Therefore, the VIC is often the first point-of-contact that visitors have with the destination, and hence, VICs have the opportunity to make “first impressions” regarding the destination (Mari, 2012; Swart, 2016; Tena & Raquel, 2014). From this premise, information provision by VICs is one area which requires particular attention as it contributes to increasing expenditure and length of stay (Carson, Adams, Deery, Jago & Daugherty, 2005; Intervistas, 2010).

The largest part of the tourist experience takes place at the destination (UNWTO, 2007). Inversini *et al* (2016) point out that by understanding the variety of touchpoints, which can create a connection with the consumer, businesses can strategically and effectively focus their efforts on designing and delivering memorable experiences at each single touchpoint. As such, VICs play an important role in the development of tourism in localities (Bedard *et al*, 2008; Intervistas, 2010; Rompf *et al*, 2005). They are vital initial touchpoints, which provide value to the visitors by providing information that allows them to make optimal decisions (Ballantyne & Hughes, 2004; De Ascaniis *et al*, 2012; Ortega & Rodriguez, 2007; Tena & Raquel, 2014; Tourism Research Australia, 2016, 2015, 2011). VICs influence the travel behaviour of visitors, their spending patterns and length of stay (Gretzel, 2013; De Ascaniis *et al*, 2012; Zeng, 2017). As a result, destinations which manage VICs, benefit from being aware of who visits the VICs; what information is important to such visitors; and how well the VIC functions in terms of providing information and services (Intervistas, 2010; Zeng, 2017).

A number of studies on VICs in Australia and the United States have been conducted. These have shown an increased recognition of the importance of VICs in the tourism landscape. This is in spite of easy access to online information (Lee, Yoo & Gretzel, 2016; Lyu & Lee, 2015; Wray *et al*, 2010). Mari (2012) argues that some visitors need a VIC to assist them in finding options and helping in the decision-making process. In the United States, a pre-visit and post-visit study in North Carolina, showed that VICs have the potential to influence the places tourists visit, and the time and money spent in the region. In Florida, VICs came second as tourists’ top information source, with the first choice being recommendations from friends and relatives (Tourism Research Australia, 2011).

A related study in Indiana VICs reported similar outcomes (Ballantyne *et al*, 2009). Rompf *et al* (2005) posited that the information obtained at these destination sources is likely to be acted upon because the visitor has initiated the request; the decision time is relatively immediate; and the visitor has pre-selected the 'local expert' or 'counselor' (Hwang & Li, 2008; Law, Leung & Buhalis, 2009; Wong & McKercher; 2011). Typically, VICs have been responsible for providing much-valued knowledge during the 'in-destination' stage, implying thereby that the contribution of VICs is very important at this stage.

1.3 VISITOR INFORMATION CENTRES IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

The importance and contribution of VICs from a global perspective has been highlighted above. The National Department of Tourism (2011) points out that VICs are the link between the tourism industry and visitors – both locally and internationally. VICs serve as vital contact-points providing “first impressions” on a destination, and furthermore, they provide value-added services to the visitors. South Africa has a number of VICs at various locations countrywide, some of which are government-owned while others are privately-owned (National Department of Tourism, 2015). Some of the Visitor Information Centres are closing down due to lack of funding (Gauteng Tourism Authority, 2014).

The contribution of VICs in destination success is clear (Ballantyne & Hughes, 2004; Ballantyne *et al*, 2009; Fallon & Kriwoken, 2002; Ispas *et al*, 2014; Tena & Raquel, 2014). However, the VIC closures in South Africa, particularly in Gauteng Province, raise some questions on the effective operation of the existing VICs. In South Africa, there are limited studies on the ability of VICs to deliver timely, useful information and knowledge to their visitors (National Department of Tourism, 2015).

Tourism is a service-intensive industry that depends on the quality of service to its customers; consequently, offering viable services to visitors is important to VICs. Therefore, the receipt and services provided by VICs should meet the requirements of visitors from different countries (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Tena & Raquel, 2014; Zeng, 2017). Beginning with these considerations, the research starts with a review of the academic literature as well as industry reports, and it assesses the activities undertaken by VICs internationally. This is done in order to make recommendations for improvement in Gauteng VICs in the 21st century.

This section has provided the background to the study. The next section outlines the problem statement in the context of South Africa. The primary and secondary objectives guiding this research are also presented.

1.4 PROBLEM STATEMENT

The majority of research on VICs has focused on the users and the non-users of VICs (Lyu & Lee, 2015; Mistilis & Gretzel, 2014b; Tourism Research Australia, 2011). Although VICs still represent the key information source, the existing models of operation are often obsolete and VICs may be unaware of evolving models for operating VICs (Minghetti & Celotto, 2013; Mistilis & D'ambra, 2008).

Recent studies have been conducted in developed countries with significant resources and well established tourism industries such as the United States of America, British Columbia, Canada, Northern Ireland, Britain, New Zealand, Spain and Italy (Cox & Wray, 2011:529; Tanaka, 2011). Minghetti and Celotto (2013) claim that there is a difference in response to tourism among the developed and developing nations. Hence, the need exists to conduct further research in VICs in less-developed countries and to ascertain the current performance of VICs. The National Department of Tourism (2015) further corroborates that there is limited research on VICs from an African perspective and specifically in South Africa.

Moreover, several of these studies are from a demand-side perspective as compared to the supply side. Less attention has been given to those involved in funding and operating these VICs such as managers, staff and owners (Fallon & Kriwoken, 2003; Smith & Holmes, 2012; Zehrer, Muskat & Muskat, 2014). Bedard *et al* (2008) and Zehrer *et al* (2014) are of the opinion that before organisations strive to meet visitors' demands, VICs need to conduct an introspect search and to enhance their internal capabilities. More knowledge is required on how VICs operate – from a staff and management perspective (i.e from a supply side perspective). This shortage in the supply-side perspective is in spite of the fact that VIC staff are regarded as influential and expert informants within VICs (Minghetti & Celotto, 2013; Smith & Holmes, 2012; Wong & McKercher, 2011). Zehrer *et al* (2014) further assert that visitors' satisfaction and components of their experience are an outcome of a successfully managed system. Therefore, to counter-balance the dominance of demand-driven research, Smith and Holmes (2012) and Zehrer *et al* (2014) heighten the need for studies that consider the perspectives of others, beyond the traditional studies, which focus on what visitors expect and demand from VICs. Therefore, this research aims to address the missing perspective of management and staff.

In the case of South Africa, several VICs have closed between 2011 and 2016. The National Department of Tourism (2011) established that there were 337 VICs in South Africa, as of 31 March 2010. The Gauteng Province then had 24 operational VICs. A follow-up assessment in 2012 indicated that the number was

declining, with Gauteng Province recording 13 operational VICs (National Department of Tourism, 2012). In 2015, the National Department of Tourism recorded 11 VICs under Gauteng Province, indicating a further decline (National Department of Tourism, 2015). There is fear that VICs will continue to close in the future, despite their documented contribution to the tourism industry as well as the success of destinations.

This is a challenge to an industry, whose main objective is to provide extensive and up-to-date information to the visitors. In addition, VICs, as players, are providing a reactive service to visitors' requests, marked with inconsistent service levels. There is a lack of standardised levels of information provision across VICs in the province. There is limited opportunity for some VICs to be exposed to best practices, where efforts towards service delivery are co-ordinated (Cohen, 2010; National Department of Tourism, 2015; South African Local Government Association, 2013). It is widely acknowledged that VICs are costly venues to maintain, and therefore, it is increasingly important to assess the effectiveness of VICs with respect to their influence on various travel-related decisions.

To summarise, the following research gaps have been identified in the context of VICs in Gauteng, South Africa: the number of VICs is declining particularly in Gauteng Province; VIC service level is below the expectation and is not uniform across Gauteng VICs; existing models of operation are often obsolete, with limited opportunity to be exposed to best practices; there are limited studies conducted from a supply-side perspective of VIC managers and staff: and there is need for research in less developed countries.

To address the above-mentioned gaps, a primary research objective and secondary research objectives have been developed, which are presented next.

1.5 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1.5.1 Primary research objective

To develop a best practice framework for Visitor Information Centres in Gauteng Province, South Africa.

1.5.2 Secondary research objectives

In order to achieve the primary objective, the following secondary research objectives were identified:

1. To conceptualise VICs within the context of the tourism industry;

2. To conduct a literature review and explore examples and case studies on the operation of successful VICs;
3. To ascertain the opinions of staff and managers through surveys on the current situation in Gauteng VICs, focusing on:
 - i. Functions of Gauteng VICs;
 - ii. Information dissemination and the equipping of staff;
 - iii. Technology adoption and usage;
 - iv. Funding for VIC operations; and
 - v. Accreditation and visitor information networks.
4. To compare practices in the operation of Gauteng VICs with the best practices internationally.

In order to address the research objectives, this study used the following research methodology.

1.6 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology employed includes secondary and primary data. Secondary research is discussed in Section 1.6.1, followed by primary research in Section 1.6.2.

1.6.1 Secondary research

Secondary research is the collection of studies, which have been published by other authors. Finn and Elliot (2000) emphasise that the research topic must be intensively conceptualised through existing research. This research started with a literature review. Cooper and Schindler (2011) add that it is always advisable to do desk-research first, which involves the scanning of available secondary data sources before engaging in a primary data search. The literature review was generated to provide a firm background for the empirical research (Femenia-Serra, Neuhofer & Ivars-Baidal, 2018). Previous research and academic articles were reviewed in order to understand consumers' use of information sources for trip-planning, and the range of operating and funding models used by VICs (Buhalis & Wagner, 2012; Tourism Research Australia, 2015). The search was mainly limited to peer-reviewed academic journals, which were in English, since academic journals generally contain advanced knowledge in any field (Mustak, Jaakkola & Halinen, 2013; Saunders, Thornhill & Lewis, 2007). This best practice review formed the basis for developing both the key informant and staff surveys. A list of the sources used is provided at the end of this dissertation.

The literature review consists of two chapters. Chapter 2 covers the conceptualisation of VICs in the tourism industry. It provides the overview of the purpose and the role of VICs; how visitors use VICs; and

the impact of VIC information on visitors' travel decisions. Chapter 3 explores the themes in the successful operation of VICs. The themes are information dissemination and equipping of staff; technology adoption and usage in VICs; funding for VIC operations; and accreditation and visitor information networks. The information gathered in these two chapters provides a checklist of items considered important for the operation of VICs (Carson *et al*, 2005; Femenia-Serra *et al*, 2018). In addition, the literature highlights some best practice examples internationally; and it generates new perspectives on the research topic.

Neuhofer, Buhalis and Ladkin (2013) argue that tourism information providers are currently relying on best-practice examples from the industry and other countries to improve their services. The United States, Australia, New Zealand and Canada are therefore considered. These countries have significant resources and tourism departments that were established a long time ago. The first tourism department was established in New Zealand in 1903. In addition, British Columbia in Canada is recognised worldwide as a leader in destination marketing and tourism development. For these reasons, several examples from VICs globally and two specific case studies are considered in the literature review in order to broaden understanding on best practices on VICs.

1.6.2 Primary research

The interrogation of literature provided crucial concepts regarding the operation of VICs and examples of best practices. Primary research was then conducted for the purpose of achieving the research objectives. The stages followed to gather the primary data are discussed next.

1.6.3 Research design

Research design is the blue-print of carrying out research. In other words, the research design articulates the purpose of the research, what data are required, what methods are going to be used to gather the data and how the data are going to answer the research questions at hand (Cooper & Schindler, 2011). The research design was exploratory in the sense that it searched for new insights and aimed to address VICs in a different way – by exploring the supply side of VICs with a focus on determining best practices for Gauteng VICs. The literature review guided the design of the research instruments, thus giving the research a theoretical grounding.

A two-tiered approach was followed by the researcher via two research instruments. The first instrument referred to as the 'staff survey' was given to staff in conduct with visitors. The second research instrument, referred to as the 'key informant survey' was given to VIC managers. In cases where the

manager was in contact with visitors, s/he was requested to answer both the staff and the key informant surveys.

Both surveys made use of both qualitative and quantitative data. Open-ended questions were included to obtain qualitative data in order to enrich the results. These questions provided participants with the opportunity to voice their ideas and opinions (Fallon & Kriwoken, 2002). Closed questions (to generate quantitative data) were used to obtain more specific responses from the respondents (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011).

1.6.4 Population, sampling frame, sample for staff and units of analysis

Before research is undertaken, a representative sample has to be obtained. Sampling refers to that part of the population selected for investigation (Bryman, 2004). Sampling theories suggest that the more representative view is to study the whole population (Sherfield, 2002). For this study, the National Department of Tourism website was used to identify the VICs within Gauteng. The primary data collection consisted of two tiers: the VIC managers and the staff in contact with the visitors. These were the target populations and the units of analysis. They are discussed separately below.

1.6.4.1 Staff survey

To form part of the unit of analysis for the staff survey, staff needed to be employed at Gauteng VICs registered with the National Department of Tourism, and needed to have contact with visitors. The staff survey (Appendix D) was developed by the researcher but also used some questions from previous surveys by other researchers, such as Deery *et al* (2007) and Carson *et al* (2005). The self-designed questions were wholly informed by the literature. Academic input was provided by the supervisors and the statistician. Further input came from the industry via a pilot study with the Director of Research and Visitor Services Manager, both from the National Department of Tourism. The survey was undertaken from October 2017 to January 2018.

Snowball sampling was employed to access Gauteng VIC staff members, who were in contact with visitors was compiled. A snowball sample meant that each respondent was asked to choose further respondents, who would be eligible for the study (Cohen *et al*, 2011; Dusek, Yurova & Ruppel, 2015). All staff identified in this manner were given a copy of the staff survey. Snowball sampling was chosen because the researcher was able to identify the manager of the VIC, who could then point the researcher to the staff. It was not possible for the researcher to do it independently as some of the staff are volunteers and some work shifts, making it hard to access them.

1.6.4.2 Key informant survey

The managers of the eight participating VICs were the unit of analysis for the key informant survey. A self-designed key informant survey (Appendix E) was developed and informed by the literature. Similarly, as in the staff survey, the survey was piloted with the Director of Research and the Visitor Services manager, from the National Department of Tourism, who then provided their feedback. A panel of professionals from academia added their input to the survey instrument. At each stage, the necessary changes were effected until an appropriate survey instrument was finalised.

A **purposive or purposeful** sampling strategy was used to extract information-rich responses from the managers. Purposive sampling was chosen because it allows the researcher to hand-pick respondents based on particular characteristics sought (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). In this research, VIC managers were sought out since they were deemed to be informed on the overall operations of the VICs and have knowledge on finances, accreditation and visitor information networking (Fallon & Kriwoken, 2003). The research was undertaken from November 2017 to January 2018.

1.6.5 Data collection and analysis

There are 11 VICs registered with the National Department of Tourism (Appendix C). The researcher attempted to contact each of the 11 VICs. Out of the 11, eight agreed to participate namely: Church Square, Hatfield, Wonderboom, Mogale, Zinikele, OR Tambo, Emfuleni and Westrand VICs. The data were collected at eight VICs between November 2017 and January 2018. This served as an introduction and invitation to participate in the research. On the agreed date and time, the researcher approached the managers, requesting their respective VIC staff to be part of the research. This assisted in gaining familiarity with the potential respondents. The data were collected from the VIC staff, via the staff survey, and from the managers via the key informant survey. After the staff and key informants had completed the surveys, the researcher collected the surveys from the VICs. Upon collection of the data, the following step was the data processing, which involved coding, editing and capturing, as well as the analysis and the drawing of conclusions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The data analysis is done in Chapter 5 and consists of three parts, namely Part 1: Staff and key informant responses on the functions of Visitor Information Centres; Part 2: Key informant responses excluding key informant survey Question 1 and Part 3: A best practice framework for Gauteng Visitor Information Centres.

1.6.5.1 Qualitative data analysis

This study used **thematic content analysis** for analysing the qualitative data. The procedure was an iterative process – going back and forth and constantly reviewing and revising. This is one of the strong underpinnings of many qualitative systems of analysis (Moore, Smallman, Wilson & Simmonds, 2012). Qualitative data, from the open-ended questions in both surveys were entered into an Excel spreadsheet and manually analysed by searching for themes according to each question. A count of similar, or related responses, played a significant part in the analysis.

The researcher made use of inductive thematic analysis based on the raw data. Inductive thematic analysis is directly linked to the data gathered, without trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame, or the researcher's existing preconceptions. This process is linked to Secondary Research Objective 3, which sought the opinions of the staff and those of the key informants on the functions of VICs, information and the equipping of staff, technology adoption and usage, funding for VIC operations, and accreditation and visitor information networks. The themes are reported in Chapter 5 of this dissertation.

1.6.5.2 Quantitative analysis

Due to the nature and aims of the staff survey, the data for the closed questions were entered into an SPSS system to provide the **descriptive statistics**. The study did not aim to identify any relationship between the variables. The main objective of the descriptive statistics was to determine facts regarding the current situation of Gauteng VICs. Cohen *et al* (2011) note that quantitative data analysis sometimes aims to simply describe the phenomenon of interest. Descriptive statistics in the form of measures of frequencies, percentages and cross-tabulations provided an effective, simple and rigorous way of arranging the data and presenting the results (Cohen *et al*, 2007). As per the qualitative analysis discussed above, the quantitative analysis also assisted in achieving Secondary Research Objective 3.

1.6.6 Ethical clearance

The research was regarded as non-invasive, although it involved human subjects. Precautions were taken to protect the participants' rights; and to ensure that the research caused no harm. To ensure that the research would be conducted in an ethical manner, the researcher applied for and was granted ethical clearance from the Research Ethics Review Committee in the College of Economic and Management Sciences at UNISA. The ethical clearance certificate can be seen in Appendix A. Furthermore, the Gauteng Tourism Authority (GTA) also gave permission for the research to be conducted. The GTA letter can be seen in Appendix B.

1.7 DELIMITATION OF THE RESEARCH SITES

The Gauteng Province has been chosen as the jurisdiction under study. Tena and Raquel (2014) and Tourism Research Australia (2015) noted that VICs are very important in the most urbanised destinations to advise the visitor who has arrived in the city. Gauteng Province is the most urbanised and fast-paced economic powerhouse in South Africa, therefore it is ideal for this research (Gauteng Tourism Authority, 2011; National Department of Tourism, 2015).

Gauteng is one of the most-visited provinces for both local and international tourists, as well as the regional hub en-route to other destinations (Madondo, 2016:18). The province has an excellent framework of versatile tourism services, ranging from an urban nightlife, upmarket shopping malls, historical and cultural sites, outdoor landscapes and upmarket conference facilities for business tourists. VICs, which are affiliated to the National Department of Tourism and registered on the National Department of Tourism's website were targeted. The VICs included Wonderboom, Church Square, Emfuleni, Zinikele, Benoni, Mogale, Hatfield, OR Tambo, Johannesburg Tourism Company, Soweto Tourism Information Centre and Stonehaven on Vaal Visitor Information Centre. The details of the VICs which participated in the survey are attached in the Appendix C. The findings from this study on Gauteng VICs can be applied to and adopted in other VICs in South Africa.

1.8 DELINEATION OF THE PROJECT

In seeking to develop the best practices for VICs, it is important to set some boundaries for the research. These boundaries are important in giving the study direction. The research does not aim to explore and exhaust all the themes in the operation of VICs. This research set out to review literature and global best-practice examples in the operation of successful VICs. The researcher then gathered primary data to understand the current situation, and to compare this with international best practices and how these could be adopted in local VICs. The research does not aim to criticise the existing mechanisms in operating VICs but instead, it seeks to complement and strengthen them, in order to increase VIC performance. The next section defines the terms pertinent to the study.

1.9 KEY TERMS

- **Visitor/tourist/traveller/customer** - One of the earliest definitions defines tourists as people on temporary trips away from home who spend money derived from their home area and not from the place being visited (Ogilvie, 1933: 2). Several definitions were developed to differentiate

between a tourist and a visitor. The International Union of Official Travel Organisations (1968) which later became the UNWTO defines the visitor as a person who travels to another country other than that of residence, for any reason other than work. UNWTO (2008) defines a **visitor** as a traveller taking a trip to a main destination outside his/her usual environment, for less than a year, for any main purpose (business, leisure or other personal purpose) other than to be employed by a resident entity in the country or place visited. The UNWTO (2014) regarded a tourist as a visitor if his/her trip included an overnight stay. Many scholars base their definitions on the UNWTO and use other terms such as traveller, tourist and excursionist (Ghanem, 2017; Pearce, 2012; Yu, Kim, Chen & Schwartz, 2012). **For the purposes of this dissertation, the UNWTO (2014: 3) definition is used and the terms visitor, traveller, consumer and customer are used interchangeably.**

- **Visitor Information Centre:** A clearly labelled, publicly accessible, physical space with personnel, providing predominantly free-of-charge information to facilitate travellers' experiences (Draper, 2016; Pearce, 2004 :8; Smith & Holmes; 2012: 563, Minghetti & Celotto, 2013: 564).
- **Best practice:** Best practice exemplifies an initiative and innovation, and it represents a significant improvement over traditional practices. Neuhofer *et al* (2013) add that it is the most popular or widespread practice, or evidence of a success story. For the purposes of this study, best practice is defined as those practices that prove effective in enhancing and improving the sustainable performance of a VIC (Buhalis & Wagner, 2012; Cox & Wray, 2011: 524; Neuhofer *et al*, 2013).
- **Volunteer:** A person who, on a regular basis, contributes his or her time and energy to a voluntary agency, statutory body, and to a social or self-help group, without being paid (Smith & Holmes, 2012; Holmes, Smith, Lockstone-Binney & Baum, 2010: 6).
- **Best practice framework:** It is a summary of elements considered to indicate best practice based on the information gathered from both literature and responses from respondents.

1.10 RELEVANCE OF THE STUDY

This study provides two major contributions. Firstly, the research is mainly designed to benefit VIC managers. It provides important insights regarding the management and operation of VICs, specifically the information resources and skills required by their staff. Secondly, it raises the awareness of related stakeholders involved in VICs. These include potential funders, the personnel of Gauteng Tourism Authority and the National Department of Tourism, by profiling a list of options available to them in

selecting the best management approach, in an attempt to improve the functioning of VICs at the destination level. Establishing effective VICs at the destination level is in the best interests of the national and provincial destination management organisations (DMOs) for the overall success of the tourism industry (Bedard *et al*, 2008; Cox & Wray, 2011).

1.11 OUTLINE OF THE DISSERTATION

Figure 1.1 below illustrates the research process followed, and the Chapter outline.

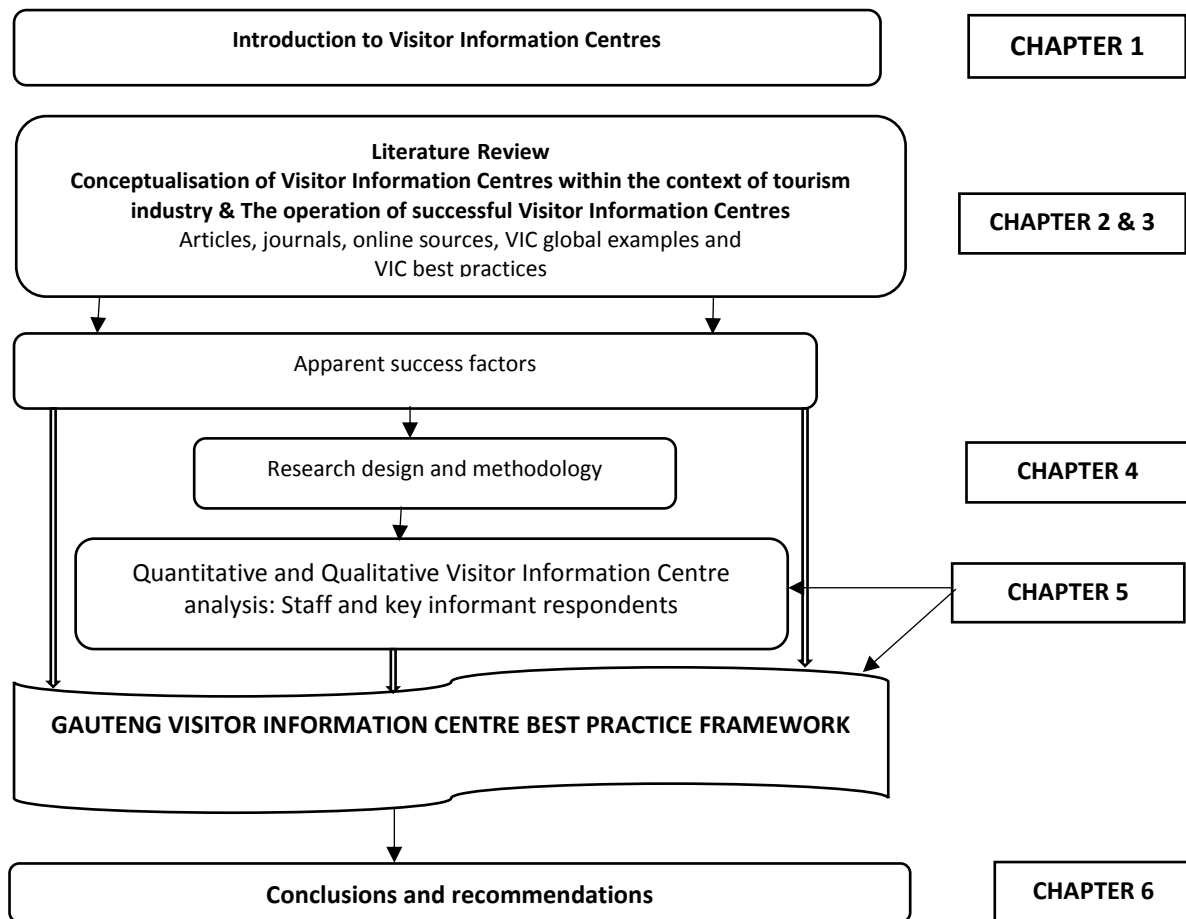


Figure 1.1 Research process and study outline

In **Chapter 1**, an orientation to the research is provided. The background and statement of the problem is presented, as well as the primary and the secondary research objectives. The methodological approaches used to provide answers to the research problem are then provided. The key terms are also defined, and the necessary boundaries of the research are highlighted to delineate the study.

The literature review consists of two chapters. In **Chapter 2**, the conceptualisation of VICs in the context of the tourism industry is discussed. The theoretical background of VICs from a global perspective, with

a special focus on VIC functions and the impact of VICs on visitors travel plans is also explored. **Chapter 3** explores the themes in the successful operation of VICs, which are supported by examples and case studies of VIC operation in other jurisdictions. The themes are information dissemination and the equipping of staff, technology uptake and usage, funding for VIC operations, and accreditation and visitor information networking. The chapter also continues to highlight and discuss apparent success factors found in the literature and how they have been adopted and implemented in other countries. This literature contextualises the research by focusing on best practices in VICs globally. The literature formed the basis for the research instruments designed by the researcher in order to collect primary data.

Chapter 4 discusses the research methodology, which includes the research site; sampling; the research design; the instruments used to gather the data; the methods used to ensure research validity; and the process of data collection. The chapter concludes with the approaches used for data analysis. **Chapter 5** provides an analysis and discussion of the research findings and links them to the literature in Chapters 2 and 3. The chapter is divided into three parts namely **Part 1**: Staff and key informant responses on the functions of Visitor Information Centres, **Part 2**: Key informant responses and **Part 3**: Best practice framework for Gauteng VICs. An overview of the research done is provided in **Chapter 6**, highlighting the main findings and conclusions. Recommendations for future research are presented last, after which the dissertation is brought to a close.

CHAPTER 2

CONCEPTUALISATION OF VISITOR INFORMATION CENTRES WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THE TOURISM INDUSTRY

2.1 INTRODUCTION TO VISITOR INFORMATION CENTRES

Visitor Information Centres play an important role in the tourism industry. They have an impact on the economic activity of a region through influencing trip plans, choice of attractions and services to visit and the length of stay in the destination (Swart, 2016; Tourism Research Australia, 2014; Tourism Research Australia; 2016). In Chapter Two, the conceptualisation of VICs within the context of the tourism industry is discussed in depth (the first secondary objective of this study). The chapter follows the flow diagram presented in Figure 2.1.

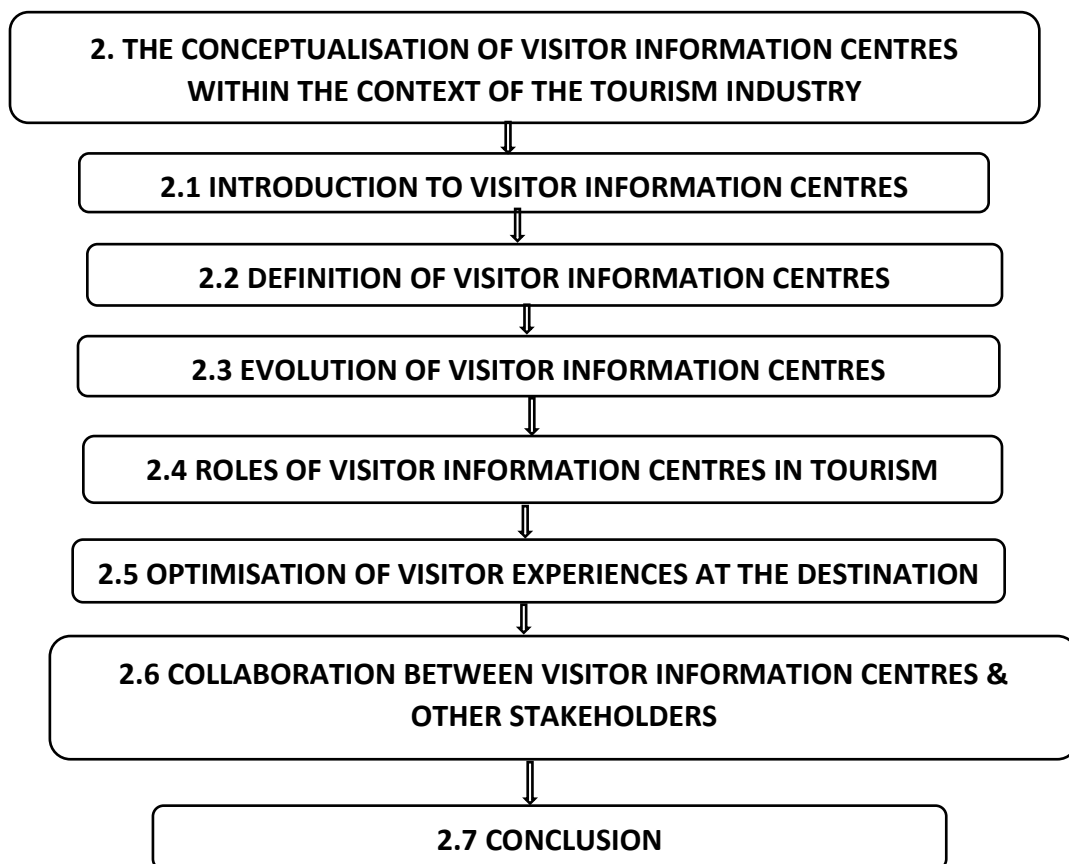


Figure 2.1: Flow diagram of Chapter 2

Tourism is acknowledged as an information-intensive industry (Lyu & Lee, 2015; Minghetti & Celotto, 2013; Mistilis & D'ambra, 2008). Providing valuable information to tourists before, during and after the trip, and helping them to have fulfilling experiences, is one of the crucial factors for destination success

(Arturo *et al*, 2010; Cox & Wray, 2011; Neuhofer *et al*, 2013; Mistilis & Gretzel, 2014a; Tena & Raquel, 2014; Tourism Research Australia, 2016). VICs are one of the recognised and leading destination touchpoints for informing and educating tourists about destination offerings (De Ascaniis *et al*, 2012; Lee *et al*, 2016; Li *et al*, 1994).

Typically, VICs have been responsible for providing much-valued local information during the ‘in-destination stage’ (Mistilis & D’ambra, 2010; De Ascaniis *et al*, 2012; McIlrath & Gordon, 2015; Mistilis & Gretzel, 2014a; Tourism Research Australia, 2016; Wray, Lebski & Fox, 2016). This is not withstanding the increased use of technology (Ballantyne *et al*, 2009; De Ascaniis *et al*, 2012; Fallon & Kriwoken, 2002; Mistilis & D’ambra, 2008; Mari, 2012; Mistilis & Gretzel, 2014b; Tourism Research Australia, 2014, 2015, 2016). VICs are often the main source of information for tourists during the trip, as is evidenced by the example in Table 2.1 from New South Wales, Australia.

Table 2.1 Top 10 information sources used by visitors in-destination (Tourism Research Australia, 2016).

Top 10 sources during the visit	Percentage (%)
Visited the VICs at the destination	42
Talked to locals for advice	23
Online travel sites	14
Recommendation from friends/relatives	12
Visited website of destination VICs	11
Referrals/word-of-mouth from locals	10
Travel book, guide, brochure (not online)	9
Talked to waiter/ café staff	9
Travel desk at accommodation establishment	8
Social media	7

Reflecting on the findings from Table 2.1 above, VICs featured prominently during the trip, as compared to the other sources. In this study in New South Wales, visitors cited the credibility and the comprehensiveness of the information from the VIC as being more important during their stay than during the pre-visit period (Tourism Research Australia, 2016). Several scholars corroborate these findings (Hobbin, 1999; Mistilis & Gretzel, 2014a). In developed countries, the VIC is regarded as a showcase for a destination; and they must set the standard in terms of quality, integrity and customer service,

which other industry operators may follow (Minghetti & Celotto, 2013; Tena & Raquel, 2014; Tourism & Events Queensland, 2013b). This also happens in less-developed countries, such as South Africa (National Department of Tourism, 2015; Wessels, 2014).

Fallon and Kriwoken (2002) also pointed out that VICs provide a focus for attracting visitors and developing ancillary services; and that they should not be underestimated as an important and influential source of visitor information in the region (Hobbin, 1999; Mari, 2012). Therefore, for those travelling to a destination, local up-to-date information at these destination touchpoints is required to ensure the best experiences for tourists during their trip (De Ascaniis *et al*, 2012; Ispas *et al*, 2014; Mistilis & Gretzel, 2014a; Tena & Raquel, 2014; Tourism Research Australia, 2016).

The discourse above confirms the results from previous studies (Lyu & Lee, 2015; Mistilis & Gretzel, 2014b; Tavares, Neves & Sawant, 2018), namely that VICs still have an important role to play, despite the increasing technology usage both in the pre-trip phase and after arrival at the destination. The discussion further confirms that VICs have great potential for influencing visitors' itineraries within the destination and even destinations further afield.

The Primary research objective is to develop a best practice framework that could assist in the operation of VICs in Gauteng Province. This study also provides constructive avenues, which could help tourism authorities develop alternative VIC services and implement new operational strategies for optimal performance. The findings from this research can also be applied to other VICs to improve their operations. Starting from this consideration, the researcher consults the literature from various destinations, in order to understand visitors' use of VICs and the range of operating and funding models available for VICs. In addition, the literature also discusses some best practice examples which have been successfully implemented in other jurisdictions. The term 'best practice' represents a vague term, but it is widely used in the business context to describe leading industry cases, that are role models to success (Cox & Wray, 2011; Neuhofer, Buhalis & Ladkin, 2015). While it can be acknowledged that researchers can learn from failed practices, this research is aimed at identifying and reporting best practices only. Success stories only are therefore reviewed. The value of studying and learning from the reputable practices of others is clearly valuable (Cox & Wray, 2011; Law *et al*, 2009). This literature was deemed critical to the exploration of how VICs could improve operations; and it provides a basis for determining the minimum standards and processes, which VICs need to achieve when providing quality customer service.

The literature review focuses on the supply side, rather than on the demand side of VICs. Much research in tourism has been demand-driven, despite the fact that success is also dependent on the service provider (Hwang & Li, 2008; Jago & Deery, 2002; Zehrer *et al*, 2014). Additionally, Jago and Deery (2002) note that they remain unconvinced in including consumer expectations alone when measuring service quality. Focusing only on the visitors' point of view may be mono-dimensional, yet much research follows this route (Arana *et al*, 2015; Ballantyne *et al*, 2009; De Ascaniis *et al*, 2012; Fallon & Kriwoken, 2003; Ortega & Rodriguez, 2007). Zehrer *et al* (2014) further note that many researchers are putting far more effort into understanding demand-driven constructs in tourism, as compared to investigating the enabling factors. This current research factors in the management perspective, which is afforded little attention in previous research (Fallon & Kriwoken 2003; Zehrer *et al*, 2014).

It is acknowledged that studies in VICs are scanty and often scattered across different research streams, such as technology usage in VICs (Deery *et al*, 2007; Lyu & Lee, 2015), volunteer staff in VICs (Smith & Holmes, 2012) and accreditation in VICs (Hobbin, 1999; Tourism & Events Queensland, 2013a). The findings from these studies have not been considered in the broader overview of the effective functioning of VICs. Therefore, this research provides a framework to VIC management and staff on improving their operations (Alonso & Liu, 2012; Fallon & Kriwoken, 2002), and thereby reducing the knowledge gap by providing the supply-side perspective (Cox & Wray, 2011; Hobbin, 1999; Zehrer *et al*, 2014).

Critical issues which are found in the literature are discussed in different contexts. This chapter begins by defining the concept of the VIC (Section 2.2), and providing a background on their evolution (Section 2.3). It will then focus on the contribution of VICs in the tourism activity of their respective regions, and the roles played by VICs (Section 2.4). The Four-Plus model developed by Pearce (2004) is used to explore the roles of VICs, namely the promotion of destination attractions, orientation and the enhancement of destination attractions, substitution of on-site visits, the control and the filtering of visitor flows and community integration. These roles are depicted in Figure 2.3, and are then discussed. Thereafter, the literature explains the optimisation of visitor experiences in various tourism regions (Section 2.5), which include Australia, New Zealand, Canada, America and British Columbia. Finally, Section 2.6 considers collaboration between VICs and State Tourism Organisations (STOs). The next section defines VICs.

2.2 DEFINITION OF VISITOR INFORMATION CENTRE

Pearce (2004) defines a VIC as a clearly labelled, publicly accessible, physical place with personnel, providing predominantly free-of-charge information to facilitate travellers' experiences. Arana *et al* (2015) refer to VICs as Tourist Information Offices (TIOs), and use the definition by Pearce (2004), which has been widely accepted by a number of scholars (Arana *et al*, 2015; Ballantyne & Hughes, 2004; Ballantyne *et al*, 2009; Ballantyne, Hughes, Deery & Bond, 2007; Draper, 2016; Ispas *et al*, 2014; Minghetti & Celotto, 2013; Tena & Raquel, 2014; Tourism Research Australia, 2016). Lyu and Lee (2015) referred to VICs as welcome centres, or visitor centres, which are predominantly responsible for disseminating information. In the United Kingdom, Sherfield (2000) regards VICs as Tourist Information Centres (TICs), having the responsibility of dispensing tourist information. The National Department of Tourism (2015) defines a VIC as a physical location that provides tourist information to visitors who tour in the vicinity of an area.

In America, where the concept of VICs originated, they are regarded as Convention and Visitors Bureaux (CVBs) with the aim of promoting and encouraging visitors to maximise their experience (Morrison, Bruen & Anderson, 1997). CVBs may grow and may have other subsidiaries operating under them, with the mandate of dispensing tourism information to the travelling public. From the above definitions, two conclusions are apparent: firstly, the principal reason of VICs is to disseminate information to visitors – both in the physical and virtual sphere. Secondly, VICs are aimed at enhancing visitor experiences, when they are already in their destination. Central and common to all these definitions are that the information provided is predominantly free-of-charge; and it is dispensed by the staff.

This discussion reveals that several names are used to refer to VICs. These are summarised in Table 2.2 which follows.

Table 2.2 Names used for VICs, according to jurisdiction

Name	Jurisdiction/destination	Authors
Tourist Information Centre	United Kingdom, Zimbabwe	Sherfield (2002), Ispas <i>et al</i> (2104), Tena and Raquel (2014).
Visitor Centre	America, Australia	Lyu and Lee (2015)
Tourist Centre	America, Australia	Alonso and Liu (2012)
Tourist Bureau	America, Western Australia	Western Australia Tourism Commission (2003)
Tourist Information Offices (TIOs)	Italy	Minghetti and Celotto (2013)
Welcome Centres/ Visitor Centre	USA, Australia	Alonso and Liu (2012), Hobbin (1999), Lyu and Lee (2015).
Visitor Information Centre	Australia, New Zealand, South Africa	Ballantyne <i>et al</i> (2009), Deery <i>et al</i> (2007), Hobbin (1999), Tourism Research Australia (2016).
Conventional Visitor Bureaus (CVBs).	America	Morrison, Bruen and Anderson (1997).
i-SITEs	New Zealand	Tourism and Events Queensland (2013)

Trends have moved from where tourists have become spectators or recipients of services to where they are participants and interact with the environment. In addition, the term ‘tourist’ seems to apply to one who is on holiday; whereas ‘visitor’ is inclined towards special interest groups, business visitors, convention delegates, events participants, sport participants and international travellers. For consistency with these industry trends and for the purposes of this study, the term Visitor Information Centre (VIC) is adopted. In addition, the definition by Pearce (2004) is used because it outlines personnel as the principal vehicle in dispensing visitor information. A number of scholars have accepted Pearce’s (2004) definition as a working definition (Arana *et al*, 2015; Ballantyne *et al*, 2009; Deery *et al*, 2007; Minghetti & Celotto, 2013; Mistilis & Gretzel, 2014a). For the purposes of this study, the terms consumer, clients, visitors, customers, tourists, travellers and travelling public are used interchangeably

For these reasons, this study only considers VICs which are staffed and are giving visitor information for free to the travelling public. To sum up, VICs can assist in establishing a destination as a visitor-friendly area, effectively promoting local, regional and country-wide assets. The VIC concept has its roots in the past, but is now facing challenges due to new technology and visitor trends.

2.3 EVOLUTION OF VISITOR INFORMATION CENTRES

Figure 2.2 below shows the major milestones in the evolution of VICs since 1896 in the United States of America. An elaboration of these milestones will follow.

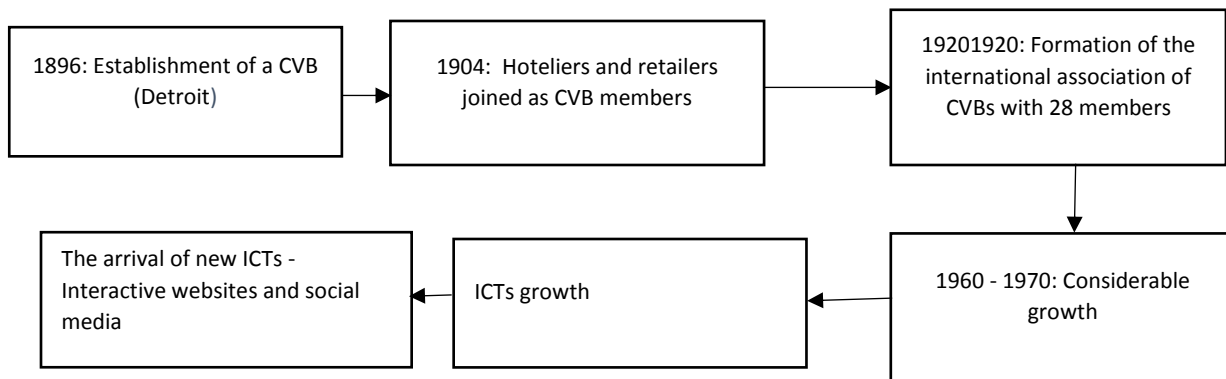


Figure 2.2 Milestones in the history of VICs (Adapted from Tena & Raquel, 2014)

The concept of the VIC originated in the United States of America (Detroit) in February 1896, with the aim of attracting conventions to cities (Beldona, Morrison & Anderson, 2008:42; Ford & Peeper, 2007:1105; Lee, Lee & Jones, 2015; Morrison, Bruen & Anderson, 1997). The VICs were known as Convention and Visitors Bureaux (CVBs). Detroit is recognised as the destination where the formal beginning of the CVB industry occurred; although it was in existence prior to the recorded time. CVBs were part of the destination marketing organisations (DMOs), playing a central role in the marketing of geographic areas (Lee *et al*, 2015:3). They served as the official contact points in the destination. As tourism was becoming a significant revenue earner, CVBs became important over the years; and they have played an important role in economic development. CVBs did not own and control the products or services they were marketing, but they were held accountable for the effective marketing of their destinations. In this sense, CVBs were to provide official, unbiased information about the destination and the available facilities (Morrison *et al*, 1997).

The basis for the formation of CVBs was that businesses should come together to organise a formal and organised promotion of Detroit, as a desirable convention destination, and to share knowledge. After establishment in 1896, members from the hospitality and retail sectors joined. This development led to the association rebranding in 1920, in order to cater for the travellers (visitors) coming into their localities. At that stage, the association had 28 members only. There was a gradual development from 1920 to the 1960s. This was followed by a considerable growth from 1960 to 1970 which saw the membership rise to 394, with members in 25 different countries by 1993.

CVBs went through many changes until after the 1900s, when the concept was widely adopted in other countries like New Zealand, and later Australia (Ford & Peeper, 2007). In Canada, VICs became popular around 1960. The CVBs evolved as points-of-contact with visitors, where leaflets were disseminated. With the passing of time, gifts, souvenirs and other local products were added to the retail line.

CVBs received grants from local government and organisations that benefited the most from the information they provided. The organisations included hoteliers and restaurants as well as the cities themselves (Ford and Peeper, 2007). Since ICTs have become important across all industries, VICs are compelled to adapt to the ICT era. This subject is mainly dealt with in Chapter 3, which considers technology uptake in VICs.

The rationale for an overview of the evolution of the destination management and marketing organisations is to provide evidence that VICs are not new in the tourism industry. In spite of these claims, they have received less academic interest and focus than other aspects of tourism management. Hence, this work will attempt to reduce this gap in the tourism destination organisations' literature. Destination management and destination marketing organisations are becoming increasingly important in many tourism destinations, due to the growth of tourism and reliance by many developing and developed economies on the tourism industry.

To conclude, the evolution of VICs dates back to the late 1800s. VICs had the monopoly over destination information; and they were valued as important destination contact points for visitors and the industry (Tavares *et al*, 2018; Tena & Raquel, 2014; Tourism & Research Australia, 2016). To date, the VIC is still acknowledged as a vehicle in engaging with visitors. With the advancement in technology, VICs are under pressure to change how they engage with visitors and disseminate information. The next section focuses on the roles of VICs in the tourism industry.

2.4 ROLES OF VISITOR INFORMATION CENTRES

VICs play a critical role in a destination's success. They need to satisfy the needs of tourists, the tourist industry and the community. At an international level, their usefulness and necessity are appreciated. Some studies note a positive relationship between the visitors' positive experiences and the presence of VICs in the destination (Alonso & Liu, 2012; Bornhorst, Ritchie & Sheehan, 2010; Mistilis & D'ambra, 2008; De Ascaniis *et al*, 2012; Lyu & Hwang, 2015; Pearce, 2004; Tena & Raquel, 2014). VICs set the stage for a visitor's experience within a destination, thereby helping to establish a consumer's 'first' impression (Lyu & Hwang, 2015; Lyu & Lee, 2015).

Pearce (2004) notes an increase of VICs in countries, such as the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Korea. A number of researchers record an emerging increase of VICs in Asian destinations and Europe, despite the growing use of the Internet and mobile technologies (Arana *et al*, 2015; Ballantyne

et al, 2009; De Ascaniis *et al*, 2012; Fallon & Kriwoken, 2003; Haerberlin Consulting, 2014; Lyu & Hwang, 2015; Tourism Research Australia, 2014, 2016).

The literature which has been reviewed thus far, underscores the principal mission of VICs as information dissemination. In accord with Deery *et al* (2007) and Tourism Research Australia (2016), one of the keys to maximising tourism potential is to have a fully informed market (Arturo *et al*, 2010; Mistilis & D'ambra, 2008; Tena & Raquel, 2014). However, the role of VICs transcends beyond the mere need to inform, assist and entertain visitors (Alonso & Liu, 2012; Ballantyne *et al*, 2009; Fallon & Kriwoken, 2003; Pearce, 2004). Various authors such as Ballantyne *et al* (2009) and Pearce (2004) suggest that there are other functions which VICs undertake.

Pearce (2004) in his Four-Plus model outlines the roles performed by VICs, which he acknowledges are undertaken in different magnitudes, depending on the location of the VICs and the nature of the attraction in the surroundings. These functions are outlined in Figure 2.3 below in the form of the Four-Plus Model. The Four-Plus Model has five components, namely:

- a) Promotion of the destination;
- b) Orientation and enhancement of the destination attractions;
- c) Substitution for on-site visits;
- d) Control and filtering of visitor flows; and
- e) The community integration function.

This model also identifies features regarded as important by tourists (Ballantyne *et al*, 2009). Each of these functions is depicted in Figure 2.3 that follows.

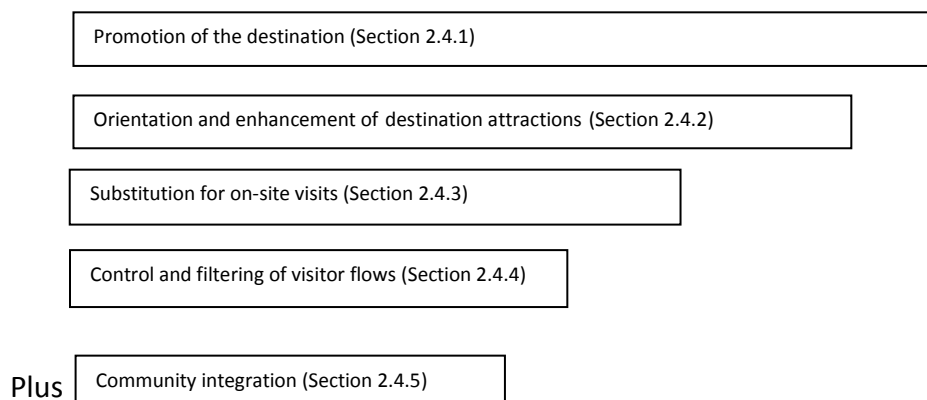


Figure 2.3 Roles of VICs: The Four-Plus Model (Pearce, 2004).

Each of these five functions (components) of the Four-Plus model are discussed next.

2.4.1 Promotion of the destination attractions

The VIC actively seeks to increase tourist demand by promoting the attractions of the region, or the area as a tourism destination, often also with the aim of increasing visitor expenditure and length of stay (Ballantyne *et al*, 2009; Cox & Wray, 2011; Mistilis & D'ambra, 2008; Tena & Raquel, 2014; Vietnam Tourist Information Centre Guide, 2013). VICs have a special relevance in promotion. The objective of promoting an area is principally achieved through information dissemination using a variety of media and resources which include brochures and the web (Mistilis & D'ambra, 2008; De Ascaniis *et al*, 2012; Tourism Research Australia, 2011). Information provision is a vital part of the marketing process at each stage of the visitor's journey.

Information obtained in VICs has an influence on travel behaviour; that is to say, visitors use this information when choosing attractions they intend to visit, the amount of time and money they are going to spend, and in planning their future trips (Hobbin, 1999; Kathri, 2019; Tourism Research Australia, 2011; Tourism Research Australia, 2016; Zeng, 2017). In addition to providing a valuable welcome and information service, VICs play a key role in converting the marketing aspirations into effective customer relations management (CRM). This role is essentially for stimulating tourist demand, as well as increasing tourist expenditure in a defined locality. The main commercial activities associated with the promotion function are the provision of booking services and the sales of local products. This function is closely linked to the provision of information, which is trustworthy, and not aimed at benefiting the VIC, but benefiting those businesses in the local region.

Since VICs seek to fulfil their promotional function, Tena and Raquel (2014) note that VICs do not only need to make information available to visitors. The information also has to be designed to arouse persuasion in visitors, so that they make decisions, optimise their experiences at destinations, and exceed their expectations. It is clear that effective information dissemination is an extension of the promotional function of VICs at the destination (Mistilis & D'ambra, 2008; Deery *et al*, 2007; Lee *et al*, 2015:2; Pearce, 2004; Tena & Raquel, 2014; Tourism Research Australia, 2016; Wong & McKercher, 2011).

In promoting the destination, VICs use various mediums, which include print and electronic. The use of information and communication technology (ICTs) by VICs is reviewed fully in Chapter 3. Studies from Australia, Canada and the USA have tended to support the view that although information is widespread through the Internet and online mechanisms, VICs are still at the centre of tourist information

distribution in a destination. With their expertise in local knowledge, VICs are mediators between web-based information services and the destination, hence diminishing uncertainty for tourists, whose information requirements cannot be totally met by using the Internet. The VICs may engage in the distribution of brochures and pamphlets regarding the goods and services offered by local businesses (Arana *et al*, 2015; Lyu & Hwang, 2015; Lyu & Lee, 2015; Mistilis & Gretzel, 2014b; Tena & Raquel, 2014, Tourism Research Australia, 2011).

Several studies have revealed that maps were the most important service or feature provided by VICs (Ballantyne & Hughes, 2004; Deery *et al*, 2007; Tena & Raquel, 2014). After maps, brochures and access to friendly staff are also ranked highly (Arana *et al*, 2015; Ballantyne *et al*, 2009; Tourism Research Australia, 2016).

Tourism Events Queensland (2013) asserts that visitors who passed through Croydon True Blue VIC, altered their plan to allow them to spend more time in the destination than they had initially allocated. Following this line of logic, VICs, through promotions, are 'catalytic elements' that motivate tourists to visit more attractions, whether planned or unplanned (Hwang & Fesenmaier, 2011). As such, a visitor's choice of attractions and where to eat and sleep is not only influenced by the information gathered before the trip, but also by the information obtained during the course of the trip (Ballantyne *et al*, 2009; Mistilis & Gretzel, 2014a). To this end, unplanned trips change in response to unexpected changes in circumstances and unanticipated constraints (Ballantyne *et al*, 2009: 779; Hwang & Fesenmaier, 2011; Mistilis & Gretzel, 2014a; Tourism Research Australia, 2014). The VIC function of promoting tourism a destination is underlined by various scholars. These scholars concur that this function encourages visitors to change their travel plans (Cox & Wray, 2011; Hwang & Fesenmaier, 2011; Mistilis & Gretzel, 2014a; Smith & Holmes, 2012; Tena & Raquel, 2014; Tourism Research Australia, 2014; Wong & McKercher, 2011). VICs are also responsible for orienting the visitor to the destination. This is discussed next.

2.4.2 Orientation and enhancement of the destination's attractions

Orientation and enhancement are also concerned with introducing the visitor to the destination (Ballantyne *et al*, 2009). This role can also be regarded as reception (Tena & Raquel, 2014; Intervistas, 2010). This function informs visitors on destination offerings, so that they may have an appreciation of the destination's features and culture. The activities include providing displays, suggesting new locations and general information to promote and foster responsible behaviour (Ballantyne *et al*, 2009; Fallon & Kriwoken, 2002; Pearce, 2004). The task of orientation and reception may be a key factor in the creation

of the destination image by tourists. It also has an influence on extending stay at the destination, and helps to increase visitor expenditure in the region. The orientation and enhancement function improves the quality of the visitors' experiences (Intervistas, 2010; Mistilis & D'ambra, 2008). Pearce (2004) notes that VICs can substitute actual site visits by offering interpretive services.

2.4.3 Substitution for on-site visits

The fourth function of VICs is to be a substitute for the attraction. The VIC may provide education and interpretation on the value of the area through displays and information. In this role, the VIC may sometimes seek to act as a substitute for visiting a tourist attraction, if it is too sensitive to visit, or difficult to access, or if the visitors are too frail or ill-equipped to access or understand the resource (Alonso & Liu, 2012; Cox & Wray, 2011; Pearce, 2004; Vietnam Tourist Information Guide, 2013). The VIC may offer re-created feature elements of the attraction. The interpretation in such VICs may be on a marine environment, a desert, or in a polar environment. For instance, the Antarctic Adventure in Tasmania recreates many aspects of a polar experience in a location that is accessible to a far greater number of visitors than could be accommodated in Antarctica. In this instance, the VIC is regarded as an attraction in itself (Alonso & Liu, 2012; Fallon & Kriwoken, 2002; Mistilis & D'ambra, 2008). Typical VICs are best regarded as interpretive centres. Fallon and Kriwoken (2002) argue that interpretation is good business, because when stories, values, issues and messages of an area are imparted successfully to visitors, their appreciation of an area is enhanced. Interpretation at VICs has been seen to contribute to the satisfaction of the visitors; and it can even be a substitute for a visit to the actual site or drawcard to visit the VIC (Fallon & Kriwoken, 2003).

In Australia, visitors who went for an interpretive walk or entered a VIC for interpretation were more satisfied than those who did not. Interpretation at these centres would not only achieve visitors' recreational goals, but it could also inform visitors about preservation and conservation; thereby fulfilling both the educational and information functions (Schliephack *et al*, 2013). Besides offering interpretation services, VICs may also play a control and filtering role.

2.4.4 Control and filtering of visitor flows

The VICs do not only act as promoters of the destination, but also as protectors of the natural resource. Fallon and Kriwoken (2003) regard control and filtering as a policing and directing function aimed at reducing visitor pressure on sensitive resources and undesirable visitor behaviour. To this end, VICs can be involved in redirecting visitors to less-sensitive sites and providing guidelines for visiting sensitive

attractions, or sensitising visitors to their potential impact (Fallon & Kriwoken, 2002; Intervistas, 2010; Pearce, 2004). This function can reshape visitors' attitudes towards more environmentally sensitive tourist activities. An example of such visitor management follows. The African Penguin at the Boulders Beach, on the southern peninsula of Cape Town (South Africa) has been listed as an endangered species by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN, 2010). The Boulders Penguin Colony attracts over 0.5 million visitors annually to view this endangered species. The Boulders has two beaches where the penguins can be seen. The Foxy beach on the northern side is now prohibited to the public, in order to avoid disturbances to the penguins. Access to the penguins is restricted to boardwalks over the beach by tour operators, such as the Forest Canopy tours. The southern beach is still open to the public, but only upon payment of an entrance fee (Lewis, 2011). In addition to the four baseline functions discussed earlier, Pearce added the 'plus' function which deals with community integration. This is introduced next.

2.4.5 Community integration

After reviewing the work of Fallon and Kriwoken (2003), Pearce (2004) added the Plus function to his initial 1991 model. As noted by Fallon and Kriwoken (2003), the success of a VIC depends on the support of the community. Pearce (2004) therefore added the Plus function which deals with community integration. In this role, Ballantyne *et al* (2009) and Pearce (2004) confirmed that, in remote and regional areas, VICs can also act as community facilities for a range of local cultural events – especially where a VIC has a large meeting room (Swart, 2016). VICs can be used to enhance the local knowledge of activities, events and attractions. This has a flow-on impact on the visiting friends and relatives tourism market. As locals become more informed regarding local destination offerings, they may recommend attractions and activities to friends and relatives who are visiting.

From the literature reviewed thus far, one can note that VICs accomplish their roles through information dissemination. This is in line with submissions from other scholars (Arana *et al*, 2015; Ballantyne *et al*, 2009; Carson *et al*, 2005; Deery *et al*, 2007; Lee *et al*, 2015) who contend that the core business of VICs is to promote the destination, which is achieved through providing unrivalled information about a destination. This assertion concurs with earlier scholars who argue that promotion is the baseline function and all other functions follow thereafter (Ballantyne *et al*, 2009; De Ascaniis *et al*, 2012; Mistilis & D'ambra, 2008).

A number of studies have been conducted in Australia and the United States to ascertain what role VICs play in the visitors' trip planning and experience (Hobbin, 1999; Hwang & Fesenmaier, 2011; Hwang & Li, 2008; Li *et al*, 1994). The statistics vary from each study; however, the results indicate that VICs do have a contribution to make in the in-destination phase especially in those activities on which visitors engage, when they are already at the destination. The following section illustrates how VIC activities impact on the visitors.

2.5 OPTIMISATION OF VISITOR EXPERIENCES AT THE DESTINATION

Although VICs need to improve their performance and to develop in order to meet the challenges of a dynamic and growing tourism sector, it should not be overlooked that VICs are already highly regarded by customers and the tourism industry (Deery *et al*, 2007; Ford & Peeper, 2007; Lee *et al*, 2015; Gretzel, 2013; Mistilis & Gretzel, 2014b; Perdue, 1995; Tena & Raquel, 2014; Tourism Research Australia, 2014). The importance of VICs is obvious. The services, products and the information obtained from the VICs appear to add enjoyment and satisfaction to the visit (Hobbin, 1999; Smith & Holmes, 2012). Visitors bring along a variety of technologies but they still rely on the print media and VICs; as they want unique, trustworthy and personalised information from local sources (Gretzel, 2013; Mistilis & Gretzel, 2014a). This is illustrated in Table 2.1. Other scholars argue that technology cannot answer all the questions and provide all the information (Kathri, 2019; Swart, 2016). Visitors therefore look to locals for advice, and as a way to connect (Arana *et al*, 2015; De Ascaniis *et al*, 2012). Upchurch and Rocharungsat (1999), in agreement with Ritchie and Goeldner (1994), found that the VICs were the next important promotional expense for regional organisations after media advertising. As a key point of distribution and interception, once the visitor has arrived, VICs have a capacity unrivalled in their region to change visitors' trip plans, to increase the level of expenditure (yield) and to inspire visitors to re-visit and recommend the destination (De Ascaniis *et al*, 2012; Hobbin, 1999; Tavares *et al*, 2018; Tourism & Events Queensland, 2013b, Tourism Research Australia, 2014; 2016).

In the past, the tourism industry's performance has been measured according to visitor numbers (Dwyer, Forsyth, Fredline, Jago, Deery & Lundie, 2006). This was found to result in profitless volumes in the industry. Recently, there are moves to focus on yield, which aims at obtaining the maximum economic benefit from a visit. From the above assertion, VICs appear to have a threefold impact on visitors, namely:

- visitors' trip plans;

- level of expenditure; and
- the length of stay.

The next section explores these impacts in depth starting with visitor plans.

2.5.1 VIC impact on visitors' trip plans

The first impact of VICs on trip planning relates to route selection and attraction visits. As visitors develop an on-site awareness on destination offerings, they may be influenced to change their itinerary both for the current trip and for future trips (Cox & Wray, 2011; De Ascaniis *et al*, 2012; Hobbin, 1999; Li *et al*, 1994; Mistilis & D'ambra, 2008; Mistilis & Gretzel, 2014a; Zeng, 2017). As per interviews with VIC patrons by Deery *et al* (2005) (as they were exiting VICs in Victoria), it was clear that the visitors had done little planning prior to travelling. In this instance, 58% had no plans regarding attractions to visit; and 91% had no tours booked at all. Related research by Hobbin (1999) in Queensland revealed a similar pattern. In New South Wales, 16% changed their travel plans as a result of their visit to a VIC (De Ascaniis *et al*, 2012; Tourism Research Australia, 2016). Hobbin (1999) concludes that VICs do influence the travel behaviour of visitors; although the impact depends largely on the nature of the trip to the area. As mentioned in Section 2.4.4, VICs also influence tourist behaviour by educating visitors regarding sensitive sites or re-directing visitors away from these sites. Besides impacting on the visitors' travel plans, VICs also influence the visitors' expenditure in the destination.

2.5.2 Impact of VICs in increasing the level of trip expenditure

The second impact of VICs is on the visitors' level of expenditure. Several scholars have corroborated that VICs increase revenue to a state or region (Hobbin, 1999; Tavares *et al*, 2018; Tourism & Research Australia, 2016; Upchurch & Rocharungsat, 1999). In this regard, effective information provision is the key to encouraging expenditure within the destination. Tourism Research Australia (2012) showed that, among the visitors who were interviewed after obtaining information from VICs, 83% had participated in additional activities; 72% had increased the duration of their stay; 22% spent additional nights in the local area; and 59% stated that as a result of information obtained from the VIC, they incurred expenditure that they had not initially planned for. In America, studies estimated an incremental expenditure of \$21 and \$45 per party of visitors which had visited Indiana and Colorado VICs respectively (Hwang & Li, 2008; Tourism Research Australia, 2016).

In Australia, Tourism New South Wales defended the key role of its VICs, pointing to the AUD\$57 million, which these VICs contributed to the regional tourism economy through influencing tourists to stay and

spend their money in the region (Carson *et al*, 2005; McIlrath & Gordon, 2015). Similar results were also produced in Western Australia and New South Australia. A related study in Northern Ireland revealed that, on average, 31% of VIC users were influenced to re-visit Northern Ireland, and 50% visited an attraction that they had not planned to visit as a result of visiting the VIC (Northern Ireland Visitor Information plan, 2010). In America, Fesenmaier and Vogt (1993) found that, as a result of the information obtained at a VIC, one third of the respondents spent additional money; 21% stayed longer than originally planned; and 29% visited places not planned prior to visiting a VIC. In Queensland, Hobbin (1999) determined that information from VICs assisted some tourists to re-arrange their itineraries and contributed to organising their time in the region. From these statistics, the significant contribution played by VICs in terms of creating extra business for a region cannot be underestimated (Team Tourism, 2012). In summary, previous research demonstrates the importance of VICs for visitors and the destination as a whole (Tourism & Events Queensland, 2012; Tourism Research Australia, 2015). While it is challenging to compute the exact figures for incremental expenditure, it is clear from previous research that VICs do have an influence on incremental expenditure (Alonso & Liu, 2012; Hobbin, 1999; McIlrath & Gordon, 2015). VICs have also been found to have an influence on the visitors' length of stay in a region, which is discussed next.

2.5.3 Impact of VICs in extending the visitors' length of stay

Finally, VICs influence visitors' length of stay in a given locality. Visitors' length of stay has attracted research for two reasons.

- The length of stay influences the overall socio-economic impact of tourism in a given economy. An increased length of stay may allow visitors to undertake a large number of activities, which might affect their overall spending.
- Length of stay forecasts visitors' on-site time, which contributes towards sustainable management by restricting visitor numbers at the destination. This is closely linked to the filtering and control function of VICs, discussed in Section 2.4.4.

Ballantyne *et al* (2009) and Deery *et al* (2007) indicate that information obtained at VICs is important in supporting contingency plans. Tourists may extend their stay at a destination as a result of the counsel from the VIC. Independent travellers are more likely to use the information and extend their stay, as they seek novelty and variety (De Ascaniis *et al*, 2012; Hobbin, 1999; Tavares *et al*, 2018). A study by Hobbin (1999) in Queensland revealed that 13% of visitors interviewed spent more time in the region than was initially planned. The three extra activities were visiting additional attractions, taking a longer

tour and visiting other cultural or historical sites. This positive impact can be multiplied when VICs are staffed with knowledgeable and friendly personnel, who can engage well with visitors (Ballantyne *et al*, 2009; Ballantyne & Hughes, 2004; Cox & Wray, 2011; Mistilis & Gretzel, 2014a). This concludes the assertion that VICs do influence the length of stay in a destination.

From the literature above, it is noted that VICs are there to provide information to the travelling public. Through effective dissemination of information on the destination, visitor experiences are enhanced. The importance of VICs can be summed up as follows:

- VICs disseminate information about the destination (De Ascaniis *et al*, 2012; Deery *et al*, 2007; Hobbin, 1999; Tena & Raquel, 2014; Wong & McKercher, 2011). This information has the potential to change the visitors' trip plans.
- VICs influence visitor plans on both the current and future trips (Alonso & Liu, 2012; Ballantyne *et al*, 2009; De Ascaniis *et al*, 2012; Upchurch & Rocharungsat, 1999).
- VICs have a significant economic impact on destination yield through (contingent) induced changes on the length of stay, and the activities undertaken in the destination (Deery *et al*, 2007; Hwang & Li, 2008; Lee *et al*, 2015; Tourism Research Australia, 2011; Tourism Research Queensland, 2013).

Therefore, the primary purpose of VICs is to increase tourism revenue by effectively developing on-site awareness and enhancing visitors' choices in the destination (Carson *et al*, 2005; UNWTO, 2007). This section has shown that if VICs are used as promotional tools, they can yield positive results for the destination. Another important aspect in the marketing and promotion of a region, particularly in terms of its tourism offering, is related to the ways in which the VICs and other regional bodies and sectors work together. This is discussed next.

2.6 COLLABORATION BETWEEN VISITOR INFORMATION CENTRES AND OTHER STAKEHOLDERS

Tourism is inherently collaborative. It requires different organisations to work together. This section defines and identifies the various types of collaborations VICs should have for their success. It further identifies how collaboration is achieved.

Collaboration occurs when a group of autonomous stakeholders engage in an interactive process, using shared values, rules, norms and structures to act or decide on issues related to the domain (Cox & Wray,

2011; Naipaul, Wang & Okumus, 2009). Many studies have alluded to the importance of collaborative relationships in various business environments. This is also relevant in the tourism industry, especially in the VIC industry (Mistilis, Buhalis & Gretzel, 2014; Tourism & Research Queensland, 2013).

VICs need to work with other stakeholders in order to fulfill some of their roles and achieve common vision (Cox & Wray, 2011; Naipaul *et al*, 2009; Wang & Xiang, 2007). It is interesting to note that some of these collaborations are better supported through information and communication technologies. Four types of collaboration are outlined: collaboration with visitors, collaboration with the community, collaboration with other VICs and National Tourism Organisations (NTOs) and collaboration with local businesses. Each of these forms of collaboration play an important role for both the VIC and the visitors (Naipaul *et al*, 2009; UNWTO, 2007). These forms of collaboration are illustrated in Section 2.4.

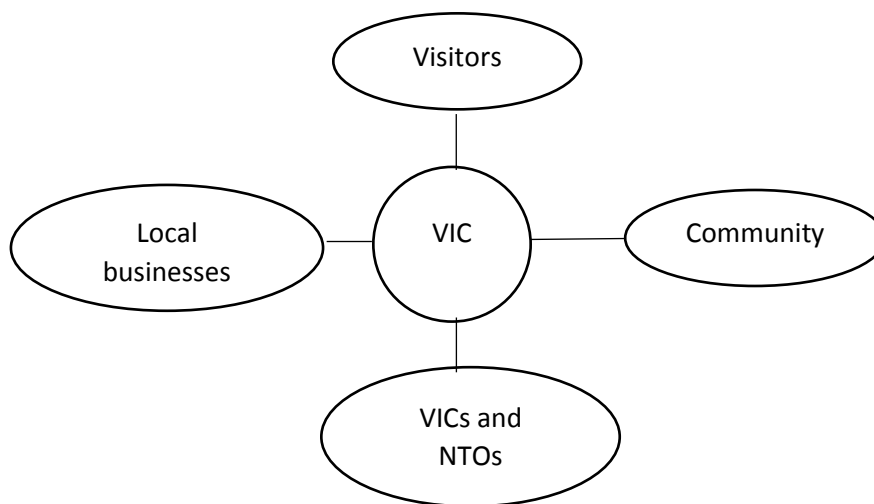


Figure 2.4 Collaboration between VICs and other stakeholders (Tourism & Events Queensland, 2013a).

The role of VICs is to provide information to visitors to enable them to make informed decisions. To achieve this, staff at VICs should seek to **collaborate with visitors** coming to the destination in order to encourage expenditure in the destination (Cohen, 2010; Khatri, 2019; Mistilis & Gretzel, 2014a). Thus, the VIC should not only be a platform for disseminating information, but also for localising the information for various visitors.

Several scholars confirm this finding and state that VICs are an important component of the promotional strategies of most state tourism organisations (Alonso & Liu, 2012; Hwang & Li, 2008; Lyu & Lee, 2015; Grinfelde & Lotina, 2015:2; Sava, 2015). Particularly, Alonso and Liu (2012) and Mari (2012) suggest that the success of tourism in a destination is closely related to the ways in which the VIC and **other regional sectors and bodies can work together**. In these instances, VICs need to have a link or form of

collaboration with the provincial body. In the case of this study, the provincial body is the Gauteng Tourism Authority (GTA). Such a relationship ensures consistency of resourcing in VICs, as well as in promotional messaging across the destination (Cox & Wray, 2011; Fallon & Kriwoken, 2003; Perdue, 1995; Tourism & Events Queensland, 2012; Tourism Research Australia, 2012; Sava, 2015). This type of collaboration is fully functional in the Ipswich VICs which have obtained a total buy-in from the regional tourism authority and the Ipswich City Council. In addition, networking with Regional Tourism Organisations (RTOs) and Local Tourism Organisations (LTOs) is a matter of such importance, that it is an essential criterion of the VIC accreditation program. This is discussed in Chapter 3. The following diagram presents the types of collaboration which should exist between VICs and different levels of government which have been discussed thus far.

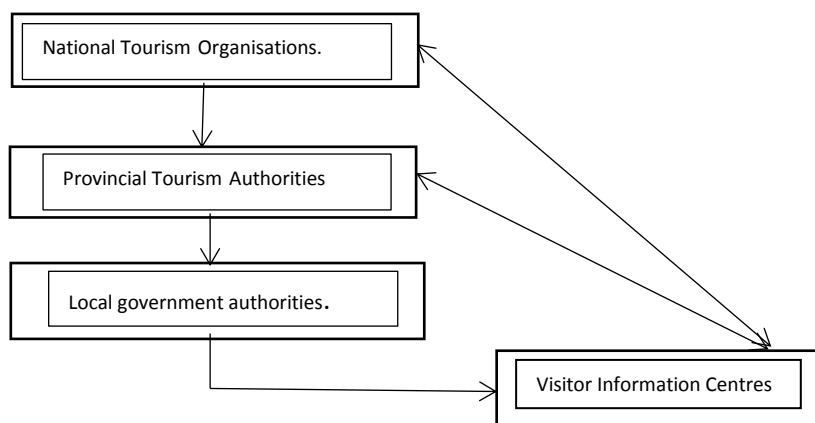


Figure 2.5 Types of collaboration between VICs and other stakeholders.

VICs need to collaborate among themselves. A collaborative network ensures a seamless VIC experience for visitors in a region. This is achieved by member VICs promoting products in the adjacent and adjoining regions such as co-ordinated hotel bookings for visitors (Manzini, 2009). Alonso and Liu (2012) and Tourism and Events Queensland (2013) stressed the importance of a collaborative VIC network in New Zealand. The i-SITEs network in New Zealand underlines the importance of collaborating with other i-SITEs in the region. The i-SITEs case study is Sections 3.4.4.1 and 3.6.3.2 of Chapter 3.

VICs should also **collaborate with the local community**. The local community is an important stakeholder in the development of tourism in an area. As locals appreciate the benefits of tourism in their area, they will embrace visitors (Pearce, 2004; Fallon & Kriwoken, 2003; Wang & Xiang, 2007).

Collaboration may be achieved in several ways including online platforms (Naipaul *et al*, 2009). In Australia, VICs may work with their RTOs to supply information online, which visitors can access at any

time prior to arriving and when in the region. Cox and Wray (2011) propose that, rather than VICs just promoting a collection of attractions in their area in an *ad-hoc* manner, regions would be successful if they establish themed promotions and brochures. This calls for a close collaboration with a regional or national tourism authority. To accomplish this, VICs should be actively involved with the RTO, local tourism organisations, tourism operators and the community.

2.7 CONCLUSION

The layout of this chapter follows the diagram in Figure 2.1. The main focus of this chapter has been the conceptualisation of VICs within the tourism industry. The chapter addressed Secondary Research Objective 1 of the study, which was ‘to conceptualise VICs in the context of the tourism industry’.

The first focus of this chapter was defining VICs and their importance in the tourism industry. VICs, as conventional engines of tourism promotion, are still important. They have a critical role to play in the distribution of tourism information, with the potential to influence choice of attraction, quality of visitor experience in the destination, length of stay and the amount of expenditure in a locality. The chapter proceeded to explore the evolution of VICs, which have roots dating back to 1896 in Detroit (USA). The main functions of VICs were identified as promotion of destination attractions (Section 2.4.1), orientation and enhancement of the destination attractions (Section 2.4.2), substitution for on-site visits (Section 2.4.3), control and the filtering of visitor flows (Section 2.4.4) and the community integration function (Section 2.4.5). VICs are a professional and trusted information source, offering much sought-after customer contact. The VICs optimise visitor experiences at the destination through providing much sought after face-to-face communication. The last part of the chapter focused on the collaboration which must exist between the VIC and other relevant stakeholders, in order to improve the service within their region. The next chapter focuses on the important themes in the operation of successful VICs.

CHAPTER 3

THE OPERATION OF SUCCESSFUL VISITOR INFORMATION CENTRES

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Various scholars have noted processes and programs that have been developed globally to assist VICs in performing their information distribution functions (Carson *et al*, 2005; Cox & Wray, 2011; Deery *et al*, 2007, Hobbin, 1999; Haerberlin Consulting, 2014). From the literature, various themes of VIC operation were identified by the researcher and are introduced in this section as illustrated in Figure 3.1. They are then discussed in detail in Sections 3.2 to 3.6. This is linked to Secondary Research Objective 2, which aimed to document best practices in VIC operations internationally. The purpose of this chapter is therefore to explore the key factors for success, and operational modalities consistent with the efficient operation of VICs globally, in response to changes in visitor expectation and behaviour. The five themes explored in this chapter are knowledge management, VIC staff development and equipping of staff, technology uptake and usage, funding, and accreditation and visitor information networking. As each theme is explored, constructive management implications for VICs, from a global perspective, are presented.

Tourism is an information intensive industry, which survives on the exchange of information between industry players and consumers. The information is stored by an organisation as knowledge. This knowledge becomes a necessity for firms to be competitive in knowledge driven markets. Therefore how this knowledge is shared or transmitted becomes useful for the organisations' competitive advantage. Knowledge management should therefore be viewed from different perspectives of how best to convey the information. VICs should seek to understand the requirements of the consumers, sources of their information for decision making, accessibility and quality of the information on these sources as well as how they are managed. These factors inform how best VICs handle their knowledge. This is broadly determined by the staff employed and equipped to help visitors, the technology used, available funding for the VIC operations and the networks which they develop with various industry players.

The five themes provide a checklist of priority areas for consideration in the design of effective VICs. These themes informed the surveys, which the researcher used to gather the primary data. Although the themes are presented separately, they are closely interlinked and are equally important. The first theme to be discussed is knowledge management.

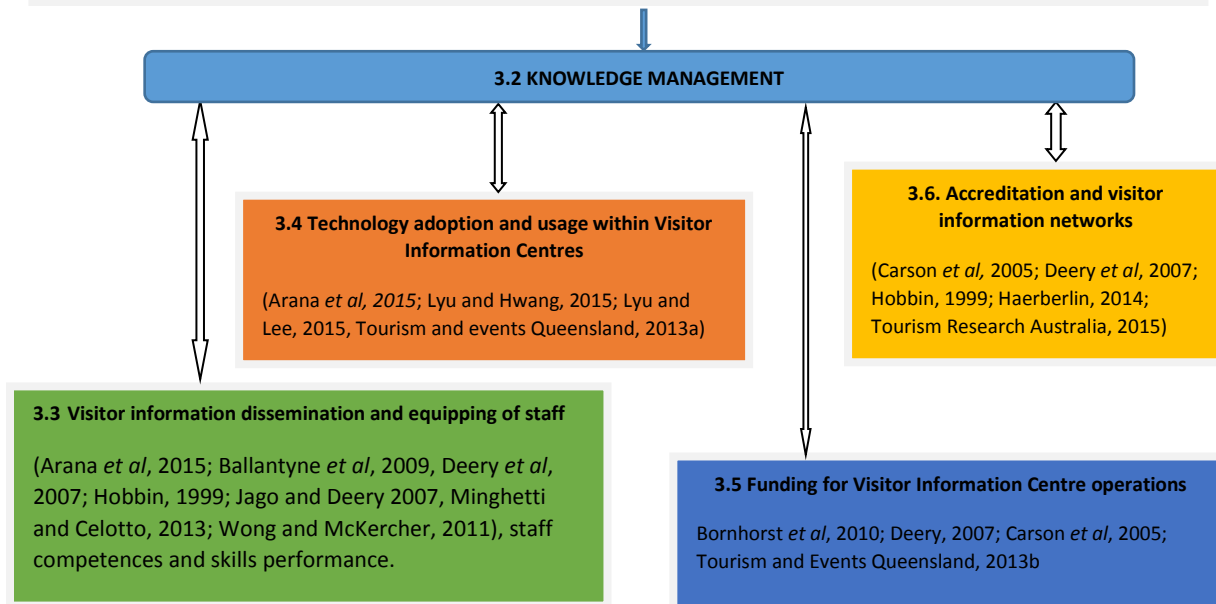


Figure 3.1 Overarching themes in the operation of successful VICs

3.2 KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

Chapter 2 outlined the information-intensive nature of the tourism industry, especially in VICs, which lends the VIC industry to knowledge management (Carson *et al*, 2005; Ballantyne *et al*, 2009; Mistilis & D’ambra, 2008; Swart, 2016; Tantray, Seghal & Sharma, 2017; Wessels, 2014). Earlier studies noted that every destination organisation is an information broker (UNWTO, 2007). Knowledge management is essential and it is increasingly regarded as a key to success, since it may be applied to improve the functioning of VICs.

The definitions of knowledge management vary widely. Knowledge management is defined as the explicit and systematic management of vital knowledge. Knowledge management involves acquiring, organising and communicating the intellectual capital of staff for re-use by others (Carson *et al*, 2005; Deery *et al*, 2007; Wessels, 2014). For the purposes of this dissertation, the researcher regards knowledge management in terms of human expertise that is stored in the mind of employees, which they have gained through experience, interactions with other people, departments or agencies. In sum, the hallmark of knowledge management is information dissemination in the case of VICs (Tantray *et al*, 2017). Carson *et al* (2005) state that online collaboration and the development of information networks are becoming a focus of knowledge management. The activities and principles of knowledge management are particularly relevant and central to effective performance (Tantray *et al*, 2017).

In other words, knowledge management underpins all the processes taking place in the VICs which are discussed in the following sections (Ballantyne & Hughes, 2004; Swart; 2016). This means that it is necessary to adopt an integrated approach to collecting, storing and disseminating information through ICT systems and their applications. These critical elements of knowledge management can, therefore, be manipulated to improve VIC performance (Swart, 2016; Tantray *et al*, 2017).

The motivation for including knowledge management is that if organisational practices are improved in the VICs, the net effect spreads into the whole destination region. In discussing the themes in Figure 3.1, the salient features of knowledge management are thus incorporated. In addition, knowledge management uses ICTs extensively, which is also the hallmark of VIC success in the 21st century (Tantray *et al*, 2017). Each of the salient themes is analysed in this chapter, according to the existing literature. The application of each theme is supported with examples of best practice from various destinations, which include Australia, New Zealand, Europe and America. The second theme is discussed next.

3.3 VISITOR INFORMATION DISSEMINATION AND THE EQUIPPING OF STAFF

The human element in the VIC is noted to have made a great contribution to the internal operations of VICs, especially regarding communication. Research consistently identifies face-to-face interactions with knowledgeable friendly staff, as being the most important feature of VICs (Arana *et al*, 2015; Ballantyne *et al*, 2009; Ballantyne & Hughes, 2004; Deery *et al*, 2005; Pearce, 2004:14; Tourism Research Australia, 2016). By their very nature, VICs provide information predominantly via the traditional media, which is face-to-face (Mistilis & D'ambra, 2008).

Thus, the members of staff employed at these VICs are essential in making the VICs informative and offering a satisfactory experience to the visitor. As a direct result of staff-visitor interaction, the visitors develop an immediate impression regarding the region's services and destination offerings (Tantray *et al*, 2017; Upchurch & Rocharungsat, 1999:43; Wong & McKercher, 2011).

Thus, the nature of the staff in the VIC determines the success of any VIC. As discussed in the previous section, direct engagements between visitors and VIC staff constitute a key factor for VIC success. This relationship is depicted in Figure 3.2 below. Sections 3.3.1 to 3.3.6 cover the importance of staff engagement in VICs, the importance of customer service by staff, competences and skills, training and staff structures in VICs, and approaches for building staff's product knowledge, respectively.

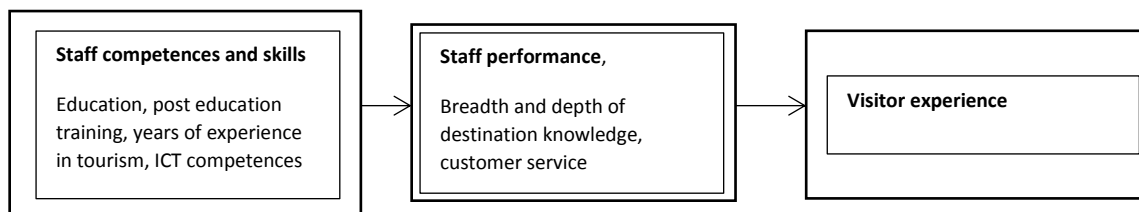


Figure 3.2 The relationship between staff competences and skills, staff performance and visitor experience (Minghetti & Celotto, 2013).

3.3.1 The importance of staff in VICs

As presented in Figure 3.2 above, the staff employed in these VICs is essential to successful operations (Mari, 2012; Reynders, 2015; Sayira, 2015; Schliephack *et al*, 2013; Wong & McKercher, 2011). The personnel employed in the VICs can be regarded as ambassadors for the region (Buhalis, Leung & Law, 2011). Two main factors increase the yield gained from providing visitor information to visitors:

- effective communication skills; and
- knowledgeable trained staff (Ballantyne & Hughes, 2004; Ballantyne *et al*, 2009; De Ascaniis *et al*, 2012; Upchurch & Rocharungsat, 1999; UNWTO, 2007).

VICs use different sets of communication tools to communicate supplier information to consumers (Arana *et al*, 2015; Deery *et al*, 2007). These studies revealed that the most prominent tool utilised, and the one which is perceived to be of the greatest value and effectivity is face-to-face contact between staff and visitors (Ballantyne *et al*, 2009:783; De Ascaniis *et al*, 2012; Hobbin, 1999; Mari, 2012).

A study in Australia by Deery *et al* (2007) asked visitors to rate certain characteristics on a scale of 1 (being poor) to 5 (very good). Table 3.2 provides the mean and standard deviation ratings of these various characteristics.

Table 3.1 Ratings of VIC characteristics by visitors (Deery *et al*, 2007).

Characteristic	Number of tourists who confirmed satisfaction	Mean	Standard Deviation
Friendliness of staff	705	4.7	0.6
Staff knowledge	694	4.7	0.7
Brochures: range and ease of finding	688	4.5	0.7
Interactive displays e.g. touch screens	531	5.3	1.2
Merchandise	385	5.6	1.4
Local products on display and for sale	616	4.84	1.31
Other	48	3.48	1.54

The respondents were most satisfied with the friendliness of the staff, the staff knowledge, brochures and interactive displays. To strengthen this assertion, studies in Australia, which examined the influence of VICs on yield, confirmed that customer service aspects within VICs **influence the behaviour of visitors to a region** (Tourism Research Australia, 2011; 2015). Particularly, staff knowledge and friendliness are important contributors to promoting **increased visitor activities**, visitor expenditure and repeat visitation. In accord with Deery *et al* (2007), the following authors confirm similar outcomes (Ballantyne *et al*, 2007; Ballantyne *et al*, 2009:783; De Ascaniis *et al*, 2012; Deery *et al*, 2007; Gretzel, 2013; Hobbin, 1999; Minghetti & Celotto, 2013; Mistilis & D’ambra, 2008; Smith & Holmes, 2012: 564; Tourism & Events Queensland, 2013b; Tourism Research Australia, 2015, 2014; Upchurch & Rocharungsat, 1999).

Several scholars underline knowledgeable staff as a success factor in VIC operations (Fallon and Kriwoken, 2003). In analysing the working of VICs in Australia, several authors found that the **quality of the experience** is determined by the quality of information service provided by the VIC staff and it was rated above 80% (Mistilis & D’ambra, 2008; De Ascaniis *et al*, 2012; Gretzel, 2013; Minghetti & Celotto, 2013; Smith & Holmes, 2012; Tourism Research Australia, 2011; Zehrer *et al*, 2014). A study in China by Wong and McKercher (2011) also confirmed similar findings.

Therefore, the role of staff in VICs is to be the ‘hosts’ or ‘ambassadors’ to the community, by being the on-site experts concerning products, attractions, sites and services. As such, VIC staff should **offer personal experiences** in a way that is intimate and friendly. The presence of the human element; and

the ability of the staff to manage conversations in VICs **help visitors to make better decisions**. The presence of the 'human factor' in VIC service is, therefore, the key to visitor satisfaction. Customer service is also important and is discussed next.

3.3.2 The importance of customer service

The modern visitor is becoming well-travelled and educated; and therefore, s/he expects high levels of service for his/her money (Tourism & Events Queensland, 2013b). VICs depend on the hospitality and the skills of their staff to service visitors effectively (Upchurch & Rocharungsat, 1999; Wong & McKercher, 2011). Providing excellent customer service is fundamental in the successful operation of VICs, and the overall success of the destination (Ballantyne *et al*, 2007; Tavares *et al*, 2018; Tourism & Events Queensland, 2013a). Furthermore, it is noted that customer service is the key to success in developing VICs into the next millennium (Ballantyne *et al*, 2007; Connell & Reynolds, 1999). Customer service is defined as the actions and reactions between visitors and VIC staff (Ballantyne *et al*, 2007). In VICs, customer service usually occurs via face-to-face interactions between the visitors and staff. Customer service ethics also involves being able to empathise with visitors (Tourism & Events Queensland, 2013b). Creating memorable experiences for visitors is the whole essence of the hospitality industry; and as such, those organisations which deliver memorable visitor experiences successfully create superior value and competitive advantage.

The importance of good customer service is emphasised in a range of industries, but most importantly in the tourism sector (Ballantyne *et al*, 2007; Tourism & Events Queensland, 2013a; Tourism Research Australia, 2016). In the tourism industry, customer service is inextricably linked to the visitors' experiences (Arturo *et al*, 2010; Minghetti & Celotto, 2013; Wong & McKercher, 2011; Zehrer *et al*, 2014). Unlike in industries with tangible products, inferior products can be recalled, but inferior customer service cannot be recalled or replaced. Consequently, any service defects are not acceptable. As such, if a VIC is able to consistently meet and exceed visitors' expectations, visitors are likely to recommend the service to other potential and actual visitors. Likewise, when their expectations are not met, visitors will inform double the number of travellers about the poor service (Ballantyne *et al*, 2007; Rajaratnam, Munikrishnan, Sharif & Vikneswaran, 2014; Zeng, 2017).

In addition, Ballantyne *et al* (2007) and Deery *et al* (2007) noted that the way VIC staff **meet and greet visitors** sends a powerful message, which may influence visitors to stay in the region or town. More precisely, VICs depend on their **staff's hospitality and information skills** to be motivated and committed

to assisting visitors (Tourism & Events Queensland, 2013b; Zehrer *et al*, 2014). In research conducted by Deery *et al* (2007), visitors in Victoria were asked why they had changed their trip plan. The responses indicated that the majority (70%) of visitors changed their trip plan as a result of conversations they had with VIC staff. Whether or not to include a visit to the destination is often influenced by the standard of service provided by VIC staff and the **knowledge** of staff. This underscores the importance of excellent customer service in VICs. Other scholars note the importance of good customer service, even in circumstances where the VICs may not be able to meet visitors' exact requests (Ballantyne *et al*, 2007; Baum, 2002).

The availability of knowledgeable staff in the success of VICs has been noted (Fallon & Kriwoken, 2003; Gretzel, 2013). To this, they add that the enablers (staff) have to be improved to attain best service quality. Wong and McKercher (2011) and Zehrer *et al* (2014) regard enablers as employee attributes, which enable staff to provide good customer service. Section 3.3.2 has emphasised the importance of customer service in affecting tourism yield. The next section discusses the basic skills and abilities required to provide good customer service. The skills and capabilities, which the VIC staff must possess to offer good service will be discussed in the context of Figure 3.2.

3.3.3 Skills and competences for VIC staff

The previous sections highlighted the importance of staff and customer service in VICs. They further emphasised that the human connection is important in the provision of services at VICs; and that visitors prefer to be attended by qualified human beings, rather than by automated technological processes (Arana *et al*, 2015:8; Deery *et al*, 2007:7; Jago & Deery, 2002; Tourism & Events Queensland, 2013a; Tourism research Australia, 2016). Recent research on visitor services strategy places customer care and quality service as being of crucial importance in VIC performance (Connell & Reynolds, 1999:503; Mari, 2009; Minghetti & Celotto, 2013; Zehrer *et al*, 2014). To deliver this role well, VIC staff management need to have a well-trained customer-focused staff with up-to-date information on the destination. Additionally, VIC management should ensure that their staff possess skills, which should leave the visitors satisfied. Three attributes of importance for VIC staff to possess are identified as:

- Customer service ethics (addressed in Section 3.3.2);
- In-depth destination knowledge; and
- Computer skills – particularly Internet and online information retrieval (Ballantyne *et al*, 2007; Ballantyne & Hughes, 2004; Minghetti & Celotto, 2013).

These three attributes were also ranked highly in Melbourne VICs in Australia (Jago & Deery, 2002).

In-depth destination knowledge influences the visitors' travel behaviour. A study done in New South Wales and Victoria indicated that the respondents were most satisfied by the friendliness of the staff and the staff's knowledge on the region. These are essential to present a first impression of staff, the VIC and the region at large (Ballantyne *et al*, 2007; Tourism & Events Queensland, 2013b; Tourism Research Australia, 2016; Wong & McKercher, 2011).

Computer skills are essential for VIC staff, particularly skills in accessing information and the ability to browse the Internet (Ballantyne *et al*, 2007; Ballantyne & Hughes, 2004; Minghetti & Celotto, 2013). There is general recognition that computer skills improve the efficiency and quality of information services (Neuhofer, 2016; Swart, 2016). In addition, access and the ability to browse the Internet has the potential to improve the accuracy, quality and scope of the information disseminated. Staff need to be able to access online information, which may be linked to adjacent regions (Bedard *et al*, 2008). Computer skills also enable VIC staff to meet the multi-destination requirements of the modern visitor. This is discussed further in Table 3.2. It provides an overview of the type of tasks performed in various staff positions and the skills required by these employees.

Table 3.2 The link between VIC staff position, tasks and appropriate skills (Tourism and Events Queensland, 2013a).

Position	Task	Skills
Centre manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure VIC operates effectively and efficiently (preferably on self-funding) basis achieving all standards and targets. • Oversee recruitment, training and supervision of staff. • Apply for relevant government funds. • Maintain close relationship with the local, regional and tourism association and industry. • Promote the VIC to the media, industry and government. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to establish and expand networks. • Understanding of information distribution techniques. • Experience and knowledgeable on how to capitalise on social media. • Understanding of tourism context in which the VIC works. • Highly developed organisational, managerial, interpersonal and leadership skills.
Information Officer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide information and advice, promote products and services within the region. • Present visitor information in a stimulating and organised manner. • Participate in product familiarisations. • Identify gaps in information provision • Attend products and service presentations. • Assist with tourism marketing projects • Enter enquiries into the database. • Ability to process enquires through email, telephone and fax. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A good knowledge of the region including local products and operators. • Excellent customer service skills. • Skill in office based software such as PowerPoint. • Excellent sales skills. • Understanding of tourism information, distribution techniques and a flair for the presentation of printed tourist information. • A desire to learn and improve oneself. • Ability to communicate with different cultures or languages. • Outgoing, friendly personality and positive attitude.
Volunteer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure all policies and recommendations of the VIC manager are adhered to. • Provide information and advice, promote products and services within the region. • Process enquires over the internet, telephone or fax. • Ability to meet time and duty commitments or to provide adequate notice so that alternative arrangements can be made. • Participate in product familiarisations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excellent customer service. • A good knowledge of the region, including local products and operators. • Ability to communicate with different cultures. • Outgoing friendly personality and a positive attitude. • Understanding of information distribution techniques and a flair for the presentation of printed information. • Excellent sales skills.

This table outlines the main office positions, which characterise a basic VIC. The positions are matched against the tasks and the skills, as well as the qualities considered requisite to offer a minimal satisfactory service. The table is presented as a basic guideline to those involved in the management and operation of VICs.

In summary, this section informs this study in the following ways:

- The provision of accurate information is a precursor to a satisfactory visitor experience.
- VIC staff should possess customer service ethics, in-depth knowledge about the destination and information technology capabilities, in order to meet the expectations of visitors.
- All the VIC staff qualities are determined by the level of education and the training received.

Accordingly, Zehrer *et al* (2014) note that for staff to be effective, there is a need to equip them. Upchurch and Rocharungsat (1999) assume that active training takes place upon hiring or throughout the duration of employment. Tourism and Events Queensland (2013) suggest that employers should be given the opportunity to undertake professional development activities on a regular basis, to ensure that skills and knowledge are kept relevant for the delivery of service quality, effective and efficient operation of VICs, and to retain employees. The next section explains the importance of training and how these customer service ethics can be imparted.

3.3.4 The importance of training VIC staff

Training is a precursor to providing quality visitor service (Ballantyne *et al*, 2007; Upchurch & Rocharungsat, 1999). The importance of training visitor centre staff cannot be overstated in terms of developing a positive image of state services and destinations. Training equips and enables VIC staff to provide better services – beyond the expectations of the visitors (Bedard *et al*, 2008; Mari, 2012; Wong & McKercher, 2011). A Canadian study in Nova Scotia, argues that respondents who received information from trained professionals were found to spend 11% more on various activities compared to those who did not (Urban Enterprise, 2013).

Training facilitates the dissemination of credible information and refines the ability of staff to be friendly, helpful, effective and efficient in the delivery of information (Alonso & Liu, 2012; Ballantyne *et al*, 2007; Ballantyne *et al*, 2009; Tourism Research Australia, 2015; UNWTO, 2007; Zehrer *et al*, 2014). It helps to develop employees for advancement to take new positions and roles; and enables staff to cope with changes in technology or the services they offer. Training should therefore be continuously provided to maintain standards. For VIC staff to acquire all the skills required to execute their duties, several approaches may be needed to equip them. These are discussed next.

3.3.5 Approaches for building staff knowledge

There are various approaches used to build staff knowledge. The most common methods used by VICs to ensure that their staff are abreast of changes and developments in the local tourism products include familiarisation tours, swapping staff with other VICs, product folders, providing staff with access to the Internet, attending regional tourism workshops with local businesses, sending staff for formal training, induction and inviting tourism providers to make presentations to staff. These are discussed in more detail next.

- Some VICs conduct **familiarisation tours** for new staff (Ballantyne *et al*, 2007; Tourism & Events Queensland, 2013b). Many VICs conduct regular familiarisation tours to businesses in immediate surroundings (Wray *et al*, 2016). By way of example, the Gateway VIC in Australia conducts regional familiarisation tours for both volunteers and paid staff every six months for familiarisation with the region's products. The familiarisation tour also involves trips to businesses and attractions further afield.
- Other VICs have a different approach to training their staff. Penguins on Parade VIC in Australia help their staff to be knowledgeable through **swapping staff** with other VICs in the region (Ballantyne *et al*, 2007). Although the system is cumbersome to plan, staff get a first-hand experience of other towns and products.
- Some VICs in Queensland encourage their staff to go through tourism-product magazines, newspapers and brochures (**product folders**) which contain the region's products in order to be up-to-date.
- In some cases, VICs **provide staff with access to the Internet**, which has regional product information.
- In Queensland, staff and management **attend regional tourism workshops and conferences** with local businesses. The VIC staff employed in the Queensland region are sent to Queensland's Annual Conferences and networking workshops with local businesses. Western Australia offers customer service and sales training through Western Tourism Network.
- **Formal training opportunities** are also available, in which the staff are awarded certificates by the Technical and Further Education College (TAFE) in Australia.
- **Induction** is another important way of ensuring that staff in the VIC are knowledgeable (Ballantyne *et al*, 2007; Tourism & Events Queensland, 2013b). In this approach, new staff are assigned to an in-house trainer for a set period of time, usually a month.

- The VIC management may also **invite tourism providers to the VICs** to make presentations of their products and services to the staff.

The fact that knowledgeable, friendly and helpful staff are desirable in VICs cannot be highlighted enough. Staff who are knowledgeable respond to customers' enquiries quickly (Arana *et al*, 2015; Ballantyne & Hughes, 2004; Ballantyne *et al*, 2009; Deery *et al*, 2007; Tourism Research Australia, 2015; Wong & McKercher, 2011). Tourism Research Australia (2011) concludes that visitors who are professionally informed of local, regional or state-wide services are likely to spend more, do more and stay longer in the region.

It can therefore be considered a best practice to concentrate on the use of highly qualified human resources, which are preferred by large segments of visitors to the destinations (Arana *et al*, 2015; Ballantyne *et al*, 2009; Hobbin, 1999; Schliephack *et al*, 2013; Urban Enterprise, 2013). Thus, there is an opportunity for VICs to raise the bar and deliver a higher level of service, while increasing their relevance. In this case, VICs could capitalise on their intimate knowledge of their regions and on their professionalism to inspire visitors to optimise their time and enjoy the products on offer (Schliephack *et al*, 2013; Tourism & Events Queensland, 2013a).

From the literature discussed above, VICs have various approaches which they may use to make their staff knowledgeable. The approaches include familiarisation tours, swapping staff, providing staff with access to the Internet, encouraging staff to go through product folders, providing induction to new staff and sending staff for formal training.

Another factor falling under VIC staff development, which is also crucial for the effective operation of VICs, is the personnel model used. This is discussed next.

3.3.6 Staffing models in VICs

The need for human contact in VICs has been underscored in Section 3.3.1. The human presence contributes to visitors' experiences, whether such a service is provided by permanent or volunteer staff (Deery *et al*, 2007; Jago & Deery, 2002; Smith & Holmes, 2012; Tourism & Events Queensland, 2013a). These authors identify staffing models existing in VICs as follows: volunteer staff; paid staff; or a combination of the two. Volunteer staff and the paid staff are discussed in Sections 3.3.6.1 and 3.3.6.2, respectively.

3.3.6.1 Volunteer staff in VICs

There is no agreed definition for volunteers in the literature (Holmes *et al*, 2010). This is largely due to the fact that volunteers are engaged in the process of assisting the experiences of others, while simultaneously undertaking a recreational activity themselves. This has resulted in some volunteers being regarded as visitors themselves. Holmes *et al* (2010) add that volunteering has been considered as a form of leisure, regardless of the organisation or the setting. However, the core elements of volunteering have been identified as freewill, the availability of rewards, formal organisation, and the closeness to the beneficiaries. Jago and Deery (2002:229) define a volunteer as a person who, on a regular basis, contributes his or her time and energy to a voluntary agency, statutory body and social or self-help group – without being paid.

Holmes *et al* (2010) and Smith and Holmes (2012:562) define volunteering in tourism, as volunteering which takes place in a tourism setting, in which volunteers contribute to tourism as participants in its production, or as consumers of such tourism experiences. The terms host and guest are used to refer to the residents and tourists in the destination respectively. Volunteers are therefore either involved in the consumption process, or in the delivery of the tourism experience.

In this study, volunteering is viewed from the perspective of the host, which involves local people (residents) serving as guests at their local VICs (Fallon & Kriwoken, 2003; Holmes *et al*, 2010; Pearce, 2004; Smith & Holmes, 2012:563). Such residents are regarded as host volunteers. From these definitions, it can be surmised that volunteerism is essentially discretionary, and it entails the donation of one's time. The definition by Jago and Deery (2002) is adopted which considers volunteers (locals) as assisting in the delivery of the tourism experience. This definition has been adopted, because it captures all the core elements of volunteering.

A large proportion of volunteer staff have been seen to assist in VICs, especially in Australia (Deery *et al*, 2007; Smith & Holmes, 2012). The majority of VICs in Queensland are staffed by volunteers, and around eleven VICs are operated exclusively by volunteers. A study in Queensland by the Queensland Information Centre Association (2004) found that a proportion of 92% of their workforce were volunteers. VICs in America have been also characterised by large numbers of volunteers. The North American organization, 'Destination Marketing Association International' found that 20% of staff in DMO-operated VICs were volunteers (Hobbin, 1999). Volunteers are very important in delivering service in VICs (Ballantyne & Hughes, 2004; Deery *et al*, 2007; Hobbin, 1999). The following studies have

explored volunteerism, as one of the crucial mainstays of VIC staffing (Deery *et al*, 2007; Jago & Deery, 2002:229; Holmes *et al*, 2010; Schliephack *et al*, 2013; Smith & Holmes, 2012:562; Tourism Events Queensland, 2013). Volunteers in VICs have a social and an economic benefit both of which are expanded upon next. The challenges of utilising volunteers are also considered.

There is no framework that is universally accepted for computing the **economic benefits** of volunteering (Holmes *et al*, 2010). The works of Jago and Deery (2002), Fallon and Kriwoken (2002) and Smith and Holmes (2012) provide some important insights into the relative cost and effectiveness of using volunteers. They note that volunteers have a positive contribution to cost-reduction and quality enhancement strategies in VICs. Since salaries are a major overhead cost for VICs, recruiting volunteers from the community to support VICs offers a cost-saving option for VICs with low operating budgets (Deery *et al*, 2007; Hobbin, 1999; Smith & Holmes, 2012). Further to cost reductions, the literature has identified that involving volunteers in VICs enhances the quality of information service; as they supplement paid staff at the centre to improve the visitor-staff ratio. Additionally, volunteers are usually retired elderly professionals (Ballantyne & Hughes, 2004; Cox & Wray, 2011).

From a **social perspective**, volunteers enhance visitor satisfaction; as they contribute their skills (Schliephack *et al*, 2013:163; Smith & Holmes, 2012). In the case of Australia, for example, volunteer staff comprised mainly locals, who had extensive local knowledge (Alonso & Liu, 2012; Ballantyne & Hughes, 2004; Cox & Wray, 2011; Smith & Holmes, 2012; Tourism & Events Queensland, 2013b). While volunteers may lack the requisite skills in tourism promotion, they provide local flavour and authentic memorable stories. This adds to visitors' experience; because it fosters links with host communities and enables high levels of human interactions as people want to talk to people (Schliephack *et al*, 2013; Smith & Holmes, 2012).

A trial of a fully automated VIC in Bendigo, Australia, revealed a poor uptake, due to the lack of human presence within the VIC (Deery *et al*, 2007). This finding is instructive to VIC management to balance technology and human presence, in order to increase visitors' experience. This can also be achieved by engaging volunteers.

While volunteers can be a source of expenditure in VICs through out-of-pocket re-imburements for meals and transport; in comparative terms, volunteer staff result in less costs, as compared to paid staff (Jago & Deery, 2002). However, these savings are only valuable if there is a significant quality service provided by the volunteers. The study by Jago and Deery (2002) justifies the engagement of volunteers

in VICs, to improve the human touch, increase the quality of visitor services through in-depth knowledge, and reduce labour costs.

Despite the considerable leverage of volunteers on VIC service, managing volunteers brings its own **challenges** to the organisation. Literature notes a low level of skills among volunteers (Ballantyne & Hughes, 2004; Hobbin, 1999). This results in inconsistencies in the level of service delivered. In addition, Ballantyne *et al* (2007) highlight the fact that, while volunteers may be locals, one should not assume that they have adequate information regarding destination products. It is therefore important for VIC management to offer volunteers a program of regular industry familiarisation to ensure they possess the necessary information and skills to assist visitors. Volunteers therefore require re-training and orientation to ensure consistency of service, which is costly (Jago & Deery, 2002; Deery *et al*, 2007:7; Holmes *et al*, 2010).

Volunteers can be impervious to change within the organisation, as volunteers may not adapt quickly to technology, which poses a threat to change (Deery *et al*, 2007; Smith & Holmes, 2012; Tourism & Events Australia, 2013b). In this regard, earlier research noted that volunteers in VICs generally have little, if any, computer experience or skills (Ballantyne & Hughes, 2004). VIC managers in Queensland noted that their volunteers tended to be older, and therefore not interested in using computers to further their knowledge and skills (Ballantyne & Hughes, 2004; Gretzel, 2013). In some instances, volunteers may be irregular in their availability for shifts. Retraining and strong internal communication processes thus become necessary, which increases costs.

Volunteers need to be knowledgeable, trained, proactive, friendly, engage personally with visitors; and provide quality referrals to visitors regarding local attractions and opportunities. This contributes to effective VICs.

In spite of challenges posed, due to financial constraints, volunteers are a necessity. Volunteers are also consistent with Pearce's (2004) 'plus community integration function' of VICs. Local community members as volunteers, provide the local flavour (Ballantyne *et al*, 2009; Fallon & Kriwoken, 2003).

3.3.6.2 Paid staff in VICs

The choice of staffing models is influenced by various factors which include service quality and funding (Alonso & Liu, 2012; Ballantyne & Hughes, 2004; Smith & Holmes, 2012). The more funding available, the more VICs resort to paid staff. Paid staff are perceived as offering higher levels of customer service as they may be professionals from tertiary institutions. A Queensland study found that paid staff had

more skills in computer literacy, as compared to volunteers (Ballantyne & Hughes, 2004). The study further noted that paid staff were prepared to improve their skills, as compared to volunteers who emphasised passion for the job (Ballantyne & Hughes, 2004; Smith & Holmes, 2012). The differences in the quality of volunteer and paid staff could affect the overall tourism efficiency of the tourism information industry. Moreover, visitors are becoming more informed and educated, and demanding up-market services from information providers. It is therefore critical that all staff interacting with visitors receive a high level of training, not only on local tourism products, but also those in the adjoining region. Training is also necessary in customer service, itinerary planning, computer skills and online tourist information retrieval.

VIC management therefore need to consider various personnel models existing in the VIC fraternity; and they need to fully exploit the opportunities there. Regardless of a staff member being a volunteer, or being paid, as long as they are in contact with visitors, the expectation is that they should be sufficiently trained. As has been highlighted before, for VICs to remain relevant and complement technology, VIC management needs to ensure that the service offered is both upmarket and unparalleled. This has implications for the staff. To achieve the expected levels requires well-trained staff, who are able to listen to the visitor and offer personalised information tailored to the visitors' requirements. An evaluation of i-SITEs Visitor Information Centres in New Zealand noted a need to effectively train staff in communication techniques, knowledge of the area, and the need to offer a standardised training programs, so as to maintain accreditation standards.

In summary to Section 3.3.6, a best-practice solution could be the training of all VIC staff whether they are volunteers or being paid. Training should focus on the following skills as outlined in Table 3.2:

- understanding of the tourism industry's structure and functions, and their role;
- understanding visitors' needs and expectations;
- delivering consistently high levels of customer service;
- online computer skills; and
- adequate product knowledge.

The other important element in the effective and efficient operation of VICs is technology adoption and usage and this is discussed next.

3.4 TECHNOLOGY ADOPTION AND USAGE WITHIN VISITOR INFORMATION CENTRES

In order for VICs to be successful in their role, they should understand their users' information needs and how these needs should best be met. Literature has identified two main approaches to meeting visitors' information needs, namely: traditional information resources and new information communication technologies (ICTs). For the modern visitor, harnessing new and emerging ICTs in the context of VICs is emerging as a critical success factor. Access to digitised content and data are changing user behaviour and expectations (Deery *et al*, 2007; Mistilis & D'ambra, 2008; Sotiriadis & van Zyl, 2013).

ICTs improve service supply, efficiency, quality and flexibility (Buhalis, 1998; De Waal, 2015; Diaz, Consuegra & Estaban, 2015; Kao, Louvieris, Powel-Perry & Buhalis, 2005; Neuhofer *et al*, 2015). It is therefore necessary to review how ICTs are shaping the dissemination of information in other countries; and to highlight how technology is integrated, and what advantages it brings to the operation of VICs. The overall aim of this section is to expose how VICs can adopt, use and benefit from ICTs.

Bedard *et al* (2008) developed a model and coined it 'The pyramid of adaptation to new technologies in services' to guide and inform the adaptation and use of ICTs in VICs. The model is depicted by a pyramid, which captures the pertinent dimensions when adopting new technologies. Three fundamental aspects of the model are training, use and acquisition.

The model is depicted in Figure 3.3 below. Thereafter, the aspects are briefly mentioned and the reader is directed to where a fuller discussion of each one occurs.



Figure 3.3 Bedard's pyramid of adaptation to new technologies (Bedard *et al*, 2008).

In Figure 3.3 above, **training** in ICTs has been put at the top, in order to highlight its strategic importance in knowledge-based firms and it therefore occupies a central role in companies aiming to be effective in the dissemination of information. Training encompasses the activities of sensitisation, observation and the diffusion of knowledge related to ICTs. (Bedard *et al*, 2008; Sayira, 2015; Wessels, 2014). The importance of training has been elaborated in Section 3.3.4.

The **use and acquisition of new ICTs** are at the base of the triangle. Arrows are provided to illustrate the relationship between the three aspects. Acquisition relates to the buying of ICTs, the extent of which is controlled by the available budget. This is discussed in Section 3.5 which elaborates on financing for VICs. The pyramid is framed by four words – partnership, group, alliance and consortium – each expressing the associative structure. These illustrate the general trend for companies to join forces so as to better face the challenge of the new economy. These are beyond the scope of the current study and are therefore not explored in-depth.

Section 3.4 focuses on the adaptation and usage of technologies in VICs (as per the Bedard pyramid). Section 3.4 firstly debates whether technology is a threat or an opportunity (3.4.1) followed by the usage of ICTs for knowledge management in VICs (3.4.2). Within Section 3.4.2, various ICTs are considered namely: the Internet (3.4.2.1), E-mail (3.4.2.2), interactive websites (3.4.2.3), tablets and smartphones (3.4.2.4) and Wi-Fi (3.4.2.5). Section 3.4.3 considers the emerging trend of utilising social media (3.4.3) and looks into the definition, importance, advantages and disadvantages of social media (Sections 3.4.3.1 to 3.4.3.5). Two case studies on the application of ICTs in VICs are then provided in Section 3.4.4 followed by funding and accreditation in Sections 3.6 and 3.6 respectively.

3.4.1 Technology: threat or opportunity

Travel and tourism comprises the single largest category of products sold over the Internet (Alonso & Liu, 2012; Camilleri & Neuhofer, 2017; Swart, 2016). Despite a wide consensus that mobile devices and online information are readily available, there are limited studies that examine whether this information development has rendered VICs as features of the past, now posing a threat to their survival (Lyu & Lee, 2015; Mistilis & Gretzel, 2014a; Sherfield, 2002). A concern exists that technology could take over people's jobs, as it is becoming more valued than staff time and expertise (Arana *et al*, 2015; Bedard *et al*, 2008; Deery *et al*, 2007; Sherfield, 2002). The relevancy of VIC in a digital environment is coming under serious scrutiny, and there are reports that the traditional operating system needs to change (Tourism & Events Queensland, 2013b). However, research has shown a trend, where VICs are embracing

technology to effectively meet their visitors' information demands, rather than being regarded as relics of history (Connell & Reynolds, 1999; Deery *et al*, 2007; Lyu & Lee, 2015; Tourism & Events Queensland, 2013b).

The introduction of technology in VICs in the previous decades has significantly affected information dissemination and tourism behaviour (Camilleri & Neuhofer, 2017; UNWTO, 2007; Viglia, Werthner & Buhalis, 2016). Now the traveller can independently search detailed and tailored information before and when s/he reaches the destination by using smartphones and other devices (De Waal, 2015; Mistilis & Gretzel, 2014a; Tourism & Events Queensland, 2013b; Wang, Xiang & Fesenmaier, 2014). This raises a question regarding the traditional functions of VICs; and whether they can still be entrusted with the role of disseminating information (De Ascaniis *et al*, 2012; Lyu & Hwang, 2015; Sherfield, 2002; Tourism & Events Queensland, 2013b). Other scholars acknowledge that the way in which VICs conduct their operations and respond to technology has changed (Connell & Reynolds, 1999; Mistilis & D'ambra, 2008).

Travel information is now ubiquitously available through the Internet (Lyu & Hwang, 2015; Lyu & Lee, 2015). In Korea, a country which is globally ranked first in smartphone penetration, statistics have confirmed that by 2012, 35 million Koreans (70% of the population) were accessing online travel information on their mobile devices. (Lyu & Lee, 2015). Yet, this country still supports VICs as being important to the tourism industry. Korean VICs provide desktop computers at the VIC to enable visitors to access information. Furthermore, these VICs provide free Wi-Fi so that patrons can access information via their mobile gadgets. This is similar in British Columbia, a province in Canada which is ahead in its technology uptake, but also still upholds the need for VICs.

VICs provide special information, which may not be available from any other source, such as confirmations and recommendations (Ballantyne *et al*, 2009; De Ascaniis *et al*, 2012). However, the vast amount of information available via mobile devices means that VICs need to rethink current practices (Lyu & Lee, 2015, Mistilis & Gretzel, 2014a). Of concern to VICs is that the future of tourism servicing lies in the digital first principle, that is self-service electronic formats (Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2014; Mistilis & D'ambra, 2008; Sherfield, 2002; Sotiriadis & van Zyl, 2013; Tourism Research Australia, 2016).

Many tourism organisations in Australia have made efforts to diversify their operations to make VICs successful, particularly in the area of ICTs (Mistilis & D'ambra, 2008; Hobbin, 1999; Lyu & Hwang, 2015; Tourism & Events Queensland, 2013a). However, besides the study by Connell and Reynolds (1999),

which focuses on a major shift in the roles of VICs, few studies explore how ICTs are shaping the future of VICs.

In light of the above, ICT development appears to pose minimum threat to the future of VICs and numerous opportunities. ICTs are key tools, which facilitate and enhance tourists' experiences; and create value in numerous ways (Sotiriadis & van Zyl, 2013; Mistilis & Gretzel, 2014a; Neuhofer, 2016). The word 'enhance' is defined as to increase or improve in value, quality, desirability or attractiveness. A simple semantic definition of technology-enhanced experience could be understood as an improvement in the tourist experience, with the aid of technology. Thus, ICTs have become an integral part of the entire journey, throughout which tourists use technology to generate richer experiences. The next section therefore identifies and discusses the contribution of ICTs, with special reference to VICs.

3.4.2 The usage of Information and Communication Technologies for knowledge management in VICs

In an information-intensive environment as in the VICs, ICTs are applied for knowledge management (Bedard *et al*, 2008; Deery *et al*, 2007; Diaz *et al*, 2015; Swart, 2016, UNWTO, 2007; Wessels, 2014). Knowledge management in VICs has been briefly discussed in Section 3.1 and is defined as the explicit and systematic management of vital knowledge, and it is associated with processes of creation, organisation, diffusion (dissemination), use and exploitation (Swart, 2016). It is also concerned with the conscious strategy of taking the right message to the visitor at the right time, in order to enhance decision-making by the potential tourist. A number of platforms can be used for this purpose. Sections 3.4.2.1 to 3.4.2.5 discuss these platforms. The most important platform of knowledge management in ICTs is the Internet, and this is discussed next (Bedard *et al*, 2008; Khatri, 2019; UNWTO, 2007).

3.4.2.1 The Internet in VICs

The adoption and use of technology in VICs has been analysed by several authors (Deery *et al*, 2007; Mistilis & D'ambra, 2010). Their research revealed that the Internet and the web are now additional information resources that are available to a VIC (Tanaka, 2011; Swart, 2016). The Internet is the fastest growing medium, which more and more visitors are using for travel-planning purposes (De Waal, 2015; Kao *et al*, 2005; Mistilis & Gretzel, 2014a). It is also used extensively within VICs to support VIC staff in meeting visitors' needs (Deery *et al*, 2007; Nguyen Le, 2014). The same authors further note that VICs can now utilise the web to promote their destination to virtual visitors. The Internet is now the

infrastructure for the information society, and is essential in the new economy of the 21st century (Bedard *et al*, 2008; Sherfield, 2002).

The Internet is not only used in gathering information, but is also used for comparisons between products and services (De Waal, 2015; Nguyen Le, 2014; Tanaka, 2011). It is an enabling technology, giving centres access to specialised information and communication services, including destination marketing systems, interactive kiosks, e-mail and related communication services (Femenia-Serra *et al*, 2018; Nevana, 2016; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). In research conducted by Tourism Research Australia (2013), it was found that both international (89%) and local visitors (48%) to Western Australia used the Internet as their primary information source. It is forecasted that the use of the Internet in the destination process will continue to increase from dreaming, planning, booking, time at destination through to post-destination sharing via social media (Tourism Research Australia, 2013; Tourism Research Australia, 2016; Tussyadiah, 2015). It is proposed that VICs with their locally specialised information should be mediators of web-based information and the Internet (Tena & Raquel, 2014).

The Internet is a recognised and enabling platform – not only giving VICs access to specialised information and communication services, but also giving VICs a global market outreach (Houtari & Nyberg, 2012; Liang, Schurkert, Law & Masiero, 2017). Therefore, to add value to these information services, VICs must be accessible to clients. Computer-mediated communication services must be adopted to enable this accessibility. Neuhofer, Buhalis and Ladkin (2012) and Tanaka (2011) state that it is no exaggeration to say that tourism is impossible without the Internet. The development of the Internet is closely linked to the increasing worldwide penetration of smartphones, tablets and related mobile applications. It has been observed that these smart devices and mobile applications are becoming indispensable devices and applications among tourists. These services available via the Internet are discussed next.

3.4.2.2 E-mail

Several scholars refer to the increasing adoption of technology in the dissemination of information in VICs (De Ascaniis *et al*, 2012; Deery *et al*, 2007; Mistilis & Gretzel, 2014a; Sherfield, 2002). E-mail is widely used internally in VICs to communicate among staff and externally to connect with suppliers of information and tourists (Ballantyne & Hughes, 2004; Deery *et al*, 2007). VICS are undergoing transformation to embrace change, and the use of e-mail is greatly contributing to accessing travel information, both in the pre-trip phase and during the experience (Ballantyne *et al*, 2007; Tourism &

Events Queensland, 2013b). The increased use of e-mail appears to have reduced telephone inquiries (Deery *et al*, 2007; Sherfield, 2002) as visitors request information via e-mail to supplement the information (Deery *et al*, 2007). Websites are one of the channels used by VICs to disseminate tourism information, and this is discussed next.

3.4.2.3 Interactive websites

Most tourism organisations now have websites (Connell & Reynolds, 1999; Kao *et al*, 2005; Nguyen Le, 2014; Tanaka, 2011). Ipswich VIC in Australia, with the support of local government, has a destination website with an online booking facility; a Facebook page to communicate with visitors and industry; YouTube presence; and is hosting digital marketing presentations for local and regional tourism businesses. It also communicates with visitors and industry via regular e-newsletters (Tourism & Events Queensland, 2013b). The websites enable visitors to access unlimited travel information, which can influence destination choice. The recent trend amongst VICs is hosting interactive websites, where the suppliers of information can upload their products, such as advertising events or discounts (Khatri, 2019; Nguyen Le, 2014). Interactive websites are considered valuable tools for both suppliers and consumers to disseminate information, communicate and to purchase products online.

The use of interactive websites is a vital and convenient means of marketing to introduce content uniqueness and product differentiation. Nguyen Le (2014) further shares the view that interactive websites are indispensable for organisations to provide high-quality interactions, which would enable tourists to co-create their experiences.

Through these interactions, potential visitors can be reached. Information provision through destination websites plays a crucial role in optimising the information retrieval process, thus influencing decision-making and increasing actual arrivals (Tanaka, 2011; Zhang, Gordon, Buhalis & Ding, 2017). VICs need to monitor their information provision and to ensure that it meets the needs of the travellers. Egorova (2013) emphasised that nowadays, interactive websites are useful in the orientation phase of travel planning for tourists.

With new versions of the web being invented, VICs should move with the trends from old to newer versions such as Web 4.0. This is commonly known as the symbiotic web. The dream behind the use of the symbiotic web is interaction between humans and machines in symbiosis. With advances in technology, the fifth generation (Web 5.0) is beckoning. Web 5.0 is regarded as a 'sensory emotive web' which takes into account the feelings of the user as operating systems to facilitate the interaction

between humans and machines. With these developments, VICs can improve the service offered to potential visitors (Aghaei, Nematbakhsh & Farsani, 2012; Algosaibi, Albahli, Khasawneh & Melton, 2017).

The interactive website is regarded as the organisation's official source of information and communication for tourists. Interactive websites allow the potential tourists not only to read text, but it also allows them to interact with various friends online. Austria, one of the leading international countries in terms of technology uptake, uses its website to respond to visitors' demands, thereby building business to consumer (B2C) online relationships (Neuhofer *et al*, 2012; Tanaka, 2011). In this regard, interactive websites help the users to optimise the information retrieval process (Egorova, 2013; Nguyen Le, 2014).

The website serves the dual role of being the information provider that provides information to the potential tourist, while also providing the necessary support. Websites should always provide precise information, as well as support reliable and secure systems. These will guarantee satisfaction from potential visitors. It is therefore vital for VICs to maintain an effective interactive website, in order to strengthen their relationships with visitors. Interactivity can be encouraged by the use of a live chat facility, where a potential visitor can chat with a representative from a VIC, without having to physically be present at the VIC. The next section sheds some light on how mobile technologies, such as smartphones and tablets are mediating the tourist experience and visitors' behaviour.

3.4.2.4 Tablets and smartphones

In response to advanced information technologies and the penetration of smart devices in tourism, mobile communication does not only become a choice, but also a necessity for tourism service providers, such as VICs (Atembe, 2015; Liang *et al*, 2017; Tussyadiah, 2015). These mobile gadgets support visitors through convenience in travel planning and enhancement in the overall tourism experience – by providing access to information, interpretation, direction, navigation and to social networks (Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2013; Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2014; Chen, Huang, Gao & Petrick, 2017; Egorova, 2013; Femenia-Serra *et al*, 2018). As a result, there is an immense opportunity for VICs to shape visitors on-site behaviour, by influencing their on-site decision-making. Websites of these service providers should cut across platforms to allow them to be adapted to mobile devices. In other words, VIC should have website versions, which can be browsed via a tablet, smartphone or other compatible devices.

Smartphones and tablets have been identified to blur boundaries between the distribution, promotion and purchase of products (Khatri, 2019; Sotiriadis & van Zyl, 2013; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Thus, the use

of technology increases cost effectiveness and culminates in new services and products, such as online booking services (OBS).

In Australia, it has been noted that tablets can provide a low-cost way of facilitating bookings, where visitors can use the devices to search and book themselves, with VIC staff at hand to provide support where needed (Houtari & Nyberg, 2012). This product is popular with Australian VICs as a revenue-generating measure (Tourism & Events Queensland, 2013b). Increasing the use of mobile communication devices can enhance tourist satisfaction by improving visitors' overall experiences in particular settings. The use of tablets and smartphones requires Wi-Fi, which is discussed next.

3.4.2.5 Wi-Fi

An increased use of smartphones and hand-held devices in accessing tourism information among the travelling public has been noted (Tourism Research Australia, 2016; Mistilis & Gretzel, 2014a). The same authors further acknowledge a widespread offer of free Wi-Fi hotspots for visitors to increase their information accessibility. This is in line with the mandate of VICs to offer accessible information to the travelling public. Deery *et al* (2007) also note that offering free Wi-Fi would increase the relevance of VICs; and it would act as a drawcard, especially for international visitors. In this regard, New Zealand and British Columbia VICs are at a stage where they are considering offering Internet facilities to the travelling public or free Wi-Fi as a standard towards accreditation.

In Australia and the United States of America, in line with the general trend, most businesses and consumers are now digitally connected (Egorova, 2013; Liang *et al*, 2017; Sherfield, 2002; Tourism & Events Queensland, 2013b). The research further remarks that technology trends, particularly ICTs, will continue to impact on VIC operations. The implication to VICs is that they should have an online presence to connect with the visitor prior to, during and post-travel (Kao *et al*, 2005; Munar & Jacobsen, 2013; Sotiriadis & van Zyl, 2013; Tanti & Buhalis, 2016).

3.4.2.6 Summary of ICT usage for knowledge management in VICs

This section has discussed the importance of technology for knowledge management in VICs. It has shown that ICTs are important for VICs to enable staff to share information among themselves, and connect with visitors and service providers. There are several platforms used to connect with visitors, which lead to business-to-customer relationships, which optimise visitor experiences in the destination. The next section introduces social media as a mega-trend in information dissemination.

3.4.3 VICs and social media

There is an emerging trend towards tourism products that earn loyalty from visitors through social media, as opposed to those pushed through paid advertising or promotion (Wray *et al*, 2016, Viglia, Minazzi & Buhalis, 2016, Swart, 2016). Social media is now regarded as a credible information source, and it has become a standard communication method for many organisations. Social media is one of the 'mega-trends' in tourism information dissemination (De Ascaniis *et al*, 2012; Mistilis & Gretzel, 2014b; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). The next section defines social media.

3.4.3.1 Definition of social media

There is no formal definition for social media, but that it is interchangeably known as Web 2.0; and in tourism terms, it is known as Travel 2.0 (Egorova, 2013; Gretzel, 2013; Miguens, Baggio & Costa, 2008; Mistilis & Gretzel, 2014a; Munar & Jacobsen, 2013; Neuhofer, 2016; Sotiriadis & van Zyl, 2013; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). This is largely due to its evolving nature. Social media is a tool of mass collaboration as it allows communication with large numbers of people in different locations and at different times (Sigala, 2008).

Several functional definitions have been put forward. Social media is best understood as an Internet-based application which encompasses consumer or user-generated content, that is, it supports bi-directional communication capabilities of the Internet (Mistilis & Gretzel, 2014a; Sotiriadis & van Zyl, 2013; Viglia *et al*, 2016). Other scholars remarked that social media acts as the digital version of the word-of-mouth communication (Egorova, 2013; Mistilis & Gretzel, 2014a; Sotiriadis & van Zyl, 2013). Social media has been coined as 'electronic word-of-mouth' (eWOM). A further shift has been proposed from eWOM to 'word of net' and 'online reviews' as more adequate terminology (Egorova, 2013; Munar & Jacobsen, 2013; Sotiriadis & van Zyl, 2013). Tussyadiah *et al* (2015) coined a functional definition and conceptualised social media as comprising of interactive platforms that facilitate communication, creation and sharing of content generated by users on Internet platforms such as Twitter or Facebook.

From the above definitions, it is apparent that social media is a concept comprising different online WOMs, blogs, sites, company websites, emails, social networking sites and other numerous online platforms. Some of the social media platforms are still evolving (Houtari & Nyberg, 2012; Nevana; 2016; Ngai, Lam, Eric, Chin & Tao, 2015). For the purpose of this study, **social media is understood as information content created by people using modern accessible publishing technologies intended to facilitate communication, and to influence and interact with peers and public audiences through the**

Internet and mobile communication networks (Chung & Koo, 2014; Maki, 2016). The following section provides an insight into the importance and the contribution of social media in tourism, with a particular focus on VICs.

3.4 3.2 The importance of social media

What makes social media attractive and useful as a tool in tourism? Social media platforms are **crucial sources of information for travel-planning and decision-making** (Munar & Jacobsen, 2013; Qian *et al*, 2015; Swart, 2016). The tools and the media applications are regarded as central to connect and share experiences (Mistilis & Gretzel, 2014a; Munar & Jacobsen, 2013; Neuhofer, 2016). Via these social media platforms, visitors' decision making behaviour is influenced (Sotiriadis & van Zyl, 2013; Viglia *et al*, 2016).

Visitors can find **real-time travel information** from network members (Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019; Chung & Koo, 2014). The content generated is shared and circulated with the intention of educating each other on tourism product brands, services and issues. Thailand, as a destination, has integrated a lot of **user-generated content** in the form of videos and stories about unique Thailand experiences. Canada, Germany and Denmark have been upfront in exploiting social media technologies to **market themselves** as tourist destinations (Buhalis & Wagner, 2012). As a result, visitors get information in real-time to inform their travel decisions.

The online reviews by other visitors are perceived as **more reliable and trustworthy** than content posted by the suppliers themselves because visitors are not compensated for their referrals (Miguens *et al*, 2008; Munar & Jacobsen, 2013; Qian *et al*, 2015; Lyu & Hwang, 2015; Zhang *et al*, 2017). The new breed of visitors are trusting their peers with whom they connect, whether they know them or not. Social media thus affects the decision making process and booking behaviour, 'because other users told them so' (Egorova, 2013; Mistilis & Gretzel, 2014b; Munar & Jacobsen, 2013; Viglia *et al*, 2016, Swart, 2016).

Social media is also important to the VICs for **information dissemination, for enhancing the customer-complaint management process**, and improving their understanding of the customer base (Houtari & Nyberg, 2012; Khatri, 2019; Nevana, 2016).

The discourse above shares the view that social media comprises a 'collective travel intelligence' which serves as a significant source of information for travellers through all the phases of the tourist journey. It is, therefore, important for VICs to understand the new breed of customers, in order to take advantage of social media strategies. This new breed of consumers are increasing their trust in social media, and making decisions on the basis of these opinions (Gretzel, Hwang & Fesenmaier, 2012)

3.4.3.3 The advantages of social media in enhancing visitor experiences

The importance of social media to enhance experiences in tourism was discussed in Section 3.4.5.2. This section explores the advantages of social media in tourism. There is a significant relationship between social media enabled communication and emotion, which may enable visitors to have a **more enjoyable and memorable experience**, if they acquire positive emotional support on social media during their trip (Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019; Munar & Jacobsen, 2013; Zhang *et al*, 2017).

Egorova (2013) profiles a number of online platforms, which can improve experiences. Social sharing is emerging as a major theme for creating positive value for the visitor (Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2014, Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2015; Rihova, Buhalis, Gouthro & Moital, 2018). Neuhofer (2016) regards this **as co-creation**, which is achieved through connection with the tourists' experiences. As visitors experience the site, they share with friends on social networks, such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Twitter; and **extract added value** (Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019; Kravets, 2017). Canada and British Columbia have been identified as having the best practices in the use of ICTs. These two destinations give their users the opportunity to upload videos, images and stories for other users to read and watch (Buhalis & Wagner, 2012).

Social media does not only give VICs a tool to **reach a global audience at tremendous speeds**, but also locally among residents. Promotional messages across social media platforms can go viral with the potential to reach a million people within a short space of time. Traditional marketing channels are costly, especially for small to medium organisations such as VICs. Social media, therefore, **contributes to the reduction of marketing costs** (Kravets, 2017). This is an advantage for VICs, which are usually characterised by limited marketing budgets.

Social media can be used to **correct misconceptions regarding a destination**. The Florida DMO embraced the power of social media in 2010 following the BP oil spill close to the beaches. The live website was mounted with a social media blitz, and it was linked to residents' Twitter feeds and Flickr with the information that the beaches were spared from destruction. The Florida DMO also launched a 5-week campaign that attracted contestants to visit Florida. A Facebook page and a website were set up, and contestants could win Florida vacation packages. The affiliated VICs were involved in the dissemination of real-time evidence through their websites that the beaches had been spared from the oil spillage (Madondo, 2016).

A study on LinkedIn revealed that social media acts as the axis upon which a community rotates. Yin Ching So (2015) explicitly noted that social media is the next **media for marketing and branding**. The author notes the triumph of Obama's election campaign and the expansion of the 'Oprah effect' on Twitter, thereby reflecting the potential power of social media in **catching attention, reaching people and delivering messages**.

Social media can be used for **customer relations management** (CRM) (Nevana, 2016). Through in-depth and member-generated content, social media helps to retain customers through building relationships with other members. Additionally, social media platforms are tools for customer service, communications and public relations, given that tourism is an information-intensive industry (Madondo, 2016: 27; Munar & Jacobsen, 2013).

The literature above has discussed the advantages of social media which can be summarised as follows:

1. Reduced costs – most of the social media sites are free, there is no cost required to open a profile and share information. Facebook, as one of the famous social network sites was popularised as free, and it will always be, besides offering the opportunity of targeting visitors by using specific criteria.
2. Customer service – they offer various shortcuts with the aim of making a purchase easier and faster. Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) contain some quick links to different companies.
3. Interactivity – this offers the opportunity for users to participate in modifying the form and content of the information.
4. Targeted market – audiences can be targeted according to their preferences. Based on their interest and preferences, one will get adverts regarding those interests.
5. Social interaction – with social media gaining acceptance in business and social lives, people are spending more time on social media platforms, responding to e-mails, checking blogs and watching videos. Consumer behaviour studies show that individuals are giving preference to advice and information that is shared online.

The advantages of social media have been discussed in detail. The next section explores the disadvantages of social media.

3.4.3.4 The disadvantages of social media

While social media may bring benefits to the visitors and the VIC; there is a flipside to social media use, which is co-destruction (Connell & Reynolds, 1999; Neuhofer; 2016). Social media can **distort personal**

experiences, as priority is given to sharing experiences with others back home (Maki, 2016; Neuhofer, 2016). Extensive use of social media results in the **loss of customer care in certain respects**, as dependency on online information increases (Neuhofer, 2016; Connell & Reynolds, 1999; Sherfield, 2002). Social media induces a **sense of perceived pressure and addiction** as visitors tend to use ICTs during their travel and experiences. These sharing practices are **time-consuming** and they are regarded as enslaving visitors to technology (Neuhofer, 2016).

Social media is mostly perceived as being free. However, it requires investment and strategy, in order to be successful (Houtari & Nyberg, 2012). This investment comes in the form of employees, money and time – to handle social media operations. For example, while it is free to upload a video, somebody within the VIC has to manage this, which creates costs. VICs therefore require adequate resources to run and sustain an effective social media strategy.

The discourse above has outlined the advantages and disadvantages of social media. VICs, as providers in information may also tap into the various social media platforms to enhance visitor experiences and reduce marketing costs. The next section outlines the practical application of ICTs in VICs via two case studies.

3.4.4 Case studies on practical application and use of ICTs in VICs

The use of ICTs in VICs has been noted in the literature. Via two case studies, this section illustrates the benefits and practical steps which have been implemented by other VICs internationally, to improve their services. Two case-studies from different jurisdictions are presented: The Ipswich VIC case-study (Australia) and the i-SITEs in New Zealand broadly illustrate best practice in the adoption of ICTs. The case studies consider the following: face-to-face engagement, online presence, social media strategy and benefits. The i-SITEs case-study is presented first, followed by the Ipswich case. After these, the section is concluded by considering the ingredients for VIC success as per the two case studies.

3.4.4.1 Case-study 1: The i-SITEs in New Zealand

New Zealand i-SITEs are a good example of VICs providing face-to-face engagement, in conjunction with a high level of online service. During a trip, the i-SITEs centres are open to attend to visitors, who physically visit the i-SITEs. In addition to **face-to-face engagement**, the i-SITEs have an extensive **online engagement** as presented in Figure 3.4. The website is managed by Tourism New Zealand, with 81 visitor centres (i-SITEs) across New Zealand.

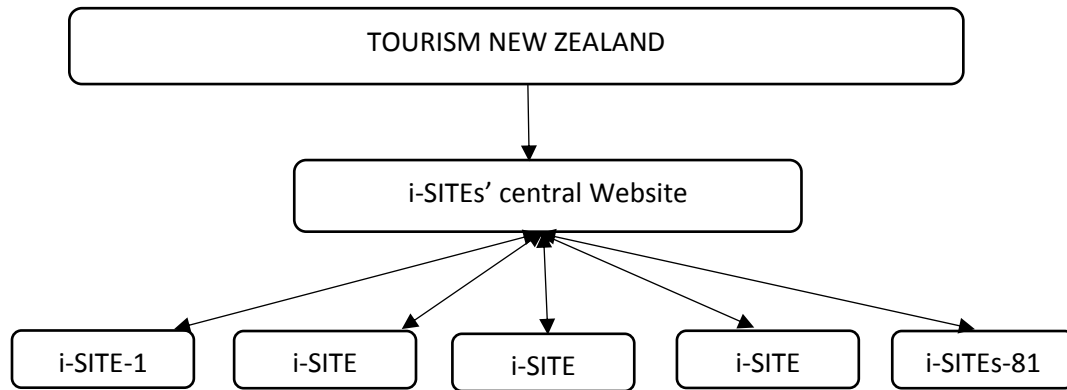


Figure 3.4 The relationship between regional i-SITE website and individual i-SITEs

The network of i-SITEs have a **central website** that is updated on a day-to-day basis. Each independent i-SITE has its own strategy, including the use of **own interactive website**. The i-SITE websites serve to broaden the reach of i-SITEs' services (Tourism Research Australia, 2016). Tourists can obtain information pre-trip through individual i-SITEs' websites. This relationship is depicted in Figure 3.4 above. In addition to the interactive websites, the i-SITEs have an online presence through **social media**, which is linked to the i-SITEs websites.

Benefits include that 90% of visitors that had used an i-SITE centre made bookings. Another core benefit of the i-SITEs is the improvement of experiences for visitors, thereby unlocking spending. This creates knock-on effects that contribute to the yield in the region. The major implication from this case study is that technology plays an important role in assisting and complementing VIC services. The second case study, namely Ipswich in Australia, is discussed next.

3.4.4.2. Case-study 2: Ipswich Visitor Information Centre in Australia.

The Ipswich VIC is located in South East Queensland, Australia. The VIC opened to the public in 2003. The centre provides a comprehensive suite of visitor services for the region and its neighbours, namely the Scenic Rim, Toowoomba Ranges and Warwick. Above the **face-to-face engagement** with those who physically visit the VIC, it also has an extensive online engagement.

The VIC provided the discover Ipswich destination website (www.discoveripswich.com.au) with an online booking facility in 2008. As a result, the manager is able to generate detailed sales reports, daily and monthly to review against the set targets as a result of this **interactive website**. In respect of **social media**, the VIC launched a **Facebook page** in 2011. The Discover Ipswich Facebook page is used to

communicate with visitors and industry. This Facebook page proved to be a useful tool for information dissemination during the 2011 flooding crisis. In addition, Ipswich promotes the destination through their **YouTube account**. The Ipswich VIC hosts **digital marketing** for local and regional tourism businesses.

The Ipswich VIC also provides a **free online booking service**, event-ticketing and ticket-master agency. It communicates with visitors and industry through a regular **e-newsletter**. The centre embeds the digital initiative in its annual business plan, in consultation with the Ipswich City Council information technology team.

To summarise the Ipswich case study, the Ipswich City Council embraces new technology and multimedia strategies, which support the centre's ambitions. Furthermore, both the VIC and council are dedicated to providing regular professional development opportunities for the VIC team. Training includes a focus on ensuring that staff and volunteers have skills to operate comfortably in a digital environment. The VIC links all social media tools, so that messages are consistent – that is stories that are posted on the Facebook page link to the Discover Ipswich website and they also highlight links to tourism operator websites.

3.4.4.3 Ingredients of VIC success as per i-SITEs and Ipswich case studies

To conclude the presentation of the two case studies, **ingredients for success** drawn from the i-SITEs and the Ipswich case studies are outlined. The ingredients for success feed into the development of management strategies worth adopting which include among other things, the following.

1. Networking with other VICs and other businesses under its jurisdiction, for instance partnering with other local organisations to increase the success of the VIC website.
2. Traditional marketing methods should not be ignored. Digital methods provide cost-efficient methods of delivering information to the tourist; but they should not be the only component in the VIC's marketing arsenal.
3. The power of the human element in assisting the visitor should not be undermined while the demand for electronic information is also on the increase (Wi-Fi and smartphone applications). Personal engagement is critical to the success of VICs.
4. Staff and volunteers have to be equipped with the knowledge and skills to deliver a mix of messages and communication used in the VICs.

5. Training and education of all staff in new and innovative technology should be done promptly. This may be costly and time consuming, but it will deliver better outcomes.
6. Incorporate individual interests, prior knowledge and experience in the education and training programs for volunteers, on the use of the Internet and other digital tools.
7. Ensure volunteers are knowledgeable and confident.

All the ingredients discussed and highlighted in the Ipswich and i-SITEs case studies thus far, resonate with the literature on information dissemination, staff development and technology adoption and use. Therefore, these case studies present practical insights worthy of adoption by VIC management. What is notable from both case studies is the use of social media in the dissemination of tourism information and the resultant engagement with visitors. With the guidance from these case studies, the following section summarises the pertinent points in adoption and use of ICTs.

3.4.5 Summary of technology use in VICs

Section 3.4 dealt with technology in VICs. Despite some drawbacks and contrary viewpoints outlined in the area of technology uptake in VICs and co-destruction, one universal theme is apparent – developing an online presence is essential to enable VICs to cope with industry trends. The literature reviewed thus far underlined that new ICTs are beneficial (Arana *et al*, 2015; Minghetti & Celotto, 2013). They improve the accuracy, quality and the scope of information disseminated to visitors at a destination. Besides being free to use, they are convenient for the technologically savvy modern visitors. The next section focuses on the funding of VICs, as a factor that influences their success (Figure 3.1).

3.5 FUNDING FOR VISITOR INFORMATION CENTRE OPERATIONS

This section analyses funding, in-as-much as it affects VIC operation. It first explores the importance of funding for VIC success. The various funding options available and those adopted by VICs in other jurisdictions are then identified. The section then shifts to sustainable funding options, which VICs may adopt for future sustainability. It concludes with a discussion of current and potential future funding trends, which are essential for the successful operation of VICs. This section is related to Secondary Research Objective 3(v) of the current study.

3.5.1 The importance of funding for the success of VICs

The environment in which VICs operate is greatly influenced by the funding arrangements and structures (Carson *et al*, 2005). VICs require funding and their overall efficiency is determined by the funding received (Ballantyne & Hughes, 2004; Tourism & Events Queensland, 2013b; Tourism Research Australia, 2016). Their function benefits the surrounding attractions, facilities and accommodation outlets (Bedard *et al*, 2008; Haerberlin Consulting, 2014). When these stakeholders realise the value of the VIC, they commit funds to them.

The funding structure also determines the operating capacity and the performance of respective VICs (Bedard *et al*, 2008). Several questions arise with regard to funding: How much money should be reserved for new ICTs? How much is available for salaries, maintenance and utilities? To this end, proper and consistent funding contributes to the effectiveness of VICs (Bornhorst *et al*, 2010:587; Deery *et al*, 2007). The available funding determines the level of adoption and the use of ICTs within VICs. Several authors remark that well-funded VICs will retain professional employees who can help increase members' confidence, provide up-market services, and contribute to operational efficiency (Ballantyne *et al*, 2009; Tourism Research Australia, 2016; Wong & McKercher, 2011). Funding also makes training possible, for example, large VICs in Australia are able to send their staff for training at the beginning of each year on topics such as customer service at a cost of over AUD\$10,000 (Ballantyne & Hughes, 2004). Well-resourced VICs will play a much broader role in tourism than that required by their accreditation standards (Urban Enterprise, 2013).

VICs would not be able to operate unless they have reliable sources of funding to cover their operational costs, such as staff wages, building maintenance and supplies, utilities, travel and associated training costs (Bornhorst *et al*, 2010; Deery *et al*, 2007; Tourism & Events Queensland, 2013b; Urban Enterprise, 2013). Staff wages are the greatest expense in most VICs, averaging 66% of the budget (Jago & Deery, 2002; Urban Enterprise, 2013). The following section explores funding options.

3.5.2 Funding options available to VICs

There are various funding options available to VICs. These may include local government grants, membership subscriptions, commission, Local Tourism Organisation (LTO) and Regional Tourism Organisation (RTO) funding, as well as funding from their own operations (Bedard *et al*, 2008; Carson *et al*, 2005). VICs may also be funded through a combination of various options. There is no one universal set of arrangements and funding sources vary widely (Tourism & Events Queensland, 2013b). Figure 3.5

presents an example by indicating the funding options for VICs in Western Australia. The figure depicts that several sources are available with the greatest support (52%) coming from their own operations and local government funding providing up to 31%.

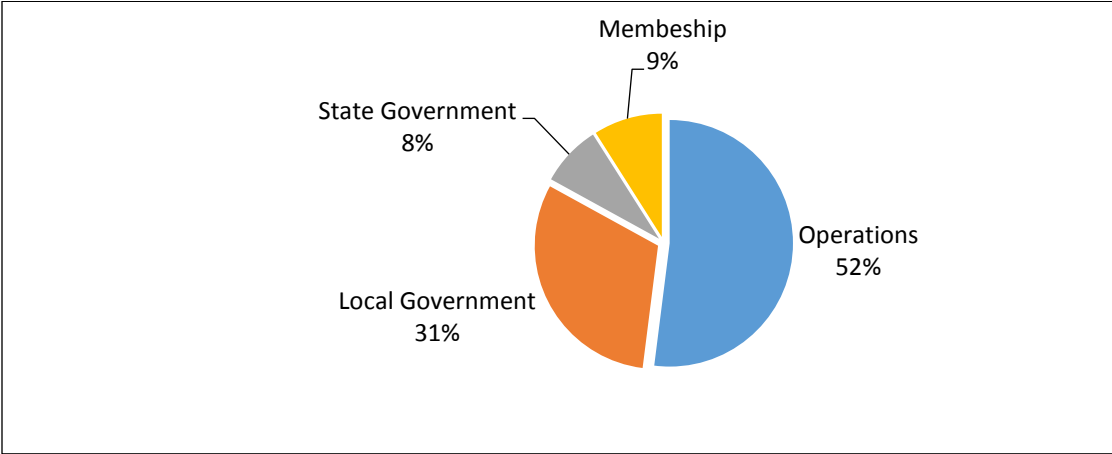


Figure 3.5 Sources of VIC funding for VICs in Western Australia (Western Australia Tourism Council, 2004).

In Queensland in the north-east of Australia, there is a wide disparity in the funding for VICs (Ballantyne & Hughes, 2004). Some VICs are totally or partially funded by shire councils; some are funded by industry; while others are self-supporting through their operations. In Victoria, VICs are predominantly funded by the local government that provides about 77% of the funding required by the VICs. It is a stable form of funding with an assurance for infrastructural support (Urban Enterprise, 2013). Staff are paid higher salaries and they are exposed to better training opportunities (Bedard *et al*, 2008; Wong & Mckercher, 2011).

In Vietnam, VICs receive funding from the regional board and/or relevant government authority (Vietnam Tourist information Centre Guide, 2013) while in the USA, VICs are state-run and funded. In New Zealand, the management, administration and marketing of i-SITEs is largely funded through an annual grant from Tourism New Zealand and membership fees. As such, very few VICs are able to operate without the financial backing from local government, or their RTO or LTO. For this reason, it is a requirement for VICs in Australia to have letters of support from local government and the Regional Tourism Association, to ensure that the centre is embraced by the community. In cases where the VIC fails to sustain itself financially, the local government usually takes over.

3.5.3 Current and future trends in the funding of VICs

The need to adequately fund VICs cannot be over-emphasised. In several instances, VICs are under-funded and under-resourced. Where this occurs, the standard of service to potential visitors and to customers at the VIC can only suffer – to the detriment of the community, the travelling public and the state. While local government grants, RTO funding and public funding may be the main sources of financing, a global trend around the world shows that VICs need to be self-financed, or self-sufficient, and they can do this by adding functions that generate additional revenue. In Australia, the USA and Britain, VICs are latching onto income-generating opportunities to subsidise their operating costs through activities, such as sale of souvenirs, paid advertising, commissions on bookings, sub-letting space and canvassing for memberships and donations (Tourism & Events Queensland, 2013a).

To summarise Section 3.4, which dealt with funding for VIC operations, there are various funding options available to VICs. These include local government, state and self-funding from operations. Among these options, local and state funding are the most stable forms with an assurance of success for the VICs. Recent trends indicate that VICs have to latch onto other forms of funding such as donations, sale of space and souvenirs to subsidise some of their operating expenses. VIC management should consider and establish a more robust financial case for continued investment in VICs. The final factor in operating successful VICs is accreditation and visitor information networks, and they are discussed next.

3.6 ACCREDITATION AND VISITOR INFORMATION NETWORKS

3.6.1 Introduction

This section defines accreditation and visitor information networking, its implications for service improvement in VICs and the benefits thereof. It must be noted that accreditation and visitor information networking are inextricably linked. The benefits of these are presented first. Two case studies are presented next, illustrating the practical application of accreditation and information networking. Many processes have been developed to assist VICs in performing their functions effectively. The most notable and widely acknowledged are accreditation and visitor information networking among VICs (Ballantyne *et al*, 2009; Carson *et al*, 2005; Cox & Wray, 2011; Deery *et al*, 2007; Wray *et al*, 2016). This section is related to Secondary Research Objective 3 (v) of the current study.

Accreditation aims to raise the standard of information provision by developing guidelines and criteria that encourage professional practices – with the aim of fostering continual improvement (Tourism &

Events Queensland, 2013b). This can be achieved through Visitor Information Centre Networks, which aim to enhance and strengthen communication between VICs and tourist operators, as well as among VICs (Carson *et al*, 2005; Tourism Research Australia, 2016). As a result, accreditation has been extensively embraced in regional areas in Australia and New Zealand (Tourism & Events Queensland, 2013a).

3.6.2 The benefits of accreditation and visitor information networks

The accreditation and visitor information networks provide a focal point for networking and for ensuring the delivery of high-service standards in the provision of reliable and readily accessible information to visitors and residents. Accreditation significantly contributes to the performance of VICs. Accredited VICs are a credible source of objective information for visitors regarding the products of the region, and are important for informed decision-making (Kao *et al*, 2005; Sotiriadis & van Zyl, 2013; Tourism & Events Queensland, 2013b; Tourism Research Australia, 2016).

Accredited VICs contribute immensely by boosting revenues through enhancing visitor experience and encouraging visitors to stay longer in the region. This can be achieved through greater dispersal and repeat visitation (Deery *et al*, 2007; UNWTO, 2007). There is an advantage in having an integrated network of accredited VICs across a country or region. It is essential for the exchange of ideas, gaining industry knowledge and the improvement of services to visitors (Tourism & Events Queensland, 2013b). Through networking, it is specified how the VIC should relate to other local and regional VICs, the tourism industry, as well as other partner organisations.

Networking among VICs is achieved through hosting and attending networking functions in the adjoining regions, via quarterly meetings with other partner organisations such as RTOs or LTOs, monthly familiarisation visits to local products and other regions. By and large, networking provides practical opportunities to learn from other VICs, and how to create a network of knowledge in the region (Tourism & Events Queensland, 2013b; Tourism Research Australia, 2016). VICs usually use online methods to share this information (Ballantyne & Hughes, 2004). Best practice requires a VIC to have a networking policy on how it relates and communicates with other partners such as VICs (Law *et al*, 2009; Naipaul *et al*, 2009; Tourism Research Australia, 2015). The application of accreditation and visitor information networking has been tested in other jurisdictions and is presented by means of two case studies.

3.6.3 Practical application of accreditation and visitor information networking

The two case studies presented in this section explore the application of accreditation, and how it is achieved. Key features upon which the accreditation and visitor information networks depend, are then discussed. The closing section sums up the benefits of accreditation and networking based on the two case studies. The following section presents accreditation in Queensland, South Australia, followed by the i-SITEs case study in New Zealand.

3.6.3.1 VIC accreditation – Queensland, South Australia

In Queensland, accreditation has pushed for higher standards in the servicing industry. The accreditation program is based on quality assurance principles, and it is aligned with the Australian and International Standards for Quality Management Systems – ISO 9002. The program addresses many of the issues that are involved in the development of a business plan; but it focuses on those key elements that are part of the day-to-day function of any tourism-business operation. In this regard, the program provides consumers and the industry with an assurance that an accredited VIC is committed to quality business practices and professionalism in all aspects of the enterprise.

The VIC accreditation policy provides a basic level of commonality across the Queensland VIC network, in which all the VICs are tasked with providing objective visitor information. The policy sets broad benchmarks for what and how this information is provided, as well as the quality of delivery. Beyond these broad benchmarks, individual VICs have considerable discretion over the detail of their service delivery and the functions they fulfil.

Some of the broad benchmarks include ongoing training as a requirement for accreditation, for VICs to ensure that their staff have the knowledge and skills to provide a consistent level of high-quality service to customers. In Queensland and New South Wales, the training required as part of accreditation includes customer service, local tourism product (through familiarisations) workplace health and safety, and the use of office computer programs. This has already been discussed in human resource development and equipping of staff (Sections 3.3.5 and 3.3.3). The second case study on accreditation is presented next.

3.6.3.2 VIC accreditation - The i-SITEs in New Zealand

The i-SITEs in New Zealand have been mentioned in previous section (Section 3.4.4) with a special focus on technology adoption and usage. However, it is also a good example of accreditation and networking.

The i-SITEs (VICs) are the front door to New Zealand's unique offerings and experiences, for all that visitors need to know, what to see, where to go and how to get there. There is a minimum level which i-SITEs need to attain, in order to get accreditation. This minimum level ensures consistency of service delivery to visitors from site to site. The minimum level stipulates the training requirements for i-SITE staff, frequency of communication with other i-SITEs, expected customer service levels and minimum requirements for branding.

The New Zealand's i-SITE network is consistently branded, with more integrated management and a strong focus on a consistently high-quality customer experience (including mystery-shopping audits). The results of this model are impressive, with over 87% of visitors being satisfied and 90% of international visitors making a purchase. Over 40% of the international visitors used i-SITEs when they were in New Zealand (Tourism & Events Queensland, 2013b).

The following benefits of accreditation can be deduced from the two case studies. These resonate with the literature on accreditation and visitor information networks, thereby bringing the whole section to a conclusion:

1. It fosters high standards in visitor servicing in the regions, ensuring the delivery of quality information and visitor facilities and the professional development of staff and volunteers.
2. It provides improved business knowledge and performance, competences and predictability.
3. It encourages the facilitation of continual business improvement, as a result of aligning to recognised and consistent total quality principles.
4. VICs that are incorporated into a network can benefit from the general promotion of the VIC network.
5. It assures customers of consistent and quality service.
6. It drives VICs to optimise the visitor experiences and maximise the value thereof for the tourism industry and the local community.
7. It ensures that services are provided in the most strategic locations, according to consistent and rational criteria.
8. It assists in implementing a single database, or knowledge management system.
9. It provides consistency in service delivery and satisfactory performance.

The next section provides the summary to the whole chapter which covers the operation of successful VICs.

3.7 CONCLUSION

Chapter 3 of this dissertation comprised the second part of the literature review conducted for the current study. The layout followed the flow diagram in Figure 3.1. The main focus of this chapter has been to explore the operation of successful VICs, which were identified as: human resource development and the equipping of staff; technology adoption and usage; funding for VIC operations; and accreditation and visitor information networks. All these fall within the realm of knowledge management (as per Figure 3.1).

This chapter provided a literature review of the key areas relevant to the operation of VICs. The chapter started by defining knowledge management, and explained its relevance to VICs. It illustrated that knowledge management is the hallmark of VIC success in the 21st century. The chapter proceeded to illustrate how knowledge management underpins other process and operations within the VICs. The dissemination of information and the equipping of the staff were discussed as an important theme which contributes to the success of VICs. VIC staff are to acquire skills in information dissemination, customer service, telephone etiquette and familiarisation tours to meet visitors' expectations. This chapter also outlined that VICs need to adopt and use new ICTs in the dissemination of tourism information. This was underlined through two case studies from Australia and New Zealand. Furthermore, the chapter explored the funding of VICs operations, which is very important to the sustainability of VICs into the future. Several options were discussed which have been adopted by other successful VICs, such generating their own income. The accreditation of VICs and networking with other industry stakeholders was underlined as one of the important strategies in the operation of successful VICs. In addition, the i-SITEs was discussed as one of the documented and successful case studies. This chapter addressed Secondary Research Objective 2, namely to document the best practices in VICs internationally. This literature review informed the research design and the research instruments used to gather the primary data. The researcher also returns to aspects of the literature review in the analysis of the data in Chapter 5. The next chapter discusses the research design and the methodology that was used to explore the objectives of the study.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the research design and methodology used for collecting the data which ultimately informs the best practice framework for VICs in Gauteng Province. To achieve it, four secondary research objectives were identified. The first secondary objective was to conceptualise VICs in the context of the tourism industry. The second explored the key themes in the operation of successful VICs. These were achieved in Chapters 2 and 3 respectively. The third secondary research objective was to explore the opinions of VIC staff and managers, in an attempt to understand the current situation in Gauteng VICs, with respect to five key areas, namely: the functions of Gauteng VICs; information dissemination and the equipping of staff, technology adoption and usage; funding for VICs; and accreditation and visitor information networks. The fourth Secondary research objective was to compare practices in Gauteng VICs against the best practices internationally.

This chapter commences with Section 4.2, which describes the study sites, these being the Gauteng VICs where the primary data were gathered. A detailed explanation of the research design and methodology will follow, in order to provide answers to the secondary research objectives that were set out, in order to achieve the primary research objective. The chapter follows certain steps, as depicted in Figure 4.1. Validity and the reliability of the data collected is discussed under 'Development of the research instruments' – Step 3. Research ethics are considered towards the end of Chapter 4.

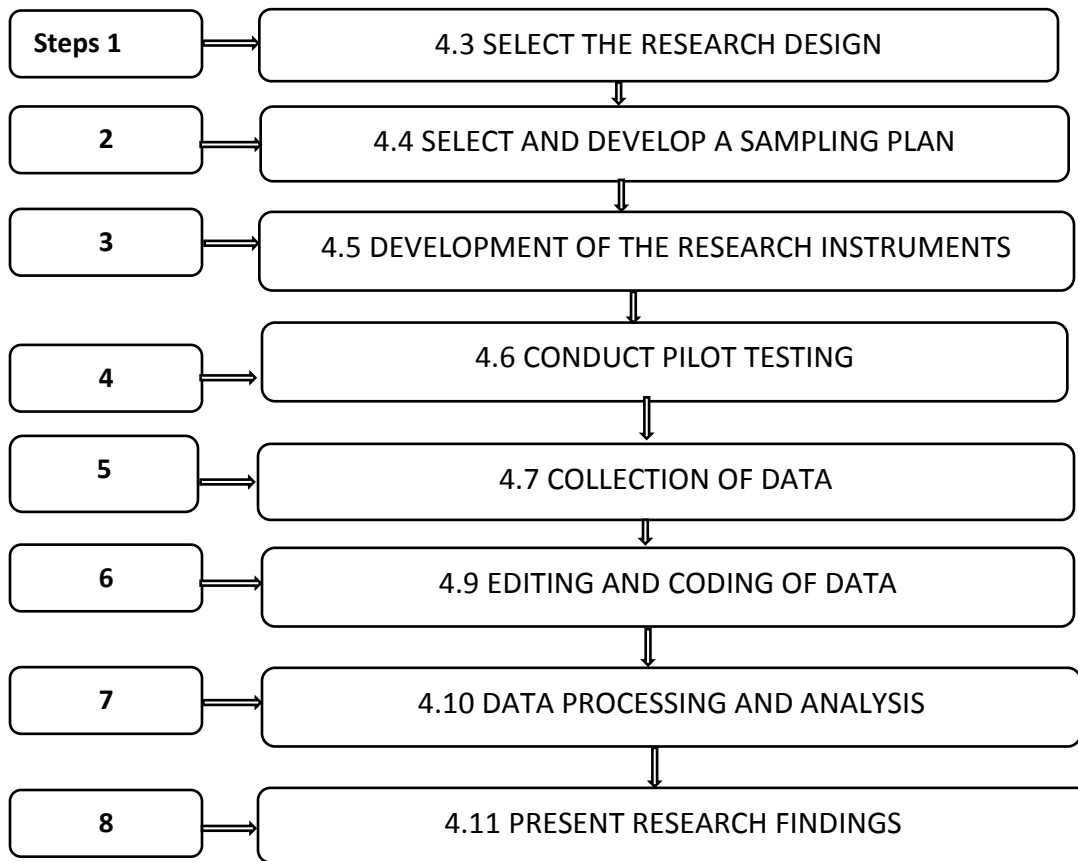


Figure 4.1 Flow diagram of Chapter 4

4.2 STUDY SITE

The research was conducted at VICs in Gauteng Province. Figure 4.2 below shows the map of Gauteng and the location of the VICs, which are registered on the National Department of Tourism website.



Figure 4.2 VICs in Gauteng Province

Out of the 11 VICs on the map, eight participated, namely Wonderboom, Church Square, Emfuleni, Benoni, Hatfield, OR Tambo (all government owned), Zinikele and Mogale (both privately owned).

The Gauteng Province has been chosen as the jurisdiction for the study. VICs are very important in the most urbanised destinations, being advisors of the territory once the visitor has arrived in the city (Tena & Raquel, 2014; Tourism Research Australia, 2015). Gauteng Province is the most urbanised and fast-paced economic powerhouse in South Africa; therefore, it is ideal for this research (Gauteng Tourism Authority, 2011; National Department of Tourism, 2015). Gauteng is one of the most visited provinces for both local and international tourists, as well as the main regional hub en-route to other destinations (Madondo, 2016:18). The Province has an excellent framework of versatile tourism services, ranging from urban nightlife, upmarket shopping malls, historical and cultural sites, outdoor landscapes, and upmarket conference facilities for business tourists. The findings from the study of Gauteng VICs can possibly be applied and adopted to other VICs in South Africa. VICs, which are affiliated to the National Department of Tourism and registered on the National Department of Tourism's website, formed the unit of analysis in this study (see Appendix C).

4.3 STEP 1: SELECT THE RESEARCH DESIGN

As depicted in Figure 4.1, the first step entails selecting the research design to be used in the study. The research design outlines the overall plan for achieving the research objectives. It lays out the research instrument and data gathering procedures, through to the presentation of results (Creswell, 2014; Creswell, 2003; Miles & Huberman, 1994; van Thiel, 2014). This research is exploratory in the sense that it searches for new insights into VICs in Gauteng and aims to assess the phenomena in a novel way, in this case via the supply side with a focus on best practices (Saunders *et al*, 2007).

The research followed a two-tiered approach – using two surveys. Survey research involves soliciting responses to direct questions, which are usually structured in the form of a questionnaire given to respondents (Finn & Elliot, 2000). The two surveys were self-designed using existing literature, giving the study a theoretical grounding (Cooper & Schindler, 2011). The surveys were designed for VIC **staff** and key informants (**managers**) respectively. Both surveys made use of open-ended questions (to gather qualitative data) and closed questions (to gather quantitative data). The rest of the chapter provides detail on the various aspects of the research design and methodology.

4.4. STEP 2: SELECT AND DEVELOP A SAMPLING PLAN

The units of analysis of a study refer to the entities from which the researcher wishes to draw conclusions. The sampling units were chosen, because they have particular features and characteristics, which enable a detailed exploration and an understanding of the central themes in the operation of VICs

(Camilleri & Neuhofer, 2017; Pasternak, 2017). The units of analysis for this study constitute VIC **staff** in contact with visitors, and **managers** responsible for the operation of VICs. Out of the 11 VICs registered on the National Department of Tourism website as per Appendix C, **eight VICs** participated, namely Wonderboom, Church Square, Emfuleni, Zinikele, Benoni, Mogale, Hatfield and OR Tambo.

- A total of 35 VIC staff were employed in the eight VICs. Out of these, **25 staff members** participated in the staff survey.
- From the eight VICs, all **eight managers** participated in the key informant survey.
- In sum, 33 respondents participated from a pool of 43 potential respondents.

Non-probability sampling was used, where a sample was chosen deliberately to produce a representative sample (van Thiel, 2014). **Non-probability sampling** targets a particular group, recognising that it only represents itself as opposed to a wider population (Cohen *et al*, 2011). In this study, it enabled access to a population which was difficult to reach, that is to say, the staff in VICs who usually do shift work, and those who only work part-time (Showkat & Parveen, 2017). In these circumstances, getting access to the whole population at once was impossible. The researcher adopted a combination of **purposive sampling** for VIC **managers** and **snowball sampling** for VIC **staff** in contact with the visitors. These are discussed next in separate sections.

4.4.1 Purposive Sample: VIC managers

Purposive sampling was used for Survey 1 (key informant survey) which was directed at VIC **managers**. It involved choosing the respondents that were knowledgeable about the operation of VICs, who could generate meaningful insights that would contribute to answering the research questions (Showkat & Parveen, 2017). Destination competitive literature states that judgement based on experience, expertise and insight is in itself a source of valuable information (Pasternak, 2017). To guarantee that only the relevant respondents were targeted; and considering the aim of the research, the respondents had to satisfy the following criteria:

- be a manager of a VIC;
- above the age of 18 years, and below the age of 65; and
- they must be in contact with visitors.

This information on the eligibility to participate is captured on the consent to participate form in Appendix H.

4.4.2 Snowball sampling for VIC staff

Snowball sampling was used for Survey 2, the **staff** survey which was directed at VIC staff. It is a type of convenience sampling whereby the researcher makes contact with a limited number of people relevant to the research, and s/he then uses these to establish further contacts with others, who meet the eligibility criteria (Bryman, 2004; Bryman & Bell, 2011; Camilleri & Neuhofer, 2017). The researcher started with the manager who provided access to the staff. Staff members were asked to participate and to suggest other potential participants, who could satisfy the eligibility criteria, namely having contact with visitors. Snowball sampling provided the flexibility needed for the data collection. Respondents were therefore those best suited to provide insights into the problem being investigated (Dusek *et al*, 2015; Pasternak, 2017).

By focusing on respondents appropriate to the study, it enabled in-depth research, and provided insights into the problem being investigated (Dusek *et al*, 2015; Pasternak, 2017). Snowball sampling allowed the researcher to maintain control over those who initially received the invitation to participate in the survey; and to make it closely mirror the target population in the study.

The researcher thus used two self-designed surveys to gather primary data. The steps taken to develop these surveys are discussed next.

4.5 STEP 3: DEVELOPMENT OF THE RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

From the flow diagram in Figure 4.1, Step 3 in the research process was the development of the research instrument. To address Secondary Research Objective 3, questions related to the current situation in Gauteng VICs were compiled in two different surveys – the staff survey (staff in contact with the visitors) and the key informant survey (for managers responsible for the running of the VICs). The processes followed in developing the two surveys were similar and both contained open and closed questions. The closed questions comprised of a range of different formats including the use of Likert scales.

The staff survey focused on the conceptualisation of VICs, functions, information dissemination and the equipping of staff, technology adoption and usage; whilst the key informant survey mainly focused on VIC funding, accreditation and visitor information networks. It should be noted that there were areas where the surveys slightly overlap – on the functions of VICs and the proposals for improvement. The layout of the two surveys is presented in Table 5.1. Both surveys are based on the reviewed literature on the conceptualisation of VICs and the themes in the successful operation of VICs, (Chapters 2 and 3) which provide a theoretical grounding.

The underlying principle that was followed in developing the surveys was to ensure that the questions related to the research objectives. The staff survey comprised five sections; and the key informant survey had three sections as follows:

Table 4.1 Relationship between the research objectives, the type of questions asked and the literature.

Objective 3	Staff survey	Key Informant Survey	Type of question	Source	Literature Section
Current situation of Gauteng VICs in respect of: 3 (i) Functions of Gauteng VICs	Section 1 Questions 1.1, 1.2b, 1.3b, 1.4b, 1.5a	Question 1.5	Open ended Give opinion, rate given options	Arana <i>et al</i> , 2015; Deery <i>et al</i> , 2005; Hobbin, 1999; Hwang & Fesenmaier, 2011; Mistilis & Gretzel, 2014b; Pearce, 2004; Tena & Raquel, 2014	2.4
	1.2a, 1.3a, 1.4a, 1.5b		Closed questions Choose from the given options		
3 (ii) Information dissemination and equipping of staff	Section 2 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 2.5		Close-ended Tick spaces where appropriate	Ballantyne <i>et al</i> (2007), Ballantyne & Hughes, (2004) Deery <i>et al</i> (2007), Tourism & Events Queensland (2013a), Zehrer <i>et al</i> (2014)	3.3
	2.4b	1.4	Open-ended State your opinion		
3 (iii) Technology adoption and usage	Section 3 3.1a, 3.2a, 3.4, 3.5, 3.7, 3.8a, 3.8b, 3.9a, 3.9c, 3.10		Close-ended Tick the spaces where appropriate	Deery <i>et al</i> , 2007; Carson <i>et al</i> (2005), Sherfield (2002), Tourism & events Queensland (2013b)	3.4
	3.1b, 3.2b, 3.6, 3.9b, 3.9d, 3.9e, 3.11		Open ended List the options, give reasons.		
Best practice framework	Section 4 4.1		Close ended Rate the given options		
	4.2	3.7	Open ended State the changes required		
	Section 5 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 5.5		Close ended Tick the appropriate option.	Zehrer <i>et al</i> , 2014; Minghetti & Celotto, 2013	
	5.4, 5.6		Close ended State your position and qualification.	Yuan, Gretzel & Fesenmaier, 2003	
3(iv) Funding for VIC operations		Section 2 1.2, 2.2a, 2.5a,	Close ended Tick where appropriate	Carson <i>et al</i> , 2005; Deery <i>et al</i> , 2007	3.5
		1.1, 2.2a, 2.3a, 2.4, 2.5b,	Open ended Tick and state where appropriate		
3 (v) Accreditation and Visitor information networks		Section 3 3.1, 3.3	Closed questions	Carson <i>et al</i> , 2005; Deery <i>et al</i> , 2007; Hobbin; 1999, Tourism & Events Queensland (2013b)	3.6
		3.2, 3.4a, 3.4b, 3.5b, 3.5c, 3.5d	Open-ended		3.6

Prominent writers in the field of VICs have tended to use both closed and open-ended survey questions which subject the data to quantitative and qualitative approaches, respectively (Bornhorst *et al*, 2010; Carson *et al*, 2005; Deery *et al*, 2007; Fallon & Kriwoken, 2003; Lyu & Hwang, 2015; Mistilis & Gretzel, 2014b; Sherfield, 2002; Sobaih, 2011; Ranjbarian & Pool, 2015). This approach tended to produce revealing results, hence, the adoption of this method by the researcher in this study. The two surveys therefore contained both closed and open-ended questions. Closed-ended questions helped to obtain factual information and this data learnt itself to quantitative analysis (Fallon & Kriwoken, 2002; Saunders *et al*, 2007). Closed-ended questions also have the advantage of making responses quicker and easier for staff and to simplify the analysis of the data. The closed questions comprised a range of different formats including the use of Likert scales. Open-ended questions collected qualitative data which had the advantage of inviting open and honest personal comments from the respondents (Cohen *et al*, 2011). These authors also assert that ‘open-ended’ questions are a very attractive device for smaller scale research, in addition to ticking numbers and boxes. The surveys can be found in Appendices D and E.

The surveys contained similar questions on the most important functions of Gauteng VICs; and suggestions for improvement within these VICs. **Section 1** of the staff survey contained questions that explored the impacts of VIC on the visitors’ travel plans, length of stay and level expenditure. It further explored the Four-Plus model by Pearce (2004). **Section 2** consisted of questions on the visitor information provision and equipping of staff. Technology uptake and usage were covered in **Section 3** and addressed Secondary Research Objective 3. **Section 4** of the staff survey contained broad VIC activities covering various activities in which the staff were requested to rate their VICs. **Section 5** covered the demographic profile of the respondents. The essential demographics which were critical to the study, were age, gender, qualifications and title. These questions were about the training currently received and training needs for the future.

The key informant survey covered themes in the operation of successful VICs namely funding, accreditation and visitor information networks. The key informant survey is structured into three sections as follows: **Section 1** (general) covered the name of the VICs, type and number of staff involved in the VICs. **Section 2** addressed funding and **Section 3** addressed accreditation and visitor information networking. **Sections 2 and 3** addressed Secondary Research Objective 3, which aimed to explore the current situation of Gauteng VICs in terms of funding for VIC operations, accreditation and visitor information networking. All the questions included in the research instruments were informed by the related literature, as indicated in Table 4.1. The final sections for both surveys attempted to gather

insights proposed by respondents to improve VICs. This also contributed to the development of a best practice framework for Gauteng VICs.

The researcher ensured that both the staff and key informant surveys were **valid and reliable**. Validity and reliability are defined as the measure of truth and falsity of scientific findings from the research (van Rooyen, 2016). A valid and reliable instrument should derive representative questions from a universal pool. The sources consulted were previous research instruments and relevant literature. A panel of supervisors and the statistician added their input to improve both surveys. Moreover, pilot studies were also undertaken. Table 4.2 provides a summary of the measures taken by the researcher.

Table 4.2 Summary of measures taken to ensure validity of the research instruments (Cooper & Schindler, 2011: 290-292)

Type	Method	Application to this study
Content validity	Panel of experts	The research supervisors and the statistician were requested to review the surveys and make suggestions to sharpen the surveys.
	Judgmental	By researching the literature first, the researcher carefully defined the topic and the measurement tools.
	Literature-based	The researcher predominantly developed his own questions based on literature. The sources consulted are shown in the fifth column of Table 4.1
Pre-test	Pilot study	A pilot study was conducted with industry experts from the National Department of Tourism (South Africa).

4.6 STEP 4: CONDUCT PILOT TESTING

A pilot test or pre-test is an essential component of the survey procedure. For both surveys, the pilot test consisted of two phases. A pilot test was conducted with the NDT Tourism Services Manager followed by NDT National Director of Research and Development. It was felt that these provided an ideal testing ground, since these members were destination managers. The pilot test gave guidance on the clarity of the questions, and in particular, any issues with the structure of the survey. The effectiveness of the surveys' wording and design were sharpened from this pilot (Cooper & Schindler, 2011). Final drafts were sent to a panel of experts in the area of tourism management (a Professor, senior lecturer and a statistician). Based on the comments from the expert panel, unclear and obscure questions were rephrased and complex items were reworded. Additionally, ineffective and non-functioning questions were discarded from the final draft (Khalid, Hilman & Kumar, 2011; Meerah, Osman, Zakaria, Ikhsan, Krish, Lian & Mahmud, 2011; van Rooyen, 2016).

The changes from the pilot test appear in Appendix F. The two phases of the pilot test improved the reliability and the validity of the research instruments. The next step was the gathering of the primary data from the study sites. Before getting to the section where the actual survey questions began, screening questions were included to determine respondents' eligibility for participation (Refer to the Appendix H for the consent and the screening questions). The screening questions ensured that the correct demographics were included, while those that were ineligible, were eliminated. The target population comprised managers for VICs and staff in contact with visitors older than 18 years, and below the age of 65.

A **participant information sheet** (Appendix G) provided information regarding the research to the potential participants. The participant information sheet introduced the researcher and the supervisors. The respondents were thanked in advance for their participation; and they were assured of confidentiality. The researcher also advised them of the option to withdraw from answering the survey, should they wish to do so at any stage.

4.7 STEP 5: COLLECTION OF DATA

This section outlines the fieldwork process and the data collection for the current study. Data was collected from October 2017 to January 2018 at **eight** of the 11 Gauteng VICs affiliated and registered on the National Department of Tourism website. The complete list of VICs appears in Appendix C. The following process was followed to collect data from the participating VICs:

- Contacts for managers were obtained from the National Department of Tourism website. The contacts were in the form of telephone numbers and physical addresses for each VIC.
- The researcher arranged for the initial meeting with VIC managers, confirming their availability over the telephone. This was done to prevent scheduling conflicts.
- On the agreed day and time, the researcher travelled to each of the registered VICs for this initial contact and invitation to participate. The researcher made the initial contact with the VIC managers, requesting that the VIC with which s/he is involved and its staff be involved in the study. The informants were given information about the nature and aim of the study. This was done to develop rapport with the VIC managers, which paved the way for the filling in of the key informant survey.
- The researcher explained the study and its importance; and usually with the manager, identified staff members as the targeted respondents eligible for the research.

- Due to different staff members being available at different times, it was best that the manager oversaw the dissemination of the surveys. Screening questions were also added to the staff survey, to ensure that only eligible respondents filled in the survey. The manager was requested to remind the eligible respondents; and to ensure that the consent form was signed before starting the survey. Thus, in all cases, it was assumed that the respondents had a certain experience and familiarity with the operations of the VICs and any current developments (Alonso & Liu, 2012; Cox & Wray, 2011; Deery *et al*, 2007).
- The researcher provided a sealed box, in which the participants dropped their completed surveys. The researcher kept in touch with the managers, to collect the completed surveys.

This section has addressed the process of the data collection and the survey administration to the prospective participants. The surveys were distributed by the main researcher after travelling to the targeted VICs in Gauteng. The next section discusses editing and coding of data.

4.8 STEP 6: EDITING AND CODING OF DATA

For the qualitative data, the researcher read the survey responses to verify the completeness, consistency and locate omissions. He then cleaned the data and classified what was significant. The focus was on words, phrases, context, frequency and specificity of the comments. Consequently, these were clearly marked (highlighted) in a descriptive manner in preparation for analysis. These were then reduced into codes and were evaluated for relevance to the research objectives (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

For quantitative data, the raw data was verified for accuracy, completeness and usability. At the survey level, the researcher went through each survey and ensured that all the survey data was collected. Inconsistencies and impossibilities were corrected. This assisted in reducing recording errors, improved legibility, clarified unclear and inappropriate responses (Cooper & Schindler, 2011). The researcher confirmed that the sum of surveys returned was not more than the number of surveys distributed.

4.9 STEP 7: DATA PROCESSING AND ANALYSIS

This section presents the procedures undertaken in analysing the data gathered from the field. When the researcher had finished with the process of editing and coding, the process of data analysis started. Data analysis is the practice of extracting useful information from the raw data, and organising it into categories thereby extracting meaning and patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Since both surveys

contained qualitative and quantitative data, two types of analysis were used. Each of these are considered below.

4.9.1 Quantitative data analysis

The quantitative data obtained from primary research were mainly descriptive statistics in order to ascertain the general patterns. The analysis made use of descriptive measures, such as frequencies, percentages and cross tabulations. Interval and ratio scale data were classified into distinct categories (Cooper & Schindler, 2011; Pasternak, 2017). Data was cleaned as it was captured into an Excel spreadsheet which was useful for further analysis. The spreadsheet was loaded into the SPSS for running more advanced statistical analysis. The quantitative analysis used specialised and standard sets of data analysis techniques. Inferential analysis was used where generalisations on the whole population were made. Qualitative analysis followed, which dealt with the open-ended questions in the surveys.

4.9.2 Qualitative data analysis

The second stage was qualitative analysis, arising from the open-ended questions which sought to make sense of the respondents' opinions and assumptions, corresponding themes, categories and similarities (Cohen *et al*, 2007). The qualitative analysis, therefore, required acceptable qualitative data analysis methods. The data were analysed by using **thematic content analysis (TCA)** (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Connell & Reynolds 1999; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Smith & Holmes, 2012; Srivastava & Thomson, 2009; Vaismoradi, Jones, Turunen & Snelgrove, 2016). TCA is widely accepted and adopted in qualitative studies for its flexibility. It is not tied to any particular epistemological approach and any theoretical framework, such as the realist or constructionist stance. Secondly, TCA allows searching for patterns and themes within the data, going back and forth to the literature and the data to ensure that the analysis is solid and thorough (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Cohen *et al*, 2007). Finally, TCA is not explicit, insisting that a theme should contain a lot of text; therefore the researcher can apply his own judgement concerning what is considered as a theme. A basic condition in identifying and coding themes is that themes provide valuable insights to the research objectives (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2013; Pasternak, 2017, Vaismoradi *et al*, 2016).

To safeguard the credibility of the findings and the interpretation thereof, rigorous and prolonged engagement and induction with the data was conducted via a qualitative thematic approach, as explained chronologically in the steps that follow (Camilleri & Neuhofer, 2017; Ritchie & Spencer, 1994):

1. Analytic induction which involved reading and re-reading the qualitative answers in the surveys for familiarisation, and listing core ideas and re-current themes (Grinfelde & Lotina, 2015; Ritchie & Spencer, 1994; Srivastava & Thomson, 2009).
2. The researcher then developed a thematic framework, through which the material is sorted. Themes which have been identified for each question were listed. These corresponded largely with the themes discussed in the literature. However, the qualitative data were analysed from an inductive approach, allowing the findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant or significant themes inherent in the raw data (Brooks, McCluskey, Turley & King, 2015; Grinfelde & Lotina, 2015).
3. The thematic framework was then applied to the data in the surveys. This was primarily achieved through indexing. Indexing means that one identifies portions or sections of the data that correspond with a particular theme in the surveys. Then the data were annotated according to a thematic framework code (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994; Srivastava & Thomson, 2009). The codes were annotated beside the text in the survey for convenience (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994; Vaismoradi, Turunen & Bondas, 2013).
4. The data were then extracted from the surveys, according to the thematic framework codes. Having applied thematic codes on individual surveys, the data were then 'lifted' from their original context and re-arranged, according to their thematic codes assigned (Srivastava & Thomson, 2009).
5. The data and themes were subjected to interpretation by relating to the literature and then forming conclusions. The researcher cross-referenced the views from various respondents, in order to gain insights on the range of views, as well as to increase the confirmability of the results (Alonso & Liu, 2012).

This transparent and comprehensive coding by the researcher, researcher reflexivity and prolonged engagement with the data were critical in strengthening the reliability and the transferability of the research findings (Camilleri & Neuhofer, 2017). The themes identified for each question through thematic content analysis are provided in Appendix J. Together with the quantitative data, the identified themes would be further used as the basis for reasoning, comparing with previous literature, and formulating a best practice framework.

4.10 STEP 8: PRESENT THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

The final stage in the research process is the presentation of the research findings. These findings appear in Chapter 5. Chapter 5 is divided into **three parts** and in each part, the findings are presented question by question starting with quantitative followed by qualitative data. The data was presented using tables and graphs. **Part 1** presents the characteristics of both staff and key informants as well as the characteristics of Gauteng VICs according to ownership and funding. This is followed by the functions of VICs which also covers Question 1.5 of the key informant survey and Question 1.1 in the staff survey. The later part covers the rest of the staff survey.

Part 2 covers the key informant survey according to the order of the questions but excluding Questions 1.1 to 1.5 which are addressed in Part 1. Findings from Part 1 and 2 are merged with best practice literature, examples, case studies and recommendations from the researcher to present the best practice framework for Gauteng VICs in **Part 3** of Chapter 5.

4.11 RESEARCH ETHICS AND ETHICAL CLEARANCE

Ethical clearance for the present study was granted by the Research Ethics Review Committee in the College of Economics and Management Sciences at UNISA on the 22nd of August 2017. The clearance certificate is attached as Appendix A. The permission to conduct the research with Gauteng VICs was granted by the Gauteng Tourism Authority. The permission letter appears in Appendix B. The researcher adhered to all the ethical procedures, according to the University of South Africa's policy on ethical clearance certification.

The research was explained to the respondents through an information sheet (Appendix G); and consent forms (Appendix H) were supplied, which respondents signed before filling in the surveys to indicate that they had voluntarily agreed to participate in the research. The information contained in the consent to participate included:

- The purpose of the research;
- Confidentiality note;
- Potential benefits of the study to the respondents, VIC management and the relevant stakeholders;
- It was clearly indicated that the respondents were not given incentives to participate; and
- It was explained how the participants would receive the results of the study.

Table 4.3 indicates ethical principles in research and how they were customised for this present study.

Table 4.3 Summary of ethical principles and how they were customised for this research (Saunders, Thornhill & Lewis, 2012).

Ethical Principle	Application to the current study
Privacy of the research participants	The privacy of the participants and the anonymity was guaranteed and assured through the entire research process and final write-up. Please see the information Sheet in Appendix G.
Informed consent of those taking part	All participants had to sign the informed consent sheet before they could complete the survey. This was attached immediately after the information sheet, but before the survey. The researcher ensured that rights of the participants were protected all stages. Please see the 'Consent to participate' form in Appendix H.
Ensuring confidentiality of data and maintenance of anonymity of research participants	All participants completed the survey anonymously and their confidentiality was assured before participation. This contributed to the quality of data gathered.

4.12 CONCLUSION

This chapter has presented an overview of the methodology used in this study. The chapter outlined the steps of the research process that were followed. The details of the study sites were provided, namely eight Gauteng VICs which are located within Gauteng Province, and are registered on the National Department of Tourism website. As depicted in Figure 4.1, the first step briefly introduced the research design, which involved an exploratory study using two surveys. The details of the research design were covered in the subsequent steps. The sampling plan (Step 2) provided the sampling procedures. The target population comprised the two populations working at Gauteng VICs. For the staff in contact with visitors, snowball sampling was used, and for the managers who were responsible for the day-to-day running of the VICs, purposive sampling was used. Step 3 in the research was the selection and development of the relevant research instruments. The surveys were self-designed, and made use of open and closed questions. Both instruments were pre-tested in July 2017 after ethical clearance was granted (Step 4). Following the pilot study, primary data were gathered from the Gauteng VICs from September 2017 to January 2018 (Step 5). Data-processing and analysis ensued after the data collection. The data was captured on an Excel spreadsheet which was imported into the SPSS software for advanced quantitative analysis; while qualitative data was manually coded and analysed into themes by inferring

from the respondents what was significant (Steps 6 and 7). The findings and the best practice framework are presented in Chapter 5 and constitute Step 8 of Figure 4.1. Chapter 6 concludes the study by revisiting the research objectives and providing recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 5

QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE VISITOR INFORMATION CENTRE ANALYSIS: STAFF & KEY INFORMANT RESPONDENTS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents qualitative and quantitative responses from both staff respondents and key informant respondents. The analysis follows the structure of the two surveys. Moreover, the chapter is divided into **three parts** which are explained below. The staff survey can be found in Appendix D and the key informant survey in Appendix E. A **grey bar** is presented before each question, indicating the question number, the survey from which the question originates and the related secondary research objective being addressed. The following table provides the abbreviations which are key to the chapter.

Table 5.1 Abbreviations used in Chapter 5

Term	Abbreviation
Key informant survey	KIS
Key informant respondent	KIR
Question	Q
Secondary research objective	SRO
Staff respondent	SR
Staff survey	SS

To orientate the reader, an example of how the grey bar with abbreviations is used, follows. “SS – Q2.4a, 2.4b; SRO 3(ii)” means

- The questions originate from the staff survey (SS)
- The questions under analysis are Questions 2.4a and 2.4b (Q)
- The questions form part of achieving Secondary Research Objective 3(ii) (SRO)

For questions which have both quantitative and qualitative responses, the quantitative is presented first, followed by the qualitative data. A short summary is provided after every section that will contribute to the development of a best practice framework for Gauteng VICs.

A flow diagram is presented in Figure 5.1 to provide guidance on the structure of the chapter. **Chapter 5 is comprised of three parts namely:**

- **Part 1:** Presents all staff survey (SS) questions (Q) regarding the function of VICs. From the key informant survey, Q 1 is also analysed in Part 1 as it contains the characteristics and functions of the VICs.
- **Part 2:** Presents all key informant survey (KIS) questions, except for Q1.
- **Part 3:** Presents the best practice framework.

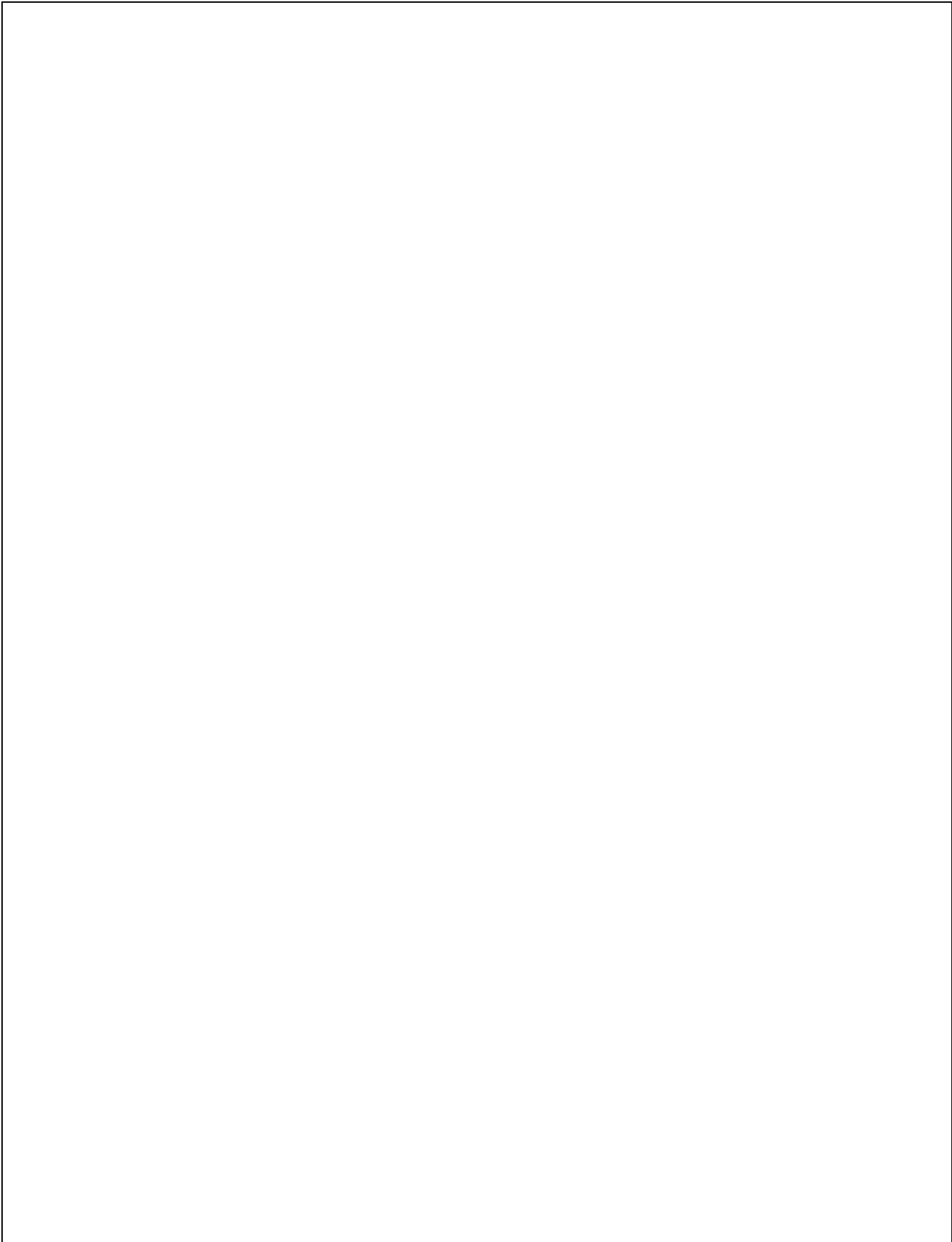


Figure 5.1 Flowchart of Chapter 5

PART 1

STAFF AND KEY INFORMANT RESPONSES ON THE FUNCTIONS OF VISITOR INFORMATION CENTRES

The first section of Part 1 (Section 5.2) presents the characteristics of the SRs according to gender, age, employee type, job title, years of service and qualifications. For KIRs, gender and age are provided. The section concludes by considering the characteristics of the VICs.

5.2 CHARACTERISTICS OF STAFF AND KEY INFORMANT RESPONDENTS

SS – Q 5.1 - 5.6; KIS - Q 1.1, 1.2

5.2.1 Staff respondents

A total of 25 SRs from eight VICs participated in this study. Regarding the **gender** of the 25 who responded, 11 were male and 14 were female. This translated to 44% and 56% respectively. Figure 5.2 depicts this distribution.



Figure 5.2 Characterisation of staff respondents by gender

This characterisation shows a higher number of females than males by a difference of 12% percentage points. Two observations are apparent: firstly, this could mean that there is a larger number of females employed in Gauteng VICs than males; or secondly, a higher number of females were interested and participated in the study, as compared to males.

A second characterisation of SRs according to **age** was also conducted. This sought to understand the general age of the SRs employed in Gauteng VICs. Most of the participants were millennials below the

age of 34. The prevalence of respondents in this younger age group will have bearing on the results received. Table 5.2 provides the ages of the SRs.

Table 5.2 Frequency table on the characterisation of SRs by age

Age (years)	21	22	25	26	27	33	34	36	41	45	52	53	60	63
Frequency	1	1	4	2	4	2	1	2	1	1	1	1	2	1
Valid (%)	4.2	4.2	16.7	8.3	16.7	8.3	4.2	8.3	4.2	4.2	4.2	4.2	8.3	4.2
Cum (%)	4.2	8.3	25	33.3	50	58.3	62.5	70.8	75	79.2	83.3	87.5	95.8	100

*one SR did not provide their age.

With regards to academic **qualifications** of staff employed in Gauteng VICs, the following findings were observed.



Figure 5.3 Characterisation of staff by qualification

The level of education among the SRs was average, ranging from matric to holding a degree. Most of the participants (13) had diplomas in tourism, or in related fields, such as marketing and human resources; two had certificates in tourism; and only one had a BTech Degree in Tourism and Pedagogics. The other two had matric, reinforced with on-the-job training and with experience of over ten years in the tourism field.

There was a diversity of **job titles**, and the researcher identified a few. More than half (52%) of the SRs were information officers or assistants. Two were managers responsible for tourism services. Of these two, one SR used the title ‘Director of VIC services’, and another the title of ‘Chairman’. The others indicated themselves as interns from college; and one used the title ‘secretary’.

5.2.2 Key informants

This section examines the characteristics of the KIRs according to gender and age. Only eight KIRs responded, one from each of the eight VICs which participated in this study. Of the eight who participated, the majority were males (62.5%) and the minority were females (37.5%), ranging in age from 42 to 63 years. It is worth noting that only four KIRs provided their age in years while the other four withheld this information. This limited information confirms earlier studies from Australia which established that most of the VIC staff were older.

5.2.3 Characterisation of Gauteng VICs according to ownership and funding

Secondly, this section considers the characteristic of Gauteng VICs in terms of ownership. With regards to ownership, the following responses were obtained from the KIRs.

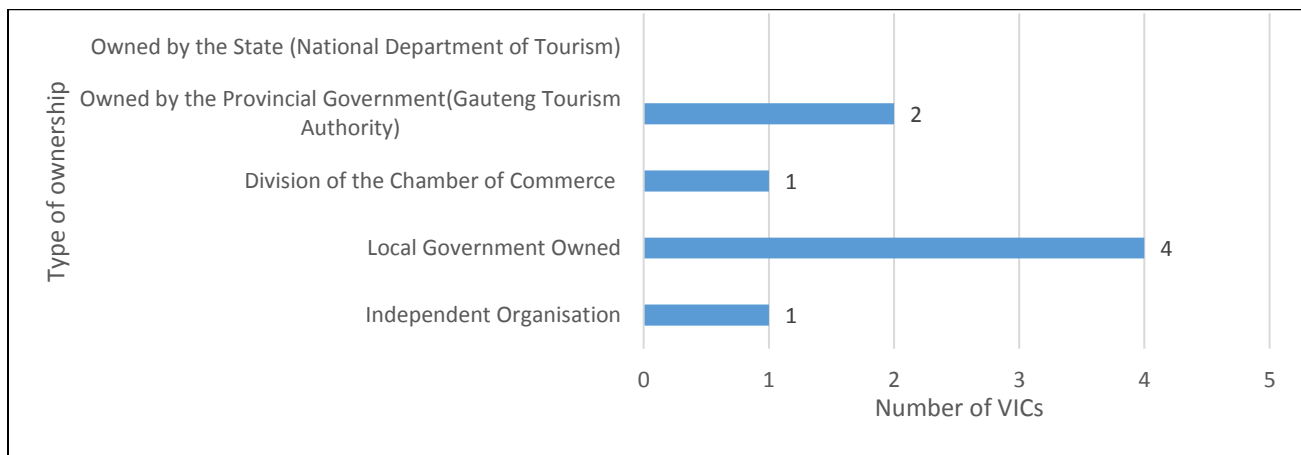


Figure 5.4 Characterisation of Gauteng VICs according to ownership

Four of the VICs which participated were owned by the local government while two were owned by the provincial government (Gauteng Tourism Authority). One was an independent organisation and the last one was a division of the chamber of commerce. The National Department of Tourism does not own any VIC. These findings confirm earlier studies in Australia that VICs are owned by the local government (Cox & Wray, 2011; Deery *et al*, 2007; Tourism & Events Queensland, 2013b).

In summary to Section 5.2 on the characteristics of participants, the majority of staff in Gauteng VICs are millennials below the age of 34 years, with most holding a diploma in tourism. Most of the staff are females. For KIRs, most were male, and older than the SRs. In respect of ownership, the majority of the VICs are under local government ownership. The next section focuses on the current situation in Gauteng VICs. This is related to Secondary Research Objective (SRO) 3.

5.3 THE CURRENT SITUATION OF VISITOR INFORMATION CENTRES IN GAUTENG: AWARENESS OF VISITOR INFORMATION CENTRE FUNCTIONS

SS – Q 1.1, KIS Q 1.5; SRO 3(i)

SRO 3(i) sought to understand the current situation of Gauteng VICs with regard to VIC functions. This question was similar for both SRs and KIRs; and therefore, the analysis consolidated both populations. This question sought awareness of VIC functions among the SRs and KIRs and it was open-ended. It should be noted that all the respondents were free to state more than one function.

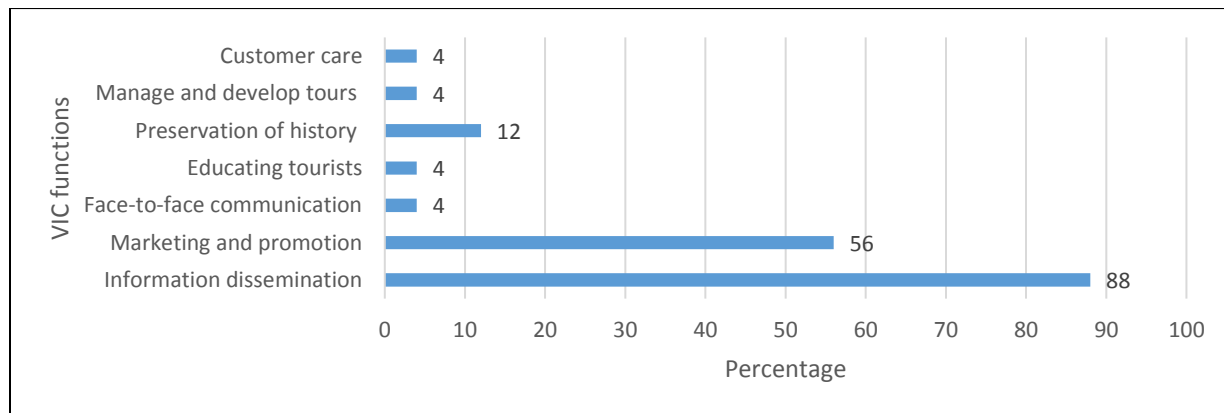


Figure 5.5 The functions of Gauteng VICs: Staff responses

The responses of the VIC staff are shown in Figure 5.5. The majority of SRs (88%) and all the eight KIRs (100%) identified information dissemination as the main function. Besides the information dissemination function, marketing and promotion of destination attractions was identified by the majority of the staff (56%). Other functions identified by the SRs were customer care, face-to-face communication with visitors, educating tourists and managing and developing tours which all recorded (4%). The SRs also identified preservation of history (12%). All these functions highlighted by the staff concur with the Four-Plus model of visitor information functions, as proposed by Pearce (2004). Sections 5.3.1 to 5.3.6 focus on the pertinent functions emerging from the data.

5.3.1 Information dissemination

The following excerpts from some of the SRs and KIRs regarding information dissemination are presented next to strengthen the findings presented in Figure 5.5.

Table 5.3 SR and KIR excerpts on the functions of VICs: Information dissemination

SR	KIR
<p>SR 1: <i>“dissemination of information to both domestic and international tourists”.</i></p> <p>SR 3: <i>“accurate and sufficient information dissemination”.</i></p> <p>SR 5: <i>“accurate information dissemination to tourists and the local municipality”.</i></p> <p>SR 6: <i>“...and information dissemination”.</i></p> <p>SR 7: <i>“ dissemination of information about the area”.</i></p> <p>SR 12: <i>“information dissemination...”.</i></p> <p>SR 19: <i>“providing quality tourism information”.</i></p>	<p>KIR 6: <i>“dissemination of tourism information...”.</i></p> <p>KIR 7: <i>“distribution of tourism-related information about Tshwane and its attractions”.</i></p> <p>KIR 8: <i>“providing information and...”.</i></p> <p>KIR 5: <i>“disseminate information about tourism attractions and things to do for tourists and visitors that go through the airport”.</i></p>

It is clear that the majority deemed information dissemination as being the most-important function of Gauteng VICs. This finding is consistent with literature studies (Deery *et al*, 2007; Draper, 2016; Mistilis & D’ambra, 2008). Particularly, the studies of Deery *et al* (2007) in Australia concluded that the core business of VICs is information dissemination. VICs should thus be considered as mainly serving the interests of the visiting public by providing information.

It could also mean strengthening the capacity and capabilities of VICs, so that VICs can fulfil this function, according to the expectations of both local and international visitors. This could entail the use of well-trained staff and various ICT platforms, which can provide useful information on trips. Besides information dissemination, Mistilis and D’ambra (2008) VICs could engage in other functions too. These are discussed in Sections 5.3.2 to 5.3.6.

5.3.2 Marketing and promotion of destination attractions

Fifty six percent (56%) of the SRs identified marketing and the promotion of of tourist destination as issues of importance. Table 5.4 contains quotes from respondents on marketing and promotion as a function of VICs.

Table 5.4 SR and KIR excerpts on the functions of VICs: Marketing and promotion

SR	KIR
<p>SR 5: "...promote and market products in the Emfuleni area"</p> <p>SR 6: " ...destination maketing..."</p> <p>SR 7: "... destination marketing is to promote and market tourism attractions".</p> <p>SR 9: "...it is to promote destination attractions".</p> <p>SR 13: "...promote destiation products in the destination".</p> <p>SR14: "...Promote and encourage tourism in Merafong city".</p> <p>SR 15: "Promote...the area's attractions".</p> <p>SR 16: "marketing and promoting tourism attractions".</p> <p>SR 17: "promoting tourism within the community".</p> <p>SR 20: "promoting tourism and heritage sites".</p> <p>SR 21: "marketing and promotion of the destination attractions through the distribution of brochures".</p> <p>SR23: "we promote the destination and create a platform for stakeholders to market their offerings".</p>	<p>KIR 2: "...providing a platform for product owners to promote their products".</p> <p>KIR 5: "to market and promote tourism in the Emfuleni area...".</p> <p>KIR 6: "...we promote that people should come and stay longer in Gauteng...".</p>

Based on the frequencies from SRs and KIRs and the excerpts above, it is evident that marketing and the promotion of destination attractions is one of the most prevalent functions of Gauteng VICs. This function does not only resonate with the function underpinned in the literature (Draper, 2016; Lyu & Lee, 2015; Mistilis & Gretzel, 2014b); but also with the Four-Plus Model of VIC function by Pearce (2004), which is cited by several authors as comprehensively capturing the basic functions of VICs (Arana *et al*, 2015; Ballantyne *et al*, 2009; Deery *et al*, 2007; Ispas *et al*, 2014). The marketing and the promotion of tourism attractions are underpinned as the 'baseline' or 'foundational' functions of VICs (Ballantyne *et al*, 2007; Ballantyne *et al*, 2009). Bahta (2003) and Tavares *et al* (2018) claim that there is a positive relationship between the level of promotion and marketing and the level of visits. Moreover, Malaysia and Germany recorded a decline in arrivals, as a result of poor promotion between 1998 and 2000; and an increase in arrivals when their promotional budgets reached their peak. Their arrivals subsequently increased, as their promotional budgets reached their peak. This study did not aim to establish and prove this relationship; however, it could be an interesting and insightful one to pursue with Gauteng VICs.

Respondents highlighted that their efforts were aimed at influencing tourists to tour their region. SR 16 outlines that "...we promote that people should come and stay longer in Gauteng..." while SR 20 stated that "... we promote the province to its fullest; and [we] also try to encourage return visits". These responses reveal that VICs carry out the promotion function – with the aim of influencing and

encouraging tourists to the region, and to increase their length of stay and their expenditure. The finding resonates with an earlier study by Nevana (2016). VIC management therefore need to market destination products as this contributes to the economic benefits to the region. The other VIC function identified by the respondents is face-to-face communication with potential visitors.

5.3.3 Face-to-face communication

The face-to-face interface with potential tourists was also identified as one of the less prevalent functions of Gauteng VICs by SR 1 and KIR 5. KIR 5 stated that the role of their VIC “...is being a direct interface with the potential tourists”. The findings indicate that almost all of the staff use face-to-face communication, as one of the unique functions which cannot be provided over the Internet. Face-to-face communication with friendly and knowledgeable VIC staff appears to be a key factor of VIC success today. This concurs with the findings of earlier studies (Arana *et al*, 2015; Ballantyne *et al*, 2009; Bahta, 2003; De Ascaniis *et al*, 2012; Mistilis & Gretzel, 2014a).

5.3.4 Service to the community

One of the salient functions of Gauteng VICs is commitment towards the community. SR 9 stated that they contribute to the local community through various training initiatives. This function was not widely acknowledged by the SRs. SR 9 could not specify what training they conducted for the benefit of the community; however, the finding that VICs have a responsibility towards the surrounding community resonates with the literature (Fallon & Kriwoken, 2003; Pearce, 2004). This function is important in the success of VICs (Pearce, 2004). The low numbers regarding service to the community could imply that Gauteng VICs are missing out on an important area, necessary for sustainability and confirmed by earlier writers (Fallon & Kriwoken, 2002; Pearce, 2004).

5.3.5 Management and tourism development

One of the salient functions identified by one SR and one KIR was management and the development of tourism. The following excerpts from a SR and a KIR help to confirm this finding.

KIR 5. *“To manage and develop tourism... in the Emfuleni area by formulating and implenting tourism-developmental programs”.*

SR 11 *“To manage and develop tourism... in the local area”.*

From the excerpts presented above, one could conclude that one of the functions of VICs could be the development of tourism at a local level. This finding largely aligns with the literature that VICs have a jurisdictional duty to ensure that tourism in their spaces is properly developed. This could be achieved by working closely with the provincial or national tourism authorities, to ensure that tourism is thriving. VICs can also accomplish this by networking with other related tourism operators to ensure that tourism is active. In this respect, the literature from New Zealand has underpinned the essence of VICs in developing tourism in local spaces.

5.3.6 Customer care

One of the VIC functions is providing customer care (4%) to the visitors. The low frequency on this function appears to suggest that staff are not aware of this function. This function is closely tied to information dissemination (Ballantyne *et al*, 2009).

In summary to Section 5.3, SRs and KIRs were largely aware of the traditional functions of their VICs. The SRs and KIRs revealed that the most important functions of VICs are mainly information dissemination, followed by marketing and the promotion of local tourism destinations. Other salient functions, which came mainly from SRs are providing face-to-face communication, management and the development of tourism, offering service to the community, educating tourists, as well as providing customer care to tourists. It is important to note that all the functions identified by the SRs and KIRs largely resonated with the literature discussed in Chapter 2 and the 4 Plus model by Pearce (2004). This section addressed SRO 3(i). Sections 5.4 to 5.12 present the findings from the **SRs only** because these questions were not asked in the KIS.

5.4 THE IMPACTS OF VIC INFORMATION ON VISITOR BEHAVIOUR

SS – Q 1.2a, 1.3a, 1.4a; SRO 3(i)

The previous section presented the functions of Gauteng VICs. The current section explores the conceptualisation of VICs in Gauteng. Respondents were asked for their opinions on whether the VICs in which they are involved influenced tourists' travel plans, expenditure and their length-of-stay. The question sought to capture the staff opinions on the impact of the information provided at their respective VICs. The questions are in two parts, the first part discussed is a closed question, followed by open-ended questions. The questions are related to SRO 3(i). In respect of the **quantitative closed questions**, the responses are presented in Figure 5.6.

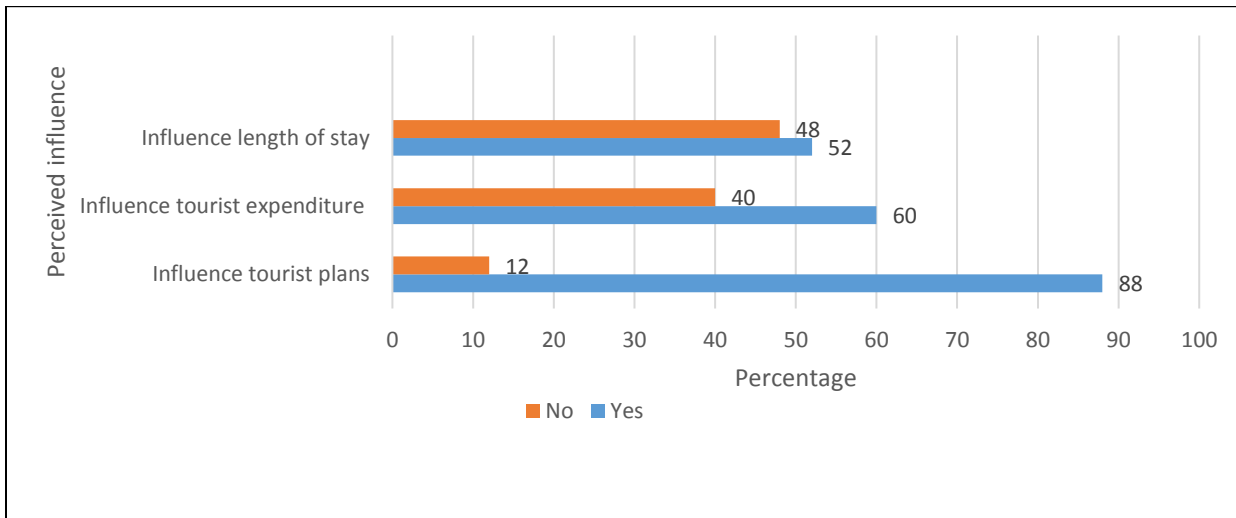


Figure 5.6 SRs opinions on the influence of VIC information (n=25)

By far the majority (88%) held the opinion that the information which they give to tourists influences their tourism plans; while 12% did not think that the information they provide influences tourists' plans. With regard to tourist expenditure, above half (60%) held the opinion that the information they provide influences tourist expenditure; while 40% did not think the same. On the length of stay, slightly above half (52%) held the opinion that the information they provide influences the visitors' length of stay; while slightly below half (48%) replied 'No' to this question. The perceptions by VIC staff respondents illustrates that the VICs' impacts on tourists' decisions, length-of-stay and level of expenditure is substantial in all the aspects, but particularly with respect to tourists' plans. This mirrors the findings in previous research (Minghetti & Celotto, 2013; Zeng, 2017) that VICs have a significant impact on travel decision-making, which in turn, influences tourists' length-of-stay and expenditure.

Influencing tourists has been regarded as one of the most important and expected roles of the VICs. Despite the majority having the opinion that VICs do influence tourist plans, expenditure and length-of-stay, a proportion (12%, 40% and 48% respectively) did not agree. It is clear that the opinions differ across the three different factors. This has implications for VIC management, particularly those offering a less-than-average service and considering closing their VICs.

First, this could be a confirmation that VICs still play a pivotal role in supporting tourist activity and experience in a locality. Secondly, it could be suggesting that VICs need to improve their services and marketing efforts, to increase their ability to influence tourists' length-of-stay and expenditure. This could be achieved by disseminating more information on the less-frequented and known attractions, which would help visitors to extend their stay within the destination.

Finally, this signifies the importance of making information available at the in-destination stage through VICs. There may be the potential to influence tourism activity, especially for those visitors with loosely planned itineraries. This mirrors the research by Deery *et al* (2007) and Hwang and Li (2008), which showed that, if the function of a VIC is done well, it can help to **increase visitors' stay and expenditure** in the local region.

In summary to Section 5.4, it is clear that VICs do have an influence on visitor behaviour, particularly relating to tourist plans and level of expenditure. Managers should therefore ensure that their staff possess adequate information on the destination. In terms of the **qualitative open-ended questions**, SRs were asked to explain how the information influenced or did not influence visitor behaviour (Questions 1.2b, 1.3b and 1.4b). Section 5.5 which follows explores these qualitative open-ended questions.

5.5 THEMES ON THE IMPACTS OF VISITOR INFORMATION CENTRES

SS – Q 1.2b, 1.3b, 1.4b; SRO 3(i)

Section 5.4 focused on the impact of VIC information on visitor behaviour, namely the influence on visitor travel plans, tourist expenditure and length of stay. This section focuses on **how the VICs influenced these behaviours**. For these open ended questions, opinions of staff who indicated 'No' are discussed first, followed by those who indicated 'Yes'.

In respect of staff (12%, 40% and 48%) who indicated that the VIC information does not influence tourist plans, expenditure and length of stay respectively, majority of them could not provide adequate explanations. Staff respondent 25 suggested that visitors would have **pre-determined their stay** before leaving home. On the other hand, SR 4 stated that they only try to influence visitors' plans in respect of visitors who phone their VIC. The following excerpts from these two SRs are provided below:

SR 4: *"Only in respect of telephone calls".*

SR 25: *"Already pre-determined their stay ... length of stay".*

These two respondents' explanations could be supporting the remainder of the staff who could not provide explanations. The proportions were 12%, 40% and 48% who indicated that, the information they provide does not influence visitors travel plans, tourist expenditure and length of stay respectively. This implies that management should ensure that their staff is trained adequately to attend to visitors' requests promptly, both online and face-to-face; so as to encourage longer stays and increased spending in the destination.

In respect of staff who indicated that VIC information influences visitor behaviour, a thematic content analysis elicited three themes across all the responses, namely accurate and up-to-date information, effective communication skills, and recommending attractions which were not on visitors' itineraries. Each of these themes are presented and discussed subsequently.

5.5.1 Up-to-date, accurate and relevant information

With regard to travel plans, the majority (56%) of the SRs indicated that they provide up-to-date and relevant information in order to influence visitors' travel plans. Some of the excerpts from the SRs are presented to support this finding.

SR 1: *"... information disseminated through our VICs is new and fresh; and as such, it has the potential to influence the visitors' plans".*

SR 17: *"... we provide relevant information to influence tourists' plans and their travel accordingly, and in an informed manner".*

SRs 3: *"As we present our offering, it makes them change their plans; as we offer other things that might be of interest to them" (itineraries, attractions, etc).*

5.5.2 Effective communication

In respect of length of stay, SRs indicated that they effectively communicate with visitors by encouraging them to stay longer and encouraging them to recommend the destination to their friends. The following excerpts support this finding:

SR 16: *"We promote that people should come and stay longer in Gauteng; and we also try to encourage them to recommend us to their friends".*

SR 21: *"By recommending other attractions, not on the itinerary, so that they can extend their stay".*

SR 12 stated that they communicate effectively with visitors, in order to encourage them to stay longer in the destination.

5.5.3 Recommending attractions not on visitors' itineraries

With regard to influencing travel plans, SRs stated that they recommend attractions which are not on the visitors' itineraries. SRs 4, 5, 6, 7, 16 and 17 stated that they offer information which may not be on the tourists' itineraries but it might well be of interest to them – both within and beyond their jurisdiction. Besides adding to visitors' travel plans, the staff aimed to influence the tourists' length-of-

stay and level of expenditure. This aligns with previous research – that information on attractions that were not on the visitors’ itineraries influences length of stay (Deery *et al*, 2007; Hobbin, 1999). Regarding returning to the region, a study by Deery *et al* (2007) in Australia, found that 63% of the visitors who were surveyed stated that they would return to the region; and 30% stated that they would stay between 2 to 14 nights within the region, as a result of information received from the VIC. This finding challenges VIC staff and management to have an intimate knoweldge of the destination products.

5.6 THE FOUR-PLUS MODEL FUNCTIONS OF GAUTENG VISITOR INFORMATION CENTRES

SS – Q 1.5; SRO 3(i)

This section is still largely addressing SRO 3(i), which sought to understand the functions of VICs by asking SRs about additional types of activities which have been carried out in other VICs globally. The activities are closely linked to the Four-Plus model by Pearce (2004) which was introduced in Section 2.4. The functions vary, according to their location and nature and are presented in Figure 5.7.

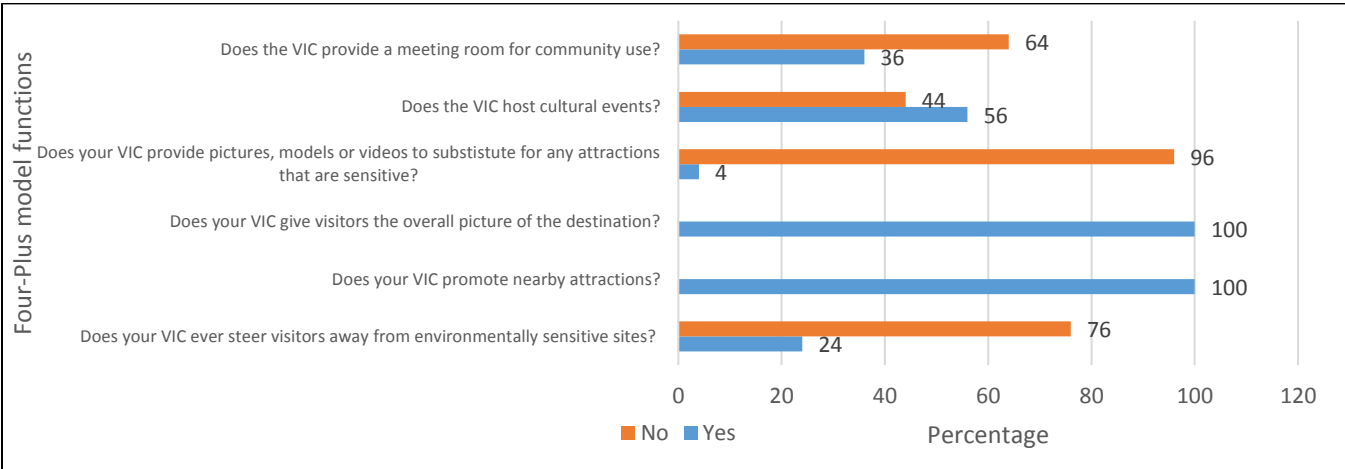


Figure 5.7 Functions of Gauteng VICs: Four-Plus model

From the statistics gathered, slightly above three quarters (76%) do not steer visitors away from sensitive sites, and the minority (24%) do. These sensitive sites include the ABE Caves, as stated by 3 (12%) SRs. These SRs were all from one VIC. One SR (4%) listed Marabastad, despite not mentioning it as a sensitive site, and he indicated that they steer visitors away from Marabastad for security reasons.

All the SRs unanimously agreed (100%) that they promote attractions nearby and give visitors the overall picture of the destination. Only four percent indicated that they provide pictures, models and videos for attractions that are environmentally sensitive; whilst the majority (96%) do not provide these. The four percent stated that they provide a substitution function, but they could not provide any examples. This

casts doubt on their claims or they did not understand substitution in relation to VICs. Slightly above half (56%) host cultural events; whilst slightly less than half (44%) do not host cultural events. The events which were hosted, included arts and crafts festivals, music and dance. These events are pre-planned. The majority (64%) indicated that they provide a meeting room for community use; and 36% do not provide a meeting room for community use. Those that claimed they provide a meeting room to the community were mainly subsumed in the municipal offices, which house the community hall or meeting room.

A number of exemplars were highlighted, covering mainly nature and historical landmarks. Those mentioned include the Voortrekker Monument, the Cradle of Humankind, Freedom Park, Constitutional Hill, Maropeng and Sterkfontein Caves, ABE caves, Kruger National Park and ABE Nature Reserve.

In summary to Section 5.5, beyond the functions discussed in Section 5.4, a limited number of VICs perform additional roles, which largely depend on their location. These opinions are very insightful and further confirm the literature findings that VICs do influence visitors' behaviour. With regard to substitutionary functions, the researcher did not seek to verify sensitive sites in Gauteng; however, 75% of the SRs stated that they do not provide substitution functions. This researcher concluded that VICs in Gauteng do not provide substitutionary functions despite being located close to sensitive sites. Finally, the majority of VICs in Gauteng do not provide any facilities for the local community in which they are located; neither do they provide interpretation services at sensitive sites. VIC management is challenged to expand the functions of their VICs to cater for a wider range of customers.

5.7 INFORMATION DISSEMINATION AND THE EQUIPPING OF STAFF

SS – Q 2.1; SRO 3(ii)

The previous section explored the functions of Gauteng VICs. The current section explores information dissemination and to what extent Gauteng VIC staff are equipped to play this role effectively. This section is related to SRO 3(ii) of this study. The question requested SRs to identify methods which they used to provide information and indicate whether the methods were easier or difficult to use. The researcher identified ten options via literature. The SRs were requested to tick those which they are using in their respective VICs. Assessment of each staff's proficiency in the use of these platforms was further required. For each information dissemination option, SRs indicated 'yes' or 'no' with respect to whether they use it or not, and also indicated whether the platform was 'difficult to use' or 'easy to use'. These findings are presented in Figure 5.8.

5.7.1 Information dissemination resources in Gauteng VICs

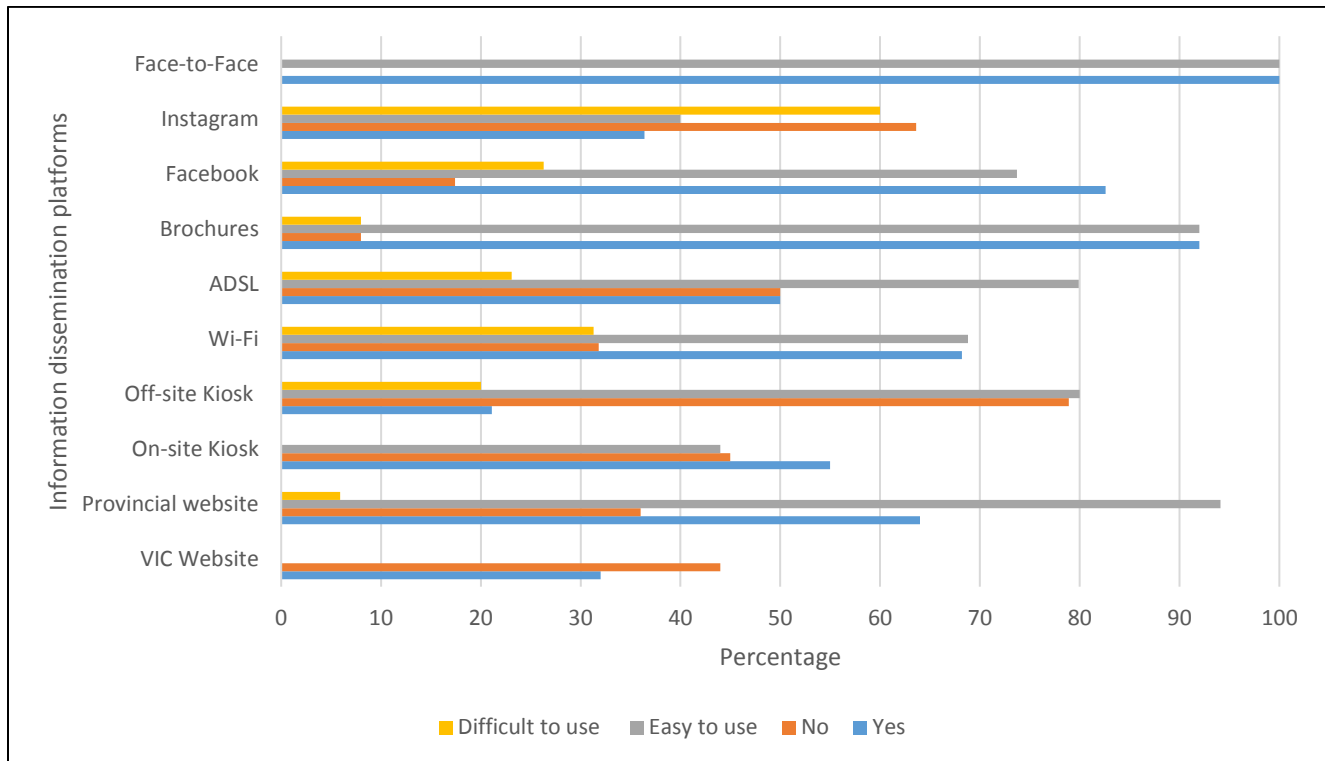


Figure 5.8 Platforms used by Gauteng staff to serve customers

In order to fulfil the function of information dissemination, the staff have a range of information resources cutting across traditional platforms and new ICTs. All (25) 100% SRs stated that they use face-to-face communication; whilst 92% used brochures. In both cases, SRs found these two platforms largely easy to use. The importance of the traditional information dissemination platforms, as key resources, have been underlined (Arana *et al*, 2015, Minghetti & Celotto, 2013). Regarding the use of ICTs, of the 25 SRs, 24 (96%) stated that they use some, or all, of the ICT-related methods. The most widely used were Facebook (82.6%), Wi-Fi (68.2%), the destination websites (64%) and Twitter (57%). Above half (55%) stated that they use an off-site kiosk; whilst another 50% use Asymmetric Digital Subscriber Line (ADSL) to serve their customers. ADSL is a telephone line used to connect to the Internet that allows for the use of voice and data concurrently. In general, SRs faced significant challenges in using Instagram (60%), Twitter (38.5%), Facebook (26.3%), ADSL (23.1%), Wi-Fi (23.1%) and off-site kiosks (20%).

The findings indicate that Gauteng VIC staff use both the ICTs and traditional methods to serve customers. This indicates a significant finding with regards to human mediation in information dissemination via new ICTs. Not surprisingly, platforms that were deemed difficult to use were not widely used by the VIC staff. Management of VICs in Gauteng should be prepared to implement significant

interventions with regard to equipping their staff. This applies, particularly in use of ICTs, as some staff had difficulty in using certain of these. This is in order to ensure that their staff engage with visitors at all the relevant touchpoints.

Table 5.5 which follows contains the number of staff which used traditional platforms to provide information to visitors. Two platforms were identified namely brochures and face-to-face communication.

Table 5.5 Number of respondents who used traditional platforms

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	1. Face-to-face or brochures	2	8.0
	2. Both face-to-face and brochures	23	92.0
	Total	25	100.0

All 25 staff indicated that they use some or all of the traditional methods listed. Of the 25, two respondents indicated that they use only one of the traditional methods (face-to-face or brochures), while 23 indicated that they use both traditional methods (face-to-face and brochures). All the 25 (100%) staff respondents found these platforms easy for them to use. This is presented in Table 5.6 which follows.

Table 5.6 Ease of use of traditional platforms in the dissemination of information (n=25)

		Responses	
		n	Percent
Q 2.1b_Traditional ICTs	Easy to use	25	100.0%
Total		25	100.0%

In respect of ICTs, 21 of the 25 staff respondents indicated that they use ICTs and four did not indicate whether they use ICTs. Four ICT platforms were identified (1-4 in column 1) across the respondents with the frequencies provided against each platform in column 2. Four staff respondents did not identify any ICT platform. The totals are presented in Table 5.7 which follows.

Table 5.7 Number of staff who use ICTs in the dissemination of information

		Frequency	Percent (%)
Number of collaborative ICTs	0	4	16
	1. Wi-Fi	10	40
	2. Facebook	7	28
	3. Twitter	3	12
	4. Instagram	1	4
	Total	25	100

From Table 5.7, 21 staff respondents indicated that they use ICTs whilst four did not indicate this. Whilst the majority use ICTs, there are other staff who might not be using or have no access to ICTs in disseminating information.

Table 5.8 contains the frequency on the ease of use of the ICTs for the 21 staff respondents who indicated that they use ICTs earlier.

Table 5.8 Ease of use of ICTs in the dissemination of information (n=21)

		Responses	
		n	Percent
Q2.1b ICT ^a	Easy to use	17	81.3%
	Difficult to use	4	18.8%
Total		21	100.0%

Of the 21 staff respondents who indicated that they use ICTs to disseminate information, 17 (81%) found the ICTs easy to use while four (19%) found the ICTs difficult to use.

Considering these findings cumulatively, Gauteng VIC staff predominantly use traditional methods to provide information to visitors as compared to ICTs. All of the Gauteng VIC staff found the traditional methods easy to use while 81.3% (Table 5.8) also found the ICTs easy to use. Less than a quarter (18.8%) had challenges in using ICTs to provide information.

From the two tables (5.6 and 5.8), it is interesting to note that, traditional methods were found to be easy to use by all the staff respondents, while ICTs were found to be easy by some of the staff respondents. This may explain the extensive use of traditional platforms such as face-to-face and brochures by Gauteng VIC staff. VIC management are challenged to provide training in the use of ICTs, particularly the new ICTs such as TripAdvisor and Instagram, which were found to be difficult to use by less than a quarter. The ease of use of these platforms may be due to the fact that the sample of respondents contained several millennials. This is responsive to the consumer trends which indicate that tourists are extensively using such platforms when planning their itineraries.

Besides the platforms discussed and identified via literature, SRs were requested to indicate other methods they use in their VICs to serve the customers. The methods identified were: WhatsApp, tourism guides, e-mail and telephone (SRs 1, 3, 5). Of these platforms, two SRs indicated that WhatsApp, e-mail and telephone are easy to use and the third SR did not indicate whether the platforms were easy or difficult to use.

In summary to Question 2.1 in the SS, most of the Gauteng VIC staff are using traditional platforms and new ICTs to disseminate information. Face-to-face communication and brochures are the widely used traditional platforms and are generally easy for the staff to use. In respect of new ICTs, Facebook is the most widely used platform. SRs faced challenges in using ICTs particularly Instagram, Twitter and Wi-Fi.

VIC managers must recognise their responsibility of disseminating information – not only to visitors, who physically visit their centres, but also to virtual visitors through the web and collaborative ICTs. This presents a critical area for VICs, which should be included in the best practice framework for VICs. There is an immense challenge for VIC management to develop their own websites and to adopt various ICTs; so that they can play a role effectively, in all stages of the visitor journey – the pre-visit stage, in-destination and post-visit stages.

5.7.2 VIC staff attributes

SS – Q 2.2; SRO 3(ii)

Staff were requested to rate some essential attributes within their VICs which relate to information dissemination. These attributes were: the destination knowledge of staff; the friendliness of staff in contact with visitors; brochure quality; and product knowledge of the adjoining regions. A five point Likert scale (poor, fair, good, very good, excellent) was used to rate these attributes. At some points in

the discussion, the Likert scale categories are collapsed or combined. In these cases, it is indicated to the reader. Each of the responses elicited are presented in Figure 5.9 and are then discussed.

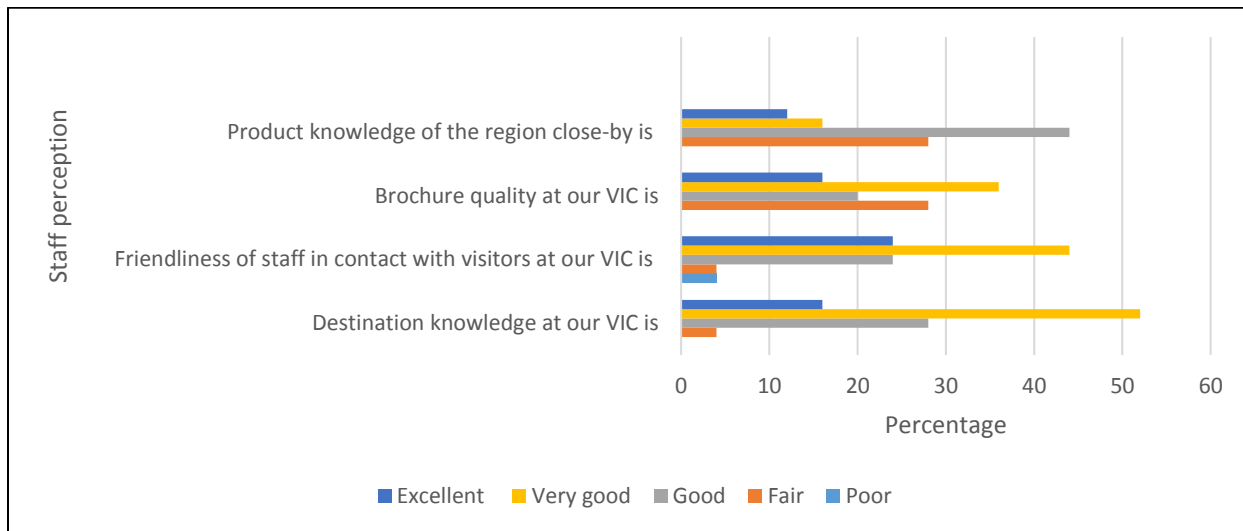


Figure 5.9 VIC staff rating of various VIC attributes

5.7.2.1 Product knowledge of the region close-by

The SRs were asked to rate their product knowledge for the destination nearby. Cumulatively, the majority, which is slightly below three quarters (**72%**), rated their knowledge to be good (excellent - 12%, very good - 16%, good - 44%). Slightly above a third rated their knowledge as fair. None of the SRs rated their destination knowledge to be poor.

5.7.2.2 Brochure quality

Cumulatively (**72%**) (good - 20%, very good - 36%, excellent - 16%) rated their brochure quality to be good. None of the SRs rated the brochure quality in their VICs poorly; however 28% rated their brochure quality to be fair.

5.7.2.3 Friendliness of staff in contact with visitors

The majority (**92%**) of SRs rated their friendliness with visitors to be above average, with the bulk of staff rating their friendliness as (good - 24%, very good - 44%, and excellent- 24%). Only 4% rated their friendliness as fair and poor, respectively. This challenges management to encourage high levels of friendliness amongst the VIC staff.

5.7.2.4 Destination knowledge at the VIC

The majority of Gauteng VIC staff rated destination knowledge highly. Cumulatively, most **(96%)** of the SRs rated their destination knowledge above average (good – 28%, very good - 52%, excellent - 16%). Only 4% rated their destination knowledge to be fair. None indicated that their destination knowledge was poor. It is important for management to be aware of the destination knowledge of their staff in order to maintain it to be above average. VIC staff are the ambassadors for their own town or region, and therefore, their ability to sell the local tourism attractions and services impact on the social and economic well-being of the region.

In summary to the VIC attributes, SRs rated their destination knowledge highly (96%), followed by their friendliness to visitors (92%). In comparative terms, product knowledge of the region close-by and brochure quality were ranked lower (72%). Managers are challenged to maintain high levels of local product knowledge and the friendliness of their staff. They also need to improve the knowledge of the staff on attractions in adjoining regions. Furthermore, they are challenged to improve the brochure quality within their VICs. This would enable visitors to optimise their experiences across the destinations. This aligns with earlier studies in Australia (Arana *et al*, 2015; Ballantyne & Hughes, 2004; Ballantyne *et al*, 2007, 2009; Deery *et al*, 2016; Draper, 2016; Tourism Research Australia, 2016). The next section discusses staff perception on VIC attributes, which have a direct impact on service delivery.

5.8 STAFF PERCEPTIONS ON THE ATTRIBUTES OF VISITOR INFORMATION CENTRES

SS – Q 2.3; SRO 3(ii)

This section sought to understand the current state of service and quality of staff in Gauteng VICs. Question 2.3 in the SS asked SRs to indicate the extent to which they agreed with several statements regarding the VIC in which they work. The attributes were derived from the literature; and they were deemed salient and having an influence on the level of service within the VICs. The eleven attributes revolved around staff development and orientation within VICs. These attributes speak to information provision and the equipping of staff, which is linked to Secondary Research Objective 3(ii) of the current study. These were rated on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Each of the eleven attributes are presented in Figure 5.10 and discussed, respectively.

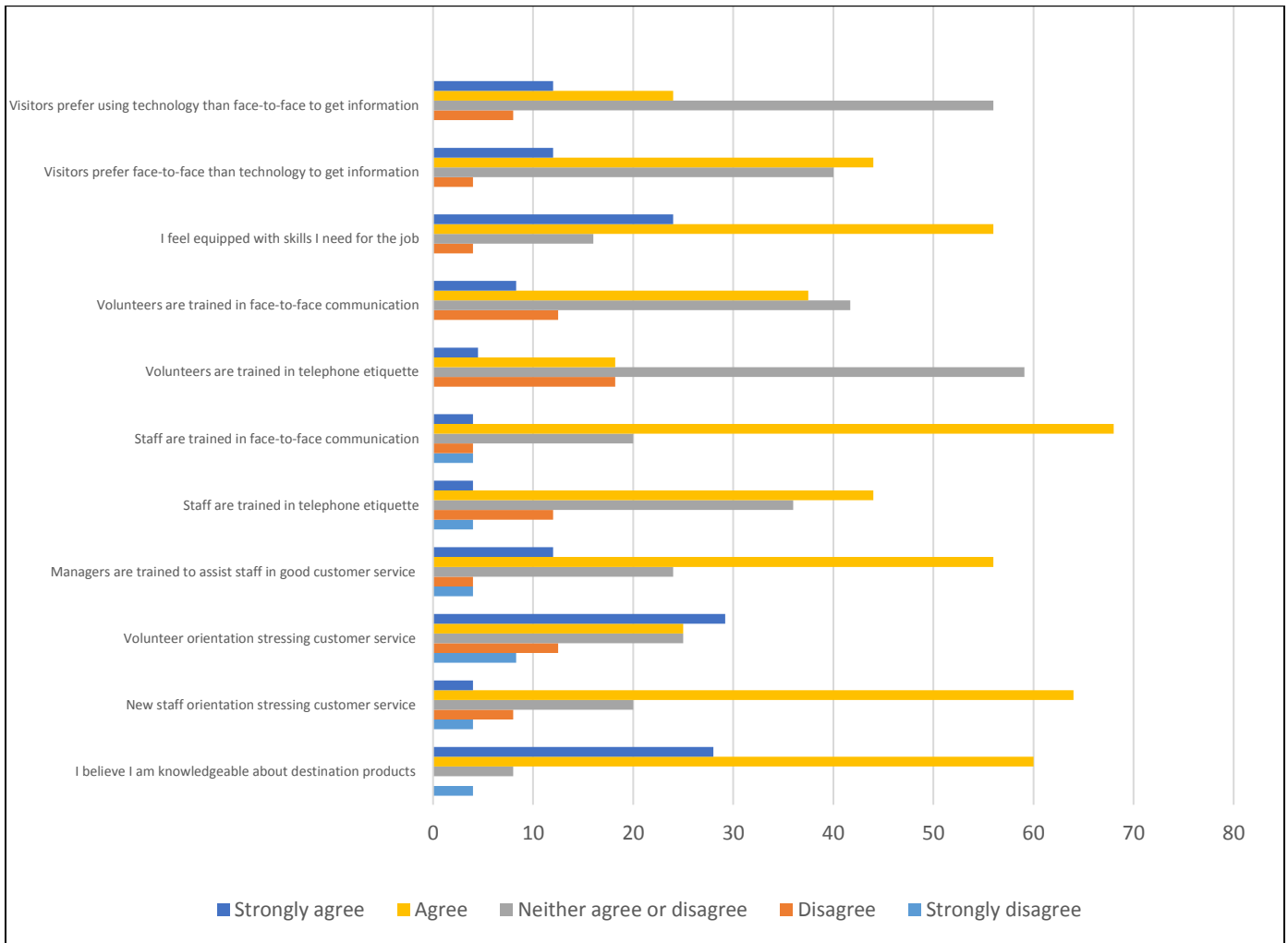


Figure 5.10 VIC staff assessment on various attributes (n=25)

5.8.1 Visitor preference in using technology over face-to-face to get information

For the attribute ‘Visitors prefer using technology than face-to-face to get information’, the majority (56%) were undecided. Cumulatively, 36% agreed (agree - 24%, strongly agree - 12%). Only 8% disagreed that visitors prefer using technology to get information rather than face-to-face contact with staff. This finding that the majority of SRs were undecided in this question, challenges managers to conduct further research so as to inform their information dissemination strategy. It could be a confirmation that a limited number of SRs understand the importance of ICTs in VICs. Perhaps it also indicates that they do not understand their visitors.

5.8.2 Visitors prefer face-to-face contact than technology to get information

For the attribute, ‘Visitors prefer face-to-face than technology to get information’, the majority of SRs (56%) agreed that visitors prefer to use face-to-face communication rather than technological platforms.

Above a third (40%) could neither agree nor disagree. Only 4% disagreed; and no respondent strongly disagreed. In general, the opinions of the SRs generally indicate that they still believe that visitors require face-to-face contact when in the destination. These opinions consistently support the view espoused by earlier studies, that face-to-face contact with visitors in the destination is vital (Lyu & Lee, 2015; Tourism Research Australia, 2016; Ispas *et al*, 2014). This is a reminder to both VIC managers and their funders, to continue offering face-to-face services at the destination level.

5.8.3 Staff equipped with skills to conduct their job

For the attribute 'I feel equipped with the skills I need for the job', cumulatively 80% indicated that they feel equipped for the job (strongly agree - 24% and agree - 56%). Only 16% were undecided, whilst 4% indicated that they did not have the skills to conduct their job.

The 16% of those who neither agreed nor disagreed could be attributed to failure to understand the question. The researcher acknowledges that the question could be vague, given that it did not specify the skills under consideration; and neither did it specify that it was referring to skills in general. However, the finding that most SRs feel equipped to do their job is clear.

5.8.4 Volunteer training in face-to-face communication

In respect of 'Volunteers are trained in face-to-face communication', 41.7% of the SRs were undecided while 45.5% of the SRs agreed that volunteers are trained in face-to-face communication (strongly agree - 8%, agree - 37.5%). Another significant proportion (12.5%) disagreed that they offered volunteers training in face-to-face communication. None of the SRs strongly disagreed with this statement. As shown in Figure 5.10, there is a significant number (41.7%) of respondents, who could neither agree nor disagree. While there could be various reasons for this distribution, this researcher interpreted this to mean absence of volunteer programmes and volunteer involvement in Gauteng VICs.

5.8.5 Volunteers are trained in telephone etiquette

In respect of 'Volunteers are trained in telephone etiquette', only 22 SRs answered this question. Of these that responded, 23.3% agreed that volunteers received training in telephone etiquette (strongly agree - 4.5% and agree - 18.8%). Slightly above half (59.1%) were undecided whilst 18.2% disagreed that volunteers received training in telephone etiquette. This challenges management to provide this training to volunteers. As indicated previously, the statistics could be indicating that there is a limited number of volunteers in Gauteng VICs.

5.8.6 Staff trained in face-to-face communication

In respect of 'Staff trained in face-to-face communication', 72% agreed that they were trained in face-to-face communication (strongly agree - 4% and agree - 68%). A quarter (20%) could neither agree nor disagree whilst 8% disagreed (disagree - 4% and strongly disagree - 4%). This challenges management to ensure continuous training of staff in face-to-face communication to ensure memorable experiences for visitors at the VICs and the destination as a whole.

5.8.7 Staff are trained in telephone etiquette

In respect of 'Staff are trained in customer etiquette', slightly below half (48%) agreed that staff were trained in telephone etiquette (agree - 44% and strongly agree - 4%). Slightly above a third (36%) were undecided whilst 16% disagreed that staff training in telephone etiquette was provided. It appears that training on telephone etiquette may not have been adequately provided to the majority of staff in Gauteng VICs. The majority could not confirm staff training in telephone etiquette.

5.8.8 Managers are trained to assist staff in customer service

For 'Managers are trained to assist staff in providing good customer service', the majority (68%) agreed that managers are trained in this regard (agreed - 12% and strongly agree - 56%). Slightly below a quarter (24%) were undecided, whilst 8% disagreed (disagree - 4% and strongly disagree - 4%). Managers are responsible for staff training in order to meet the basic standards within VICs. The minority which disagreed and were undecided, challenges management to improve their skills in customer care in order to assist staff.

5.8.9 Volunteer orientation stressing customer service

For the attribute 'Volunteer orientation stressing customer service', 54.2% agree (agree - 25% and strongly agree - 29.2%) that volunteer orientation stressing customer service was conducted. A quarter (25%) could neither agree, nor disagree. Only 20.8% (disagree - 12.5% and strongly disagree - 8.3%) disagreed that volunteers are taken through orientation in customer service. The statistics appear to indicate that volunteer orientation stressing customer service is not sufficiently conducted.

5.8.10 New staff orientation stressing customer service

For the attribute 'New staff orientation stressing customer service', the majority (68%) agreed (agreed - 62%, and strongly agreed - 4%) that new staff are taken through orientation, stressing the importance

of customer service. Slightly below a quarter (20%) could neither agree nor disagree; and only 4% strongly disagreed that they conduct staff orientation that stresses the importance of customer service. It appears that new staff orientation that stresses customer service is not sufficiently conducted.

5.8.11 Belief in being knowledgeable regarding destination products

For the attribute 'I believe I am knowledgeable about destination products', more than three quarters (88%) agreed that staff are knowledgeable about destination products (agree - 60% and strongly agree - 28%). Four percent strongly disagreed, whilst 8% could neither agree nor disagree. It appears that the majority of VIC staff were knowledgeable regarding the destination products.

In summary to Section 5.8, the findings reveal four attributes in which the VIC staff have done well. Two of these attributes are product knowledge and face-to-face communication. The staff appear also to be doing exceptionally well in another two attributes, namely customer service and orientation of new staff in customer service. For the remaining attributes (telephone etiquette, volunteer staff training, managers' training to equip their staff), it is clear that there is still need for more training of managers to be able to equip their staff. The areas where staff need most assistance is in telephone etiquette.

5.9 STAFF OPINIONS ON TRAINING RECEIVED

SS – Q 2.4a, 2.4b; SRO 3(ii)

The previous section focused on the various staff attributes which ensure a superior service within the VIC. This section focuses on the various types of training offered to VIC staff and sought to assess if the training was sufficient to enhance staff capabilities. Four aspects were identified from literature namely: face-to-face communication, telephone etiquette, customer service and information provision (Ballantyne & Hughes, 2004; Ballantyne *et al*, 2007; Ballantyne *et al*, 2009; Upchurch & Rocharungsat, 1999). A final option 'Other' was also provided where respondents were asked to specify the other forms of training. A five point Likert scale was provided. The findings are presented in Figure 5.11 and then discussed. The option 'Other' is discussed last.

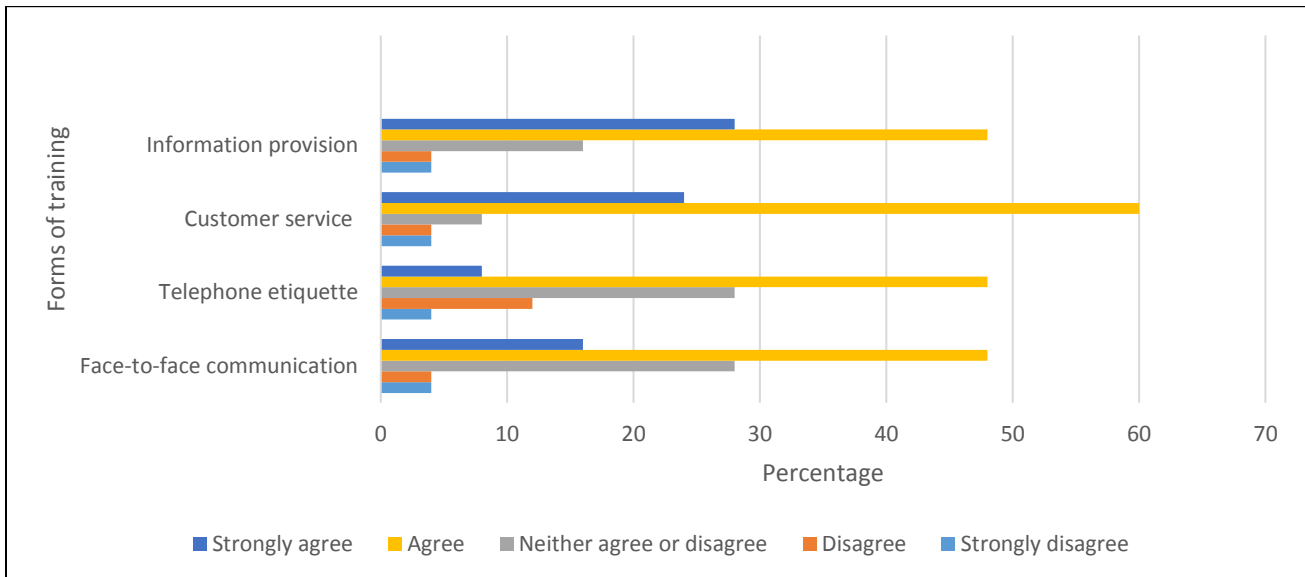


Figure 5.11 SRs opinions on training received within Gauteng VICs (n=25)

In respect of **information provision**, the majority (76%) confirmed that they were provided with sufficient training in information provision (agree - 48% and strongly agree - 28%). Less than a quarter (16%) were undecided whilst 8% disagreed (disagree - 4% and strongly disagree - 4%). With regard to **customer service**, 84% agreed (agree - 60% and strongly agree - 24%) that they had received training in customer service; whilst 8% disagreed (disagree - 4% and strongly disagree - 4%). Eight percent were undecided. In respect of **telephone etiquette**, the majority, which is slightly above half (56%), agreed that they had received training (agree - 56% and strongly agree - 8%), whilst 28% were undecided; and 16% disagreed (disagree - 12% and strongly disagree - 4%). With regard to training on **face-to-face communication** among staff, 64% (agree - 48% and strongly agree - 16%) confirmed that they had received training. Slightly above a quarter (28%) were undecided; whilst 8% disagreed (disagree - 4% and strongly disagree - 4%).

SRs were requested to indicate '**Other**' types of training, which they thought could increase their capabilities to do their job, which were not identified previously. Only four SRs provided responses; and it is important to note that all the respondents were from different VICs. The responses did not vary extensively. All four unanimously mentioned training in social media. The staff also identified knowledge-management training, which is very important in knowledge-intensive industries characterising the VIC sector.

In summary to Section 5.9, it appears that the majority of staff in Gauteng VICs had received training. The training had more emphasis on customer service (84%) and information provision (80%) whilst

training was minimal in telephone etiquette and face-to-face communication. The section has also equally reported that there is a significant population which did not receive any training at all. While it may seem comforting that the majority of staff went through training, the literature indicated that all staff and managers should be trained in order for customer service to be excellent (Ballantyne *et al.*, 2009; Wong & McKercher, 2011; Upchurch & Rocharungsat, 1999). Therefore, in Gauteng VICs, this appears to be a gap in service delivery. This challenges management to ensure that all VIC staff are trained in **information provision and customer service**. Emphasis should be directed towards **face-to-face communication and telephone etiquette**, which are seemingly not given enough emphasis. These critical attributes determine the first impressions on the destination, the decision taken by the visitor and also the word-of-mouth recommendations by the visitor to other potential visitors.

This researcher recognises that there could be a gap between training and practice, particularly when there is a long time lag between training sessions. To counteract these potential gaps, it is imperative for all staff to possess all the requisite skills, in order to provide enhanced information and communication. To this end, the management is advised to provide regular training sessions on all the important skills to optimise superior service and the visitor experience at the destination. Staff opinions on training required is discussed next.

5.9.1 Staff opinions on training required

SS – Q 2.4b; SRO 3(ii)

The staff were requested to identify any training which they felt they needed. Thematic content analysis was used to analyse the responses; and these are presented in Figure 5.12 as per the themes identified by the researcher.



Figure 5.12 Areas for more training of Gauteng VIC staff

Respondents were asked to outline the type of training which they felt they need in discharging their duties. The most prevalent type of training which was mentioned by majority (88%) of the SRs was **customer care** or services training. The following excerpts from the respondents confirm this finding:

SR 6: *“Customer services and HR”*.

SR 12: *“Tourism marketing, human resource and customer service”*.

SR 16 & 17: *“Customer service and information provision”*.

SR 18: *“All types of training (customer care, product knowledge and ICTs)”*.

SR 24: *“Tourism marketing, information provision and customer care”*.

Much previous research underscores the importance of customer service. In the research projects done by Wong & McKercher (2011), Zehrer *et al* (2014) and Mistilis and Gretzel (2014a), tourists regarded customer services as the main motivation for their visit to the VIC. From both fieldwork findings and the literature, customer-service attributes (friendliness and knowledgeable staff), which contribute to increasing the level of expenditure and the length of stay, were found to be critical underpinnings for the success of the VICs in discharging their roles (Mistilis & D’ambra, 2008).

Slightly above a quarter (28%) of the SRs identified a need for training in **telephone etiquette**. This is one of the important skills which may attract visits. Ballantyne *et al* (2009) underlines that the way staff answer the telephone gives an impression of the VIC as a whole, as well as the destination.

The third most-mentioned type of training required by the VIC staff in Gauteng VICs was **information provision** and **product knowledge**. Due to the fact that information provision is closely tied to product knowledge, the two are discussed together. Most of the staff respondents (24%) indicated that they still require information provision and product knowledge. SR 1 pointed to the need for “*continued familiarisation tours of products within the region so, I am forever on top of my game in promoting the region*”. SR 23 indicated that, “*when we started, we did not go through any training in any of the options; however, information provision is one important aspect*”.

SR 18 also stated that he/she is in need of “*all types of training*” (*customer care, product knowledge and ICTs*). **In summary**, it appears that Gauteng VIC staff still require more training in customer care which has been highlighted by several SRs. The training may also include social media marketing which may cater for the modern and technologically inclined visitors.

5.9.2 Frequency of training in Gauteng VICs

SS – Q 2.5; SRO 3(ii)

Question 2.5 in the staff survey asked about the frequency of training for the various areas of Section 5.9. The skills are face-to-face communication, telephone etiquette, customer service and information provision. Six options were presented, which were: never, weekly, monthly, quarterly, twice a year and annually. An option ‘Other’ was provided for staff to identify other options. Each of these areas is presented in Figure 5.13 and is subsequently analysed.

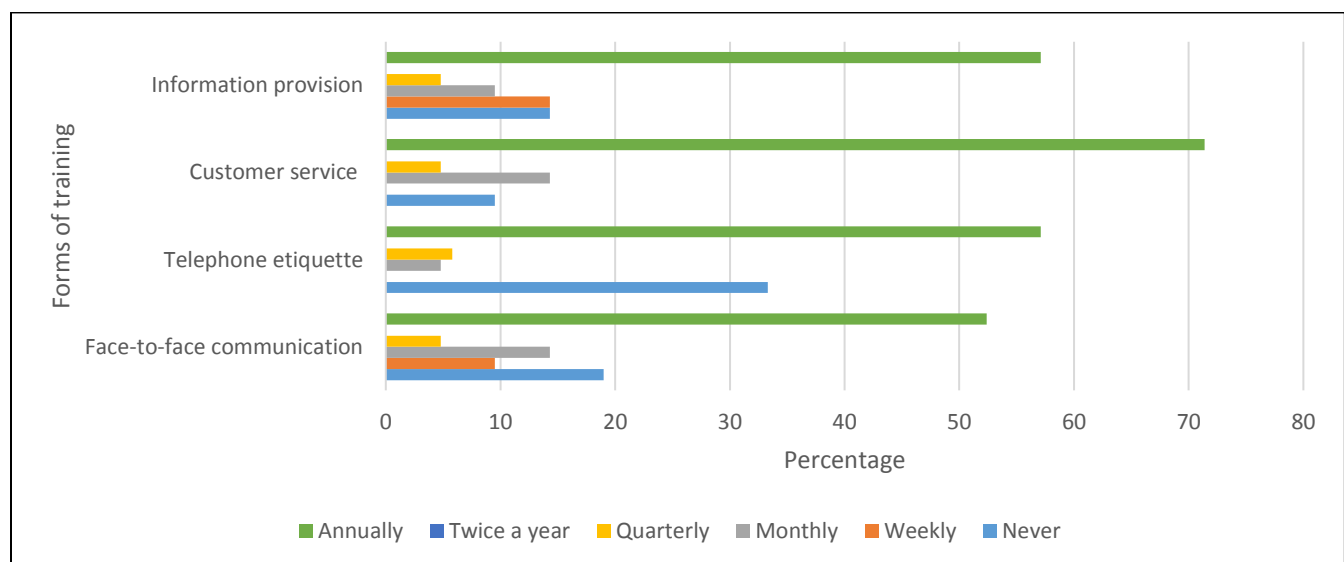


Figure 5.13 Frequency of training for Gauteng VIC staff (n=25)

SRs were asked to indicate how often they had received training in **information provision**. From the Figure 5.13 above, the majority (57.1%) indicated they had received this type of training annually; while 4.8% had received it quarterly; and 9.5% had received it monthly. A significant percentage (14.3%) had received this training weekly. Finally, 14.3% indicated that they had never received any training in information provision.

With regard to **customer service**, slightly below three quarters (71.4%) indicated they had received training in customer service annually; 4.8% quarterly; and 14.3% had received this training monthly. A total of 14.3% had received this training weekly; while another 14.3% had never received any training in customer service.

When asked to indicate how often they had received training with regard to **telephone etiquette**, the majority (57.1%) indicated that they received training in telephone etiquette annually. Slightly above a third (33.3%) indicated that they did not receive any training of this sort. A total of 4.8% had received training on a monthly and a quarterly basis, respectively.

With respect to **face-to-face communication**, only 21 SRs had been completely trained. Of those that responded, 19% had never received any training; 9.5% had received weekly training; 14.3% had received monthly training; 4.8% quarterly; and 52.4% annually. It could be concluded that most of the SRs in Gauteng VICs had received some kind of training regarding face-to-face communication skills; and it was mostly conducted annually.

In summary on the frequency of training, it is clear that more than half of the staff employed in Gauteng VICs received training in face-to-face communication, telephone etiquette, customer service and information provision; while a significant number did not receive training in any of these skills. It should be noted that the survey did not include a mechanism for the evaluation of the training programs offered to staff. This section explored the frequency of training offered to VIC staff in Gauteng Province.

The p-value is used to explore the strength of the relationship between two continuous variables. This gives an indication of both the direction (positive or negative) and the strength of the relationship. A positive correlation indicates that as one variable increases so does the other. A negative correlation indicates that as one variables increases the other decreases (Pallant, 2005).

The researcher conducted a correlation analysis to establish if there is a linear relationship between the frequency of training and if the training was perceived to be sufficient. The analysis revealed

the following: face-to-face communication ($r=0.614$), telephone etiquette ($r=0.729$), customer service ($r=0.654$) and information provision ($r= -0.572$). There was a strong positive correlation between the two variables ($p>0.05$), suggesting a strong relationship between frequency of training and that the training was perceived as sufficient. A correlation for information provision was obtained but in the opposite direction. It should be noted that the correlations are based on a limited sample size and therefore these need to be treated with caution. In this regard, more frequent training is associated with higher levels of agreement that training is sufficient. Therefore, VIC management should increase the frequency of training for VIC staff.

This finding is informative to VIC management to roll out regular and frequent training in face-to-face communication, telephone etiquette, customer service and information provision to ensure that staff are sufficiently trained and have the skills required to assist in optimising the visitors' experiences. This is a critical area of focus for VIC management which is worthy of adoption in developing a best practice framework which can improve service delivery within Gauteng VICs.

In summary to Section 5.8, there is a relationship between frequency of training and whether the training is sufficient. The section revealed that training is not consistently offered, with most of the training conducted annually. In this regard, management has to consistently provide regular training to staff in order to provide superior experiences to the visitors. The other critical area for VIC success is the uptake and use of ICTs (as per Figure 3.1) which is discussed next.

5.10 TECHNOLOGY ADOPTION AND USAGE IN GAUTENG VISITOR INFORMATION CENTRES

SS Q – 3.1a, 3.3, 3.4, 3.5; SRO 3(iii)

5.10.1 Introduction

The previous sections reported on the functions of Gauteng VICs, information dissemination and the equipping of staff within Gauteng VICs. These were related to SROs 3(i) and 3(ii), respectively. The current section reports on the adoption of technology and the usage thereof; and it addresses SRO 3(iii). The question required SRs to tick the various ICT platforms which they use in their VICs, in order to help visitors. Nine methods were identified via literature. The options 'Other' and 'I don't know' were

provided. SRs were allowed to tick more than one option. The findings are presented in Table 5.5, and then discussed.

Table 5.9 Web and ICT usage in Gauteng VICs (n=25)

ICT Resource/ Method	Frequency (25)	Percentage (%)
A VIC Website	11	44
A provincial website	11	44
On-site electronic website	6	24
Off-site electronic website	3	12
E-mail lists	16	64
Social Media: Twitter	6	24
Facebook	21	84
TripAdvisor	4	16
Instagram	6	24
Local Radio	1	4
Local magazine	1	4
Electronic Brochures	1	4
Can online users make bookings via the website?		
Yes	1	4.2
No	23	95.8
Missing	1	
Who provides your online service to the Internet?		
Server on site	4	18.2
Don't know	18	81.8
Other specify		
Missing	3	
How often is the website information updated?		
Never	3	12.5
Daily	-	-
Weekly	-	-
Monthly	1	4.2
Annually	1	4.2
Irregular basis	2	8.3
Don't know	17	68
Missing	1	4.2

The surveys indicate that almost all the VICs have adopted some sort of ICTs in their operations. The general picture emerging from these surveys is that ICTs are imperative for a region's competitiveness; and they have been adopted at different magnitudes. Focusing on the ICT platforms, the most widely

used technological platform is **social media**, particularly the **Facebook** platform, with a usage rate of 84%. Twitter and Instagram are not extensively used, with a usage rate of 24%; and TripAdvisor is used by only 16%. It appears that Gauteng VICs are not providing adequate social-media platforms, on which staff may interact with potential visitors to the region. It is evident that Gauteng VICs are not responsive to current trends. **E-mail** lists have a usage rate of 64%. The next most frequently used technological platform, to help serve customers, were the **websites**. Table 5.9 indicates that both **provincial** and **VIC websites** are also used, with a usage rate of just below half (44%).

Further analysis on the platforms at the staff's disposal, to assist visitors, shows that the majority of Gauteng VICs do not have dedicated VIC websites; and their online presence is mainly through their local government websites and provincial government websites. Of these two, the highest online presence was through the local government websites, perhaps because the majority of the participating VICs fall under the jurisdiction of the local government.

SRs were asked to identify ICT platforms which they use to serve customers; and these platforms were categorised into traditional and collaborative ICTs as envisaged by Deery (2007). Traditional ICTs are those that visitors can instantly provide responses whilst collaborative are those where visitors can engage with service providers instantly and online. The e-mail in this regard was identified as a traditional platform. Of the 25 respondents, 24 indicated that they have traditional ICTs to serve customers whilst 21 of the 25 VIC staff indicated that they have collaborative ICTs. For these two types of ICTs, a correlation analysis was conducted. This indicated in Table 5.10.

Table 5.10 Correlation analysis of traditional and collaborative ICTs

Correlations				
			q3.1a_Traditional	q3.1a_Collaborative
Spearman's rho	q3.1a_Traditional ICTs	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.483*
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.014
		n	25	25
	q3.1a_Collaborative	Correlation Coefficient	.483*	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.014	.
		n	25	25
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).				

The results indicate that the higher number of traditional ICTs available is statistically positively correlated ($p=0,014$) with the availability of collaborative ICTs with a correlation coefficient of 0.483. The statistical analysis indicates that the higher the use of traditional ICTs by staff, the more they are able to use collaborative ICTs. This challenges VIC management to propose a new management strategy that would help to deliver timely travel information to current and potential visitors to the destination. In response, VIC management should optimise the use of the current ICT platforms, and extend the adoption of the social-media platforms beyond Facebook. This would be in response to the literature, which showed the importance of social media in business management, particularly in tourism, which is now based on real-time conversations (Mistilis & Gretzel, 2014b) or collaborative platforms. Although the e-mail (64%) platform was widely used across Gauteng VICs, it is not regarded as a collaborative ICT (Deery *et al*, 2007; Yuan *et al*, 2003). While there is a marked ICT presence with regard to all the VICs under study, their ICT use remains very basic; and it is restricted to mainly broadcasting information. The integration of social media into the traditional distribution channels, such as interactive websites, which are linked to the social media, would widen the distribution channels for VICs.

When it came to the identification of **other Internet-based platforms**, which are used by VIC staff in Gauteng, **electronic brochures** and the **local radio** came to the fore. From the statistics presented in Table 5.9, these two platforms are seemingly not widely used and are not popular with the staff in serving customers. Some platforms, which were not technological, were mentioned and these included magazines.

From Table 5.9, there was only one SR who claimed to belong to a VIC engaged in Internet-based commerce by offering an online booking service; whilst the bulk (95.8%) indicated that their VICs do not offer online bookings. As indicated in Table 5.9, SRs were asked who provides the online service to the Internet. The majority (81.8%) did not know, while 18.2% stated that it was the server on site. SRs were also requested to indicate how frequent the information on the website was updated. The majority (68%) did not know, while 12.5% indicated that the information is never updated. Only 4.2% indicated that website information is updated monthly and annually respectively. Less than a quarter (8.3%) stated that the website information is updated on an irregular basis.

In summary to Section 5.10.1, SR surveys show that technology has not been fully integrated. Whilst there seems to be some kind of online presence for most of the VICs, the adoption of the ICTs within the

VICs is sporadic. In some instances, the websites are hosted by the local government, or the provincial government, which owns some of the VICs. To this end, ICTs seem to play an inferior role in the dissemination of information when compared to traditional methods. Noticeably, there is strong evidence that VICs in Gauteng use some technological platforms when handling face-to-face enquiries with customers. It is noted that, although VICs use traditional platforms to attend to visitors' requirements, it is evident that they also provide human mediation on web-based sources. This broadly concurs with the study by Deery *et al* (2007), who argued that the motivation for visitors to visit VICs is to seek clarity on the information obtained from the web, which could be seemingly confusing. SRs were requested to indicate the most effective ICTs they identified and give reasons. This is discussed next.

5.10.2 Effective ICT platforms used in Gauteng VICs

SS – Q 3.1b; SRO 3(iii)

Question 3.1b in the staff survey referred to the list of ICT platforms offered in Question 3.1a and asked SRs an open-ended question regarding which of these were most effective and why. This part of the question gave provision for varied responses; and these were analysed quantitatively, and then qualitatively. Firstly, the frequencies relating to the most effective ICTs are presented, followed by the reasons why they are considered to be most effective. These reasons are presented according to the themes emerging. Figure 5.14 presents the most effective ICT platforms.

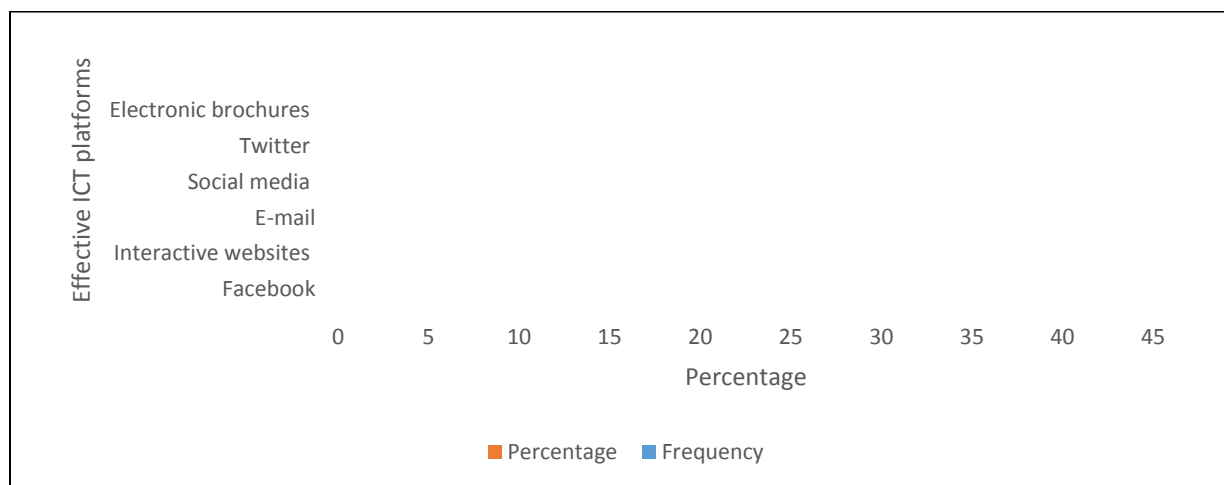


Figure 5.14 The most effective ICT platforms in use in Gauteng VICs (n=25)

Firstly, the frequencies revealed that **Facebook** (44%) was regarded as one of the most effective platforms followed by the **interactive websites** (32%). **E-mail** and **social media** each recorded 16% while **Twitter** and **electronic brochures** recorded 4% each. This aligns with Question 3.1a which found an

extensive use of Facebook. Perhaps it could be due to the fact that it has been perceived as effective and use. This supports the confirmation from the literature that social media platforms are some of the most effective means of effectively marketing and engaging with potential tourists (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010).

It is worth noting that the majority were aware of the importance of social media, particularly Facebook, in the operation of VICs. It should be recognised that there is an overlap between social media and Facebook. It appears that other SRs could have regarded Facebook as not related to social media. However, there seems to be limited appreciation of other social media platforms such YouTube and Flickr.

Secondly, respondents were asked an open-ended question regarding why they had chosen a particular ICT platform as the most effective. The researcher conducted thematic content analysis of the reasons provided and identified five themes namely: accessibility, convenience, user-friendliness, cost effective and modernity. These themes are presented in Table 5.11 and then discussed.

Table 5.11 Emerging themes from Question 3.1b (n=25)

	# of respondents	Accessibility	Convenience	User friendliness	Cost effectiveness	Modern
Website	9	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Social Media:	4	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Twitter			✓		✓	
Facebook	9	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Trip Advisor	1		✓			✓
ICTs	2		✓		✓	✓
E Mail	2		✓	✓		

5.10.2.1 Accessibility

From the analysis of the responses from the SRs, a recurrent theme of accessibility emerged clearly. Most of the respondents alluded to this theme (15 out of the 25). The following excerpts from the various respondents confirm this finding:

SR3: *“We load all information and the latest updates for everyone to access them.”*

SR4: *“... Facebook is where people access information faster and more easily.”*

SR5: *“[Facebook] has the access for all.”*

Accessibility is one of the quintessential features, which runs across all the responses from the respondents. This theme is also clear in the literature, which emphasised that tourism information must

be disseminated through various platforms, where it can be easily accessed by the potential tourists (Gretzel & Fesenmaier, 2009; Gretzel *et al*, 2012; Wang & Fesenmaier, 2013; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). This is also discussed in depth in Chapter 3 (Section 3.4.3.4)

5.10.2.2 Convenience

The second theme which came out clearly from the findings on the use of various ICT platforms, is convenience. The website and social media platforms could be accessed by potential tourists in the pre-visit, during visit and post-visit stages. SR 7 stated that the platforms are “*user-friendly, and visitors can use them wherever*”. SR 1 stated that the days of printed brochures are outdated; and they have been overtaken by the convenience of social media and electronic communication. In support of this statement, SR 12 stated that “*many people use [social media]*”. This is consistent with previous studies discussed in the literature, which underscored the importance of VICs in providing tourism information, which is convenient to the tourists. In this regard, literature underpins the statement that VICs should have interactive websites, which should be compatible with smartphones and tablets – for the convenience of the tourist. This is receiving much attention in current research (Dickinson *et al*, 2016; Wang & Xiang, 2007; Wang, Xiang, & Fesenmaier, 2014).

5.10.2.3 User friendliness and cost effectiveness

User-friendliness and cost-effectiveness are two of the factors influencing the adoption of ICT platforms. In several cases, social media platforms were regarded as easy-to-use and cheaper. SR 7 stated that social media platforms are “*simple for communication*”; whilst SR 11 stated that social media “*can reach a lot of people at once*”. These findings align well with the studies by Sigala (2008) and Xiang and Gretzel (2010). These authors underscored the fact that electronic platforms are cheaper than the traditional marketing platforms. These arguments are further mirrored by Yuan *et al* (2003), who contended that VICs invest in new technology, in order to achieve efficiencies and cost-savings (Section 3.4.3.4).

From the literature reviewed, it could be noted that social media is taking precedence above the other ICT platforms. However, in the Gauteng context, it appears that social media is greatly under-utilised in collaborating with both real and potential tourists.

A notable response was from SR17, who mentioned e-mail, Twitter and Facebook, and indicated that “*they are easy and phoned-based*”. This researcher understood and interpreted this reason to mean that the platforms can be easily accessed through mobile telephones and smartphones. With this

interpretation in mind, the respondent's assertion and the researcher's interpretation are consistent with the literature that underscores the use of smartphones in tourism.

The literature emphasises that smartphones are desirable in tourism; and they are essentially information centres, which not only facilitate travel and decision-making; but they also enhance the experience in the destination. Besides supporting travellers through convenience in travel planning, they also provide access to information and interpretation, direction and navigation, social networks and entertainment (Chen *et al*, 2017; Wang, Park & Fesenmaier, 2012; Wang & Xiang, 2012). Therefore, there is an opportunity for VIC managers, as destination managers, to influence tourists' behaviour – not only in the pre-trip phase, but more importantly in the experiential stage, through relevant context-based recommendations via telephone-based applications.

5.10.2.4 Modernity

One of the salient themes is modernity, in which VICs are seen to be in tune with what the tourists are expecting. To this end, an online presence and social platforms are regarded as what is modern in the ICT domain; and therefore, VICs should be seen to be in touch. Judging from the responses, the SRs understand that ICTs and social media platforms are important in the operation of VICs. The researcher envisages that social media and ICTs should be incorporated into the practical framework of VICs.

In summary to Section 5.10.2 on effective ICT platforms used in Gauteng VICs, the most effective was Facebook followed by interactive websites. This confirms that interactive websites and social media, particularly Facebook, are important tools of trade. The more manifest themes with regards to the reasons for use of these platforms were convenience, user friendliness, cost effectiveness, and that the platforms are modern, matching the needs of the modern and technologically savvy visitor.

5.10.3 The contribution of interactive websites in VICs

SS – Q 3.2a, 3.2b, 3.6; SRO 3(iii)

Questions 3.2a, 3.2b and 3.6 in the staff survey have been analysed together as they are closely related. Question 3.2a asked SRs if their respective **VICs had their own websites** and Question 3.2b asked for the **website address and purpose**. Question 3.6 asked SRs to **state important sites linked to their websites**. All the 25 SRs participated; and the minority (40%) indicated that they have their own VIC websites; while the majority (60%) indicated that they do not have a VIC website.

Question 3.2b required each SR to state the **VIC website address and its purpose**. Less than half (44%) managed to provide the website addresses. Only 11 SRs from three different VICs managed to provide their addresses, as follows:

SR 4: "www.thewestrand.co.za."

SR 5, 6 and 12: www.merafongtourismassociation.co.za.

SR 16, 17, 18, 19, 21, 22 and 25: "www.gauteng.net."

The response rate in this part of the survey was very low (14 out of 25); and it was a concern to the researcher, given the fact that this information is important in the discharge of staff duties. Knowing this address help staff to refer potential and actual tourists to important information, especially those who make inquiries over the telephone. The researcher could not verify whether it was a matter of the lack of the information, or negligence on the part of the staff members. However, it is clear from the literature that a good understanding of the quality and quantity of the platforms for spreading information online can facilitate VICs to market themselves and the region effectively.

Most of the VIC in Gauteng Province do not have their own websites. The findings from this question largely underpin the findings in Question 3.2a, which concluded that VICs in Gauteng do not have their dedicated VIC websites. The situation in Gauteng is a different case from VICs in New Zealand, where despite having a central website, each VIC has its own VIC-dedicated website. This presents a missed opportunity by most of these VICs to identify both with their real and potential travellers.

After stating the address, SRs were requested to state **the purpose of the websites**. The recurrent and frequently cited theme was information dissemination on tourism attractions and directions. The following excerpts were extracted from the surveys to substantiate this finding:

SR 5: "*For disseminating information on directions and attractions around the area*".

SR 6: "*Letting people know what is around Merafong*".

SR 7: "*Provide a link to tourism information*".

SR 16: "*Information dissemination, careers, etc*".

Of all the 11 SRs who stated the purpose of their websites, 10 alluded to information dissemination. Only SR 12 stated "*to promote tourism sites*". This still aligns with the information dissemination role.

Question 3.6 in the staff survey requested SRs to state **important sites linked to their websites**. Only three SRs managed to list the organisations linked to their websites. These quotes are indicated below.

SR 4: “*Members (see website)*”.

SR 9: “*Maropeng Africa, Gauteng Tourism Authority, Cradle Local Tourism Association and Westrand Tourism*”.

SR 18: “*Cradle of Mankind, Dinokeng and Constitutional Hill*”.

The researcher could not explain the low response rate, or the lack of any response to this particular question. There could be various reasons for this, such as a lack of information, or that it was an unclear question. However, it appears that the greater number of the SRs were not informed; as most of the SRs indicated that they do not have VIC websites of their own. This could be explained by SR 6 who stated “*not applicable*”; and SR 17 who mentioned a generic Internet service. This finding can be corroborated in Question 3.2a; where almost three quarters do not have their own VIC websites. The failure by most of the SRs to state important links to their websites, particularly from the adjacent regions, could mean that VIC staff may not be able to meet some of the visitors’ requests for information in the adjacent regions. In contrast, research suggests that the availability of information on adjacent regions would help VIC staff to service visitors’ requirements – particularly because regions differ in terms of services, facilities and attractions.

In summary to Section 5.10.3, the majority of Gauteng VICs do not have their own websites, let alone interactive ones. Websites users will only obtain information without any interactivity. It appears that those who responded were aware that their websites are used for information dissemination. A few (3) of the SRs were informed of the important sites linked to their VIC website. This challenges VIC management to improve staff skills in information dissemination and develop interactive VIC websites to enhance visitor access to vital information.

5.10.4 ICT capabilities of staff

SS – Q 3.7; SRO 3(iii)

Question 3.7 asked SRs to indicate the extent to which they agreed with various statements in the VIC in which they are involved. The statements are shown in Figure 5.15 and were designed to understand the opinions of staff with regard to various skills, abilities and capabilities and the lack thereof in respect of computer use in the VICs. To assist in the analysis, a five point Likert scale, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree was provided. Figure 5.15 presents the findings.

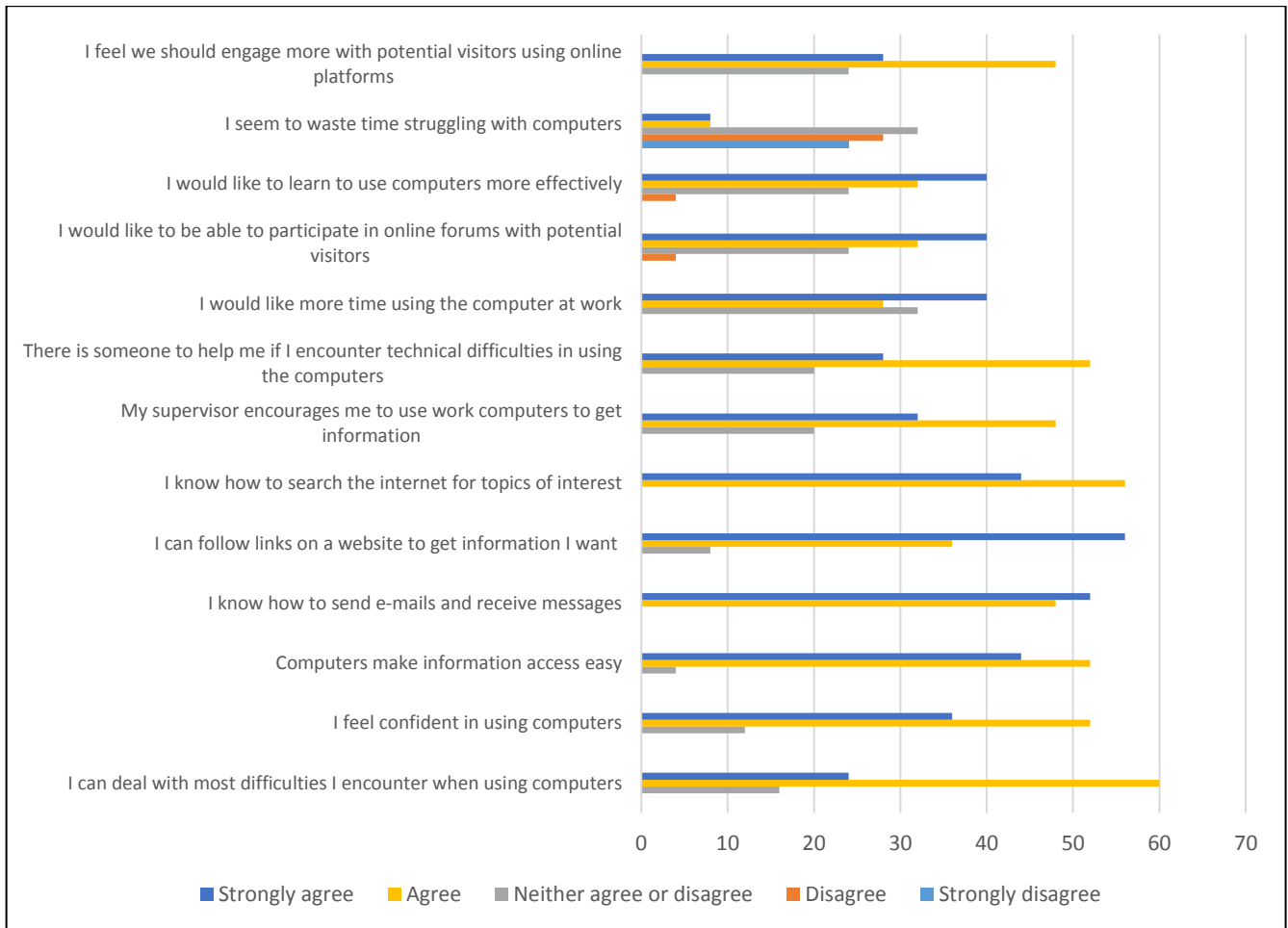


Figure 5.15 Staff competences in the use of computers in Gauteng VICs

With regard to **searching the Internet for topics of interest** (agree - 56% and strongly agree - 44%), **dealing with computer difficulties** (agree - 60% and strongly agree - 24%), **general computer confidence** (agree - 52% and strongly agree - 36%), **receiving and sending e-mails** (agree - 48% and strongly agree - 52%), the staff generally scored above three quarters, cumulatively. It is clear that staff have some competency in these areas. It is also supported by the fact that, on average, the staff indicated that they do not **seem to waste a lot of time struggling with computers** (disagree - 24% and strongly - 28%). There is also a positive attitude from staff towards improving their computer capabilities. Cumulatively, 68% indicated they would like to have **more time for using computers at work** (agree - 28% and strongly agree - 40%), and 32% could neither agree nor disagree. There is no significant correlation between age and the willingness to learn how to use computers. In the main, there is a positive attitude with regard to learning to work with computers at work.

With regards to **following links on the website for information**, 92% of the SRs agreed that they are capable (agree - 36% and strongly agree - 56%). In respect of **participating on the online forums** with

potential visitors, the majority (72%) showed interest (agree - 32% and strongly agree - 40%), while 24% were undecided, and only four percent (4%) disagreed. In respect of **engaging more with visitors on online forums**, the majority (76%) indicated willingness (agree - 48% and strongly agree - 28%), while 24% could neither agree nor disagree.

In summary to Section 5.10.4, it appears that staff possess general skills in working with computers and expressed willingness to engage with visitors on online forums. Management is challenged to facilitate staff access to online forums together with equipping them to interact with both actual and potential visitors. This may mean significant investment in new ICTs and retraining staff. The next section focuses on the impact of ICT on the operations of Gauteng VICs.

5.10.5 Technological disruption in VICs

SS – Q 3.8a, 3.8b, 3.9a, 3.9b, 3.9c; SRO 3(iii)

This section seeks to explore the **impact of ICTs on the operation of Gauteng VICs**. This directly links to SRO 3(iii), which relates to the uptake and the usage of ICTs in VICs. SRs were asked for their opinions on the disruption brought about by technological changes. The frequencies elicited are presented in Figure 5.16.

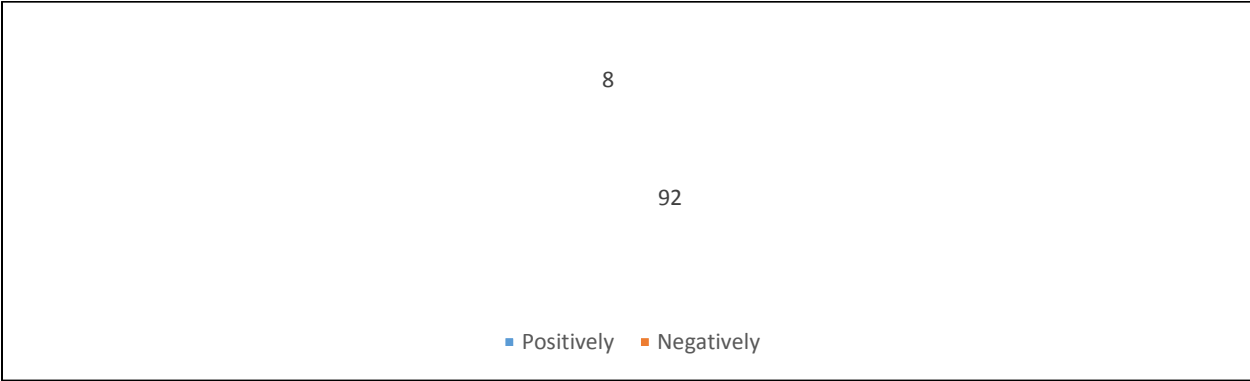


Figure 5.16 The impact of technological disruption on VICs

As seen in the Figure 5.16 above, almost all the SRs (92%) indicated that the technological disruptions affected their operations positively; and 8% indicated that the disruptions were negative. From this finding, it is apparent that technological developments are inevitable, but with the positive impacts overriding the negative ones. **How these technological developments impact on the roles of the VICs** will be discussed next.

A five-point Likert scale was provided, against which the SRs were requested to indicate their responses. The Likert scale ranked from no effect to a major effect. Figure 5.17 depicts the findings.

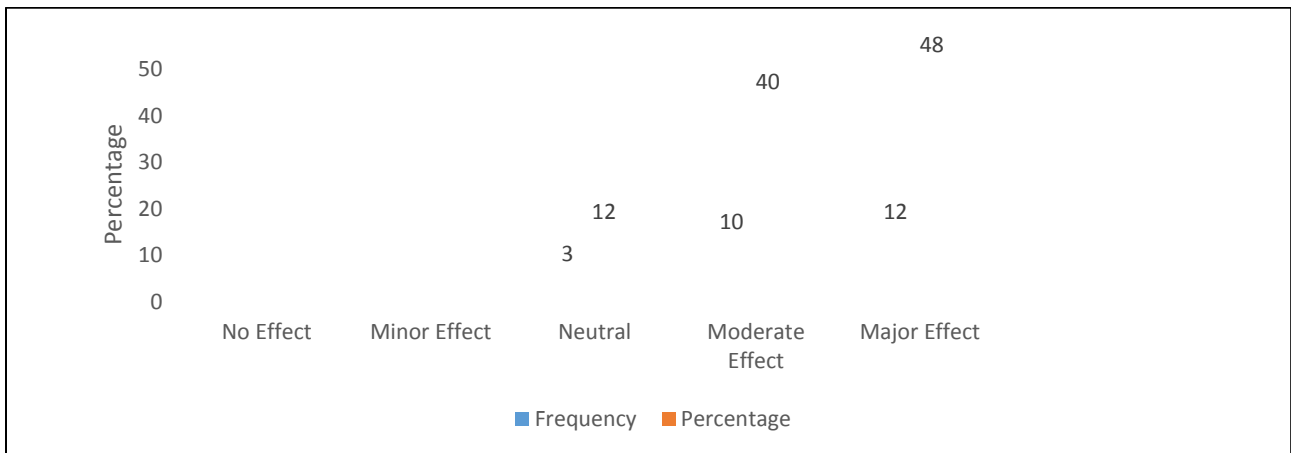


Figure 5.17 The effect of technological disruptions on VICs

The opinions of the SRs were almost evenly split. Slightly below half (48%) indicated that technological disruptions have had a major effect; whilst 40% indicated that they have only had a moderate effect. Only 12% indicated that technological disruptions have not had any effect on their operations. Interestingly, there were no respondents who indicated that technological disruptions have had no effect, or a minor effect, respectively, on their operations. It can therefore be concluded that the majority acknowledged that technological platforms have had a moderate to a major effect on their VIC roles. Earlier studies in the literature confirmed the extensive disruption, which has been brought about by ICTs in VICs (Lyu & Lee, 2015, Hwang & Lee, 2014).

Question 3.9a asked SRs whether their respective VICs had **provided them with sufficient training in respect of the use of technology**. Figure 5.18 indicates the responses that were elicited from the SRs.

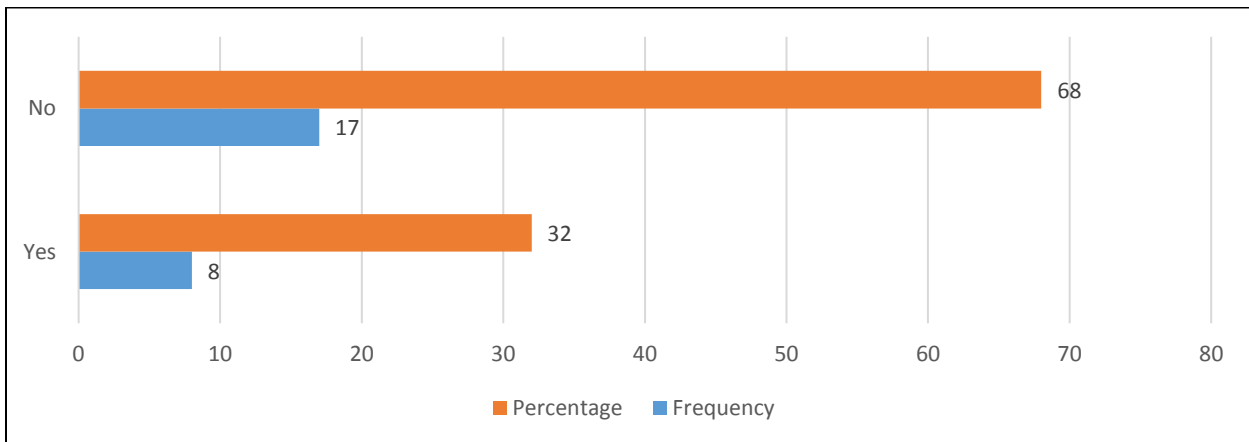


Figure 5.18 Sufficiency of training in the use of technology

From the information given, the majority (68%) did not receive sufficient training; whilst 32% stated that they had received sufficient training. Notwithstanding the significant proportion of those who had received sufficient training, it is self-evident that training, or the re-orientation of staff in computers, is necessary because of the large proportion who confirmed that they did not receive any training. It is recommended that training should be given routinely, in order to keep the staff abreast of developments.

Placing these findings in the context of staff development and training literature, there is a disconnection between the two. From the data solicited, it is apparent that the majority of staff in Gauteng VICs did not receive sufficient training in respect of technology usage from their VICs. From the literature that underscored that training enhances the capabilities and skills of the staff, it could be concluded that there is a gap in terms of what is being offered, and the standards and expectations of the services provided in Gauteng VICs. Literature emphasises the importance of information quality as being crucial, because it entails accuracy, completeness, timeliness and effective presentation. If, therefore, VIC staff are not adequately trained, it compromises the impression presented at the VICs – let alone the image of the destination as a whole.

Question 3.9c asked SRs **how the training was offered**. The varying responses presented in Figure 5.19 were interesting to note.

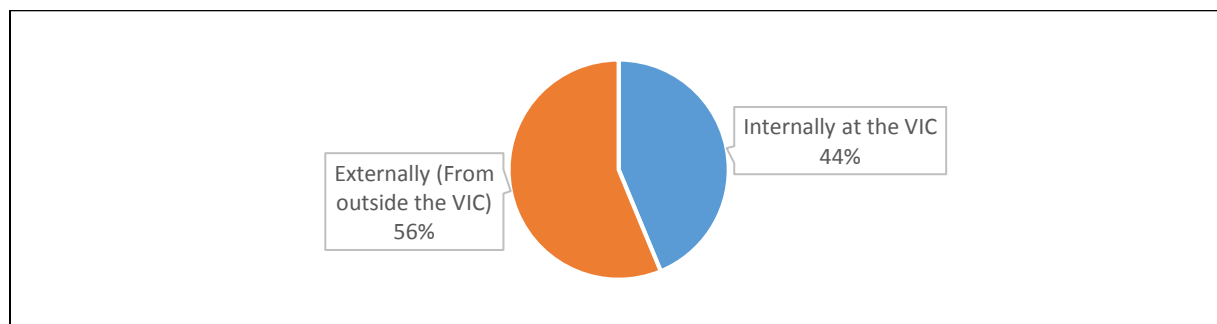


Figure 5.19 Conducting training in the use of ICTs (n=16)

Only 16 SRs completed this part of the questionnaire; and nine did not complete it. Of those that completed, the majority (56%) stated that they received training externally (from outside of the VIC); whilst 44% stated that they had received their training internally at the VIC. Large VICs may send their staff to be trained externally in various skills, but it is not a common practice (Ballantyne *et al*, 2007). This finding does not therefore resonate with the literature, which discussed that a common practice is that VICs conduct training for their staff internally through monthly workshops and familiarisation visits

(Ballantyne & Hughes, 2004). From these workshops, it is envisaged that employees will sharpen their skills in product knowledge and customer service. What is not clear in these results, however, is whether the external training costs are covered by the VIC concerned. It would be interesting to establish through follow-up research whether the VICs have the capacity and are consistently offering this training to their staff; since most of the VICs are small establishments with limited staff and small budgets.

In summary to Section 5.10.5 on technological disruption in Gauteng VICs, the majority indicated that ICTs have brought a major positive disruption. This disruption had a major significant on the operation of Gauteng VICs. With regard to the use of ICTs, most of the staff did not receive adequate training. For those that claimed to have received training, the majority indicated that the training was offered externally. What is not clear is whether the training is paid for by the VIC. The next section focuses on various ICTs platforms and how long they have been in use in Gauteng VICs.

5.10.6 ICT platforms in use and their duration of use

SS – Q 3.10; SRO 3(iii)

SRs were asked to indicate which platforms they are using. They were further requested to indicate how long they have been using them. The analysis of this question has been premised on the fact that the impact of technology may not necessarily translate to sales or profit. Therefore, the number of applications in use and the duration in years were crucial factors that could be used and easily assessed. A longer time of use of a technological platform denotes experience; while the number of applications denotes sophistication. Nine platforms based on the literature review were identified and an option was given to SRs to state those that were not included in the list. Firstly, the results are presented quantitatively by means of a graph (Figure 5.20). Thereafter, the nine platforms will be discussed separately.

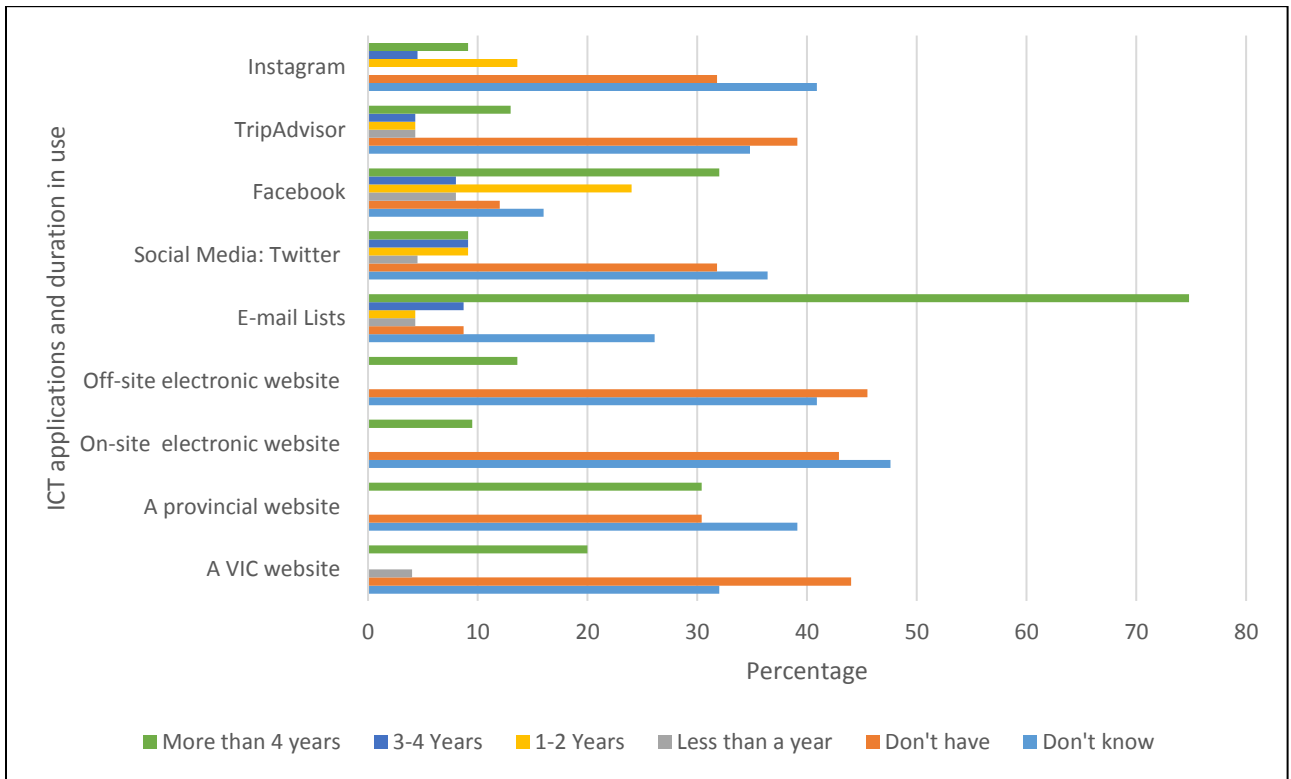


Figure 5.20 ICT applications and duration of use in Gauteng VICs

The use of ICTs within VICs is at a relatively low level; and it seems insufficient for these ICTs to be effective in building and supporting both local and international visitors. It can be observed that ICTs are not uniformly implemented across Gauteng VICs. Most of the VICs in Gauteng are gradually implementing ICTs for tourists’ information dissemination and promotion after realising their immense benefits.

5.10.6.1 VIC website

With regard to VIC websites, 32% did not know whether their VIC operated one. It is further evident from Figure 5.20 that most of the VICs (44%) do not have their own websites; and only 20% indicated that they have been in possession of a website for more than four years. This resonates with Question 3.2a, which found that a lot of VICs do not have their own websites. In this question, only five SRs managed to provide their website addresses; and managed to state the purpose thereof. This finding is at variance with the literature, which underpins the fact that a website is critical for information-intensive industries, particularly at a VIC, which has the principal objective of disseminating information. The i-SITES case study presented in the literature (Section 3.4.4.1) points out that all 83 i-SITES have their own websites, in addition to the main website hosted by the provincial government, in which they also

have a presence. This underscores the importance of VIC owned websites, which can be updated at regular intervals, or as and when necessary.

5.10.6.2 Provincial website

With regard to provincial websites, a significant proportion (39.1%) indicated that they did not know whether they have a provincial website. Slightly below a third indicated they have a provincial website at their disposal; and 30.4% indicated that they have had the website for more than four years.

5.10.6.3 On-site electronic website

With regards to on-site websites, 47.6% did not know whether they have one, while 42.9% indicated that they do not have this type of website. Only 9.5% indicated they had an on-site website, which has been in use for more than four years.

5.10.6.4 Off-site electronic websites

With regard to off-site electronic websites, a significant proportion of SRs (40.9%) indicated that they did not know whether this platform is used at their VICs; whilst 45.5% indicated that they did not have an off-site electronic website. Only 3 (13.6%) indicated that the off-site electronic website has been in operation for more than four years.

Considering the findings related to websites, it may be concluded that most of the VICs in Gauteng neither own, nor operate electronic websites. Most VICs could therefore be relying on traditional platforms to service the information needs of the potential visitors. These may include e-mail lists and face-to-face communication. This is corroborated in Question 2.1, which indicates an extensive use of traditional platforms. While it could be premature to conclude, the low usage of these recent and basic Internet platforms could be attributed to a lack of finance; since this a challenge mentioned in literature.

5.10.6.5 E-mail lists

In respect of e-mail lists, over half of the SRs indicated that they have an e-mail list, with the majority (47.8%) indicating that they have had them for over four years. A proportion of 4.3% indicated that they had been using e-mail lists for less than one year; and another 4.3% for 1-2 years. 8.7% indicated that they had been using this platform for 3-4 years running. Overall, it is evident that the majority of VICs in Gauteng are largely still using traditional platforms in the dissemination of information. VIC management may be perceiving e-mail as the most important platform in the dissemination of information. While it is still relevant, the literature has pointed to a transition from basic platforms, where interaction has

been ongoing between the service provider and the consumer, through to more recent platforms, such as interactive websites and social media. This could be an opportunity for VICs to closely interact and monitor visitors' behaviour in terms of the information required and the feedback on their experiences in the region.

5.10.6.6 Social media: Twitter

With regard to the use of social media, particularly Twitter, 36.4% of the staff indicated that they do not know whether their VICs have a presence on this media platform; while 31.8% indicated that they do not have a Twitter account. A relatively low proportion (4.5%) indicated that they had been using the Twitter handle for less than a year; and 9.1% indicated that they have been on the Twitter platform for 1-2 years and 2-3 years, respectively. Another 9.1% indicated that their VICs have been using the Twitter platform for more than four years now. The overall picture emerging from these results is that the majority of VICs in Gauteng are not extensively using social media platforms, and particularly Twitter.

In contrast, the literature in respect of social media usage has pointed to an extensive use of social media platforms for marketing and promotion, as well as the dissemination of tourism information to potential tourists (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Tussyadiah, 2015). Literature further emphasises the use of social media for niche marketing, which could increase level of visitation and assisting in the targeting of specific markets. For example, the Ipswich VIC has a Facebook page and Twitter linked to its websites – as a measure, not only to engage with potential visitors, but also for the effective dissemination of information (Sigala, Christou & Gretzel, 2012).

This concept of cross-platform websites, although highlighted and discussed in the literature, was not mentioned by the SRs. This was also corroborated in Question 3.1a, which indicated that the majority of VICs do not have their own websites, let alone social media sites linked to these websites. VICs in Gauteng could therefore be missing business opportunities. Trends are shifting from the traditional platforms of information dissemination and promotion, to tourists that are trusting their peers to share authentic information about the destination through social media platforms (Buhalis & Law, 2008).

5.10.6.7 Facebook

With regard to the use of Facebook as a social media platform, 32% of SRs indicated that they have been using Facebook for more than four years while 8% indicated that they have been using Facebook for 3-4 years. Twenty four percent indicated that they have been using Facebook for 1-2 years; whilst eight percent had been using the platform for less than a year. Less than a quarter (12%) indicated that they

do not have a Facebook platform; and 16% indicated that they do not know whether their VIC is using Facebook. Generally, it may be concluded that most of the VICs in Gauteng are using Facebook to interact and communicate with potential tourists, with most VICs being active on these platforms for over four years. This finding resonates with the literature and qualitative findings, which have underscored the extensive use of Facebook.

The literature has stated that, amongst the social media networking sites, Facebook is the most used – both in terms of numbers (potential tourists) and minutes spent (Neuhofer *et al*, 2012, Ngai *et al*, 2015; Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009). To this end, the VICs in Gauteng have an appreciation of the importance and use of social media, particularly Facebook, to support and enhance visitor experience. This finding is also corroborated in Question 2.1, which found that Facebook is popular with VIC staff; and it is easier for them to use.

5.10.6.8 TripAdvisor

With regard to the use of TripAdvisor as a social media platform, 39.1% indicated that they do not have it; while 34.8% indicated that they do not know whether their VICs have a presence on this platform. The minority (4.3%) stated that they have been using TripAdvisor for less than a year, 1-2 years and 3-4 years respectively. Only 13% indicated that they have been using this platform for more than four years. From these results, it may be concluded that the use of TripAdvisor, as a social media platform to engage with potential tourists, is very limited. Perhaps VICs do not value and appreciate the importance of of this platform in promoting and marketing their products; or they do not have the know-how or resources to use it. In contrast, the literature has revealed TripAdvisor to be an important and prominent digital word-of-mouth platform, with more than 170 million reviews worldwide (Sigala, 2008). It is regarded as a reliable source of information for travellers, with reviews acting as decision-making drivers, which help to reinforce and reassure purchase intentions. Therefore, VICs could be losing out on the opportunities presented by TripAdvisor, as a social-media platform.

5.10.6.9 Instagram

With regard to the use of Instagram, 40.9% of SRs do not know whether their VIC is using this platform, while 31.8% indicated that their respective VICs do not have Instagram. No respondent indicated that they have been using Instagram for less than a year. Of all the social-media platforms discussed, it is evident that Instagram is the least used platform, with the majority stating that they do not know much about its use within the VIC. This finding is at variance with the literature, which has emphasised the

importance of the presence of social media sites to improve the visitors' experience, from dreaming about a trip to post-travel reviews. To this extent, it might imply that SRs are not aware of the powerful influence and the crucial role that Instagram could have on potential tourists and the tourism industry as a whole.

In summary to Section 5.10.6, it is evident that SRs in Gauteng are aware of the various social media platforms that are available, and the powerful impact they have, especially Facebook, Twitter and TripAdvisor. What is clear from these statistics is that e-mail lists have been used within the VICs for over four years. Most of all, the social media platforms, which the VICs claim to have used (except for Facebook), have been recently adopted in the past 1-2 years; and evidently some VICs have not yet embraced these platforms. This confirms the fact that VICs have been slow to adopt recent ICTs which can assist in the dissemination of tourism information. By and large, Gauteng VICs are relatively late adopters of technology. This represents a lost opportunity in respect of engaging with visitors and the effective dissemination of tourism information. The adoption of these technologies would require significant investment in the beginning. This does not only benefit the VICs, but also the destination as a whole. Therefore, VIC management are challenged to adopt various social media sites, which they could use to interact with potential visitors throughout the travel process. This will be included in the best practice framework, which will be presented in Part 3 of Chapter 5.

5.10.7 Emerging technologies in Gauteng VICs

SS – Q 3.11; SRO 3(iii)

The previous section has profiled ICTs platforms in Gauteng VICs and the duration which they have been in use. Question 3.11 in the staff survey asked SRs to list the technologies they think their VIC should look into in future. Table 5.7 presents these ICT platforms. A response rate of 84% was obtained in this part of the question. Most of these responses indicate the VIC staff were keen to have a range of technologies adopted in their VICs. A significant number (60%) identified some of the technologies which were already identified in the previous sections of the survey. These included social media platforms and websites. Above half (56%) of the SRs identified social media platforms (14 out of 25). While some listed social media as a broader term, a significant number (45%) stated specific social media platforms which included Facebook, TripAdvisor, Twitter and Instagram. A sizeable figure stated the need for VIC websites which are interactive, where they could seal some business deals online. The other less mentioned

platforms which were not previously identified were iPad, plasma screens, ICTs and VIC applications. The following table presents the breakdown of the media platforms.

Table 5.12 ICTs to be considered by Gauteng VICs in the future

SR #	Interactive VIC websites	Plasma Screens	ipad	Facebook	Twitter	Instagram	TripAdvisor	Gauteng Application	Videos	VIC application	Touch screen	Email	Social Media	On-site electronic website	Wi-Fi
SR 1															
SR 3															
SR4															
SR5															
SR6															
SR7															
SR8															
SR9															
SR10															
SR11															
SR12															
SR13															
SR14															
SR15															
SR16															
SR17															
SR18															
SR20															
SR22															
SR23															
SR25															
SR25															
	8	2	3	1	3	3	2	1	1	1	2	1	5	1	1

Results indicate that SRs differ in terms of the emphasis they place on certain platforms; and that all of the ICT platforms are still important. In particular, the findings confirm the results from previous studies – that the various ICT platforms are important, and can be used in all the trip phases (pre-trip, in destination, post-trip). This assertion has been discussed in Section 2.7.2.6. Extensive literature from

well-developed destinations, such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand concur with these findings (Arana *et al*, 2015; Deery *et al*, 2007; Draper, 2016; De Ascaniis, 2012; Intervistas, 2010).

As depicted in the Table 5.12, Wi-Fi was only mentioned by SR 17, as one way of making tourism information accessible to the public. The SR was of the opinion that making Wi-Fi accessible in the VIC area could improve service to the travelling public, as well as patronage to the VICs themselves. A review of examples and best practices from developed countries shows that VICs are providing free Wi-Fi not only to improve accessibility, but also patronage by both tourists and local community.

The other less-mentioned platform is the VIC application, better known as ‘apps’. SR 9 justified the introduction of a VIC app, which might assist individuals to access information, make purchases and share their experiences anytime and anywhere. Leading research has found that tourism operators and organisations are developing destination apps to enhance the tourism experience in the destination. However, it is admitted that the use of the destination applications are still in their infancy (Lu, Mao, Wang & Hu, 2015). SR 1 also identified television-based technologies to provide information. These include plasma screens. Literature states that these technologies are being superseded by mobile smartphones that have Internet capabilities.

The researcher identified a number of platforms, which could enable potential visitors to access information. Besides the ICT platforms identified in the survey, one of the SRs identified touch-screens, which could assist with the self-help function, when the office is closed. Existing literature has underscored this platform as being very important in the dissemination of tourism information. Connell and Reynolds (1999) and Deery *et al* (2007) stated that touch-screens are a desirable channel to provide information after hours. These are best in secured places such as airports.

5.10.8 Reasons for the adoption of ICT platforms within Gauteng VICs

SS – Q 3.11; SRO 3(iii)

In Question 3.11, SRs were asked to first list ICTs to be looked into in the future and secondly, to give reasons why their VIC should look into them in the near future. The identification of these platforms has been done in Section 5.10.7. The current section explores the reasons. Various reasons were presented; and following content analysis by the researcher, these were categorised into five main themes. The themes were moving with the trends; bringing information to the modern state; the accessibility of

information after hours; extensive reach to the potential tourists; and to add some visual elements to marketing regions. These themes are discussed briefly in the following sections.

5.10.8.1 Moving with the trends

The information distilled from the surveys indicated that the staff in the VICs are keen to move with international trends. Some examples follow:

SR1: *"...to bring our data collection efforts up to a modern state."*

SR8: *"Modern"*. This was in relation to the use of iPads in the dissemination of tourism information.

SR7: *"...to keep up with the times, and for easy reference purposes."*

SR25: *"Popular with the modern tourists"*.

5.10.8.2 The accessibility of tourism information

The vast majority of the SRs emphasised the crucial role of these ICTs in assisting the access of tourism information. In the opinion of the SRs, a particularly important role is to ensure an unhindered tourism information flow. SR 15 stated that *"it gives unhindered access..."*. SR 19 added that *"[Facebook] is accessible by the majority"*. Accessibility of information plays an important role in determining the number of potential visits to a destination. This theme mirrors infogratication as discussed in Section 3.4.3.4. This infogratication could be satisfied through the use of ICT platforms. This finding serves to confirm that a significant number of VIC staff have an appreciation of ICTs as effective platforms for the dissemination of tourism information.

5.10.8.3 Extensive reach to potential tourists

Seven SRs cited the extensive reach to potential tourists as a positive effect of new ICTs. The following excerpts extracted from the surveys confirm this finding:

SR5: *"Social media - to gain more followers"*.

SR6: *"Instagram - people will be able to see pictures of the attractions"*.

SR11: *"Instagram - has more following and high working class. It is mostly used by celebrities and other touring and tourism entities."*

SR13: *"VIC website - reaches wider information audience."*

SR15: *"To reach a wider following"*.

SR16: *"A lot of people prefer and use the social media a lot."*

SR20: *"[Social Media] - reaches a lot of people at once."*

These excerpts consistently allude to reaching out to a bigger number of potential tourists. This finding mirrors the assertions in the literature that ICTs are a means to reach out to a number of potential tourists; since technology has been extensively adopted by businesses and individuals alike (Swart, 2016).

5.10.8.4 Bringing information to a modern state

The use of social media platforms contributes to bringing information to a modern state. SR7 stated that *"the use of i-pads assist in bring information to a modern state..."* SR 14 added that the use of plasma screens *"... ensures the information is accessible to visitors after hours"*. The excerpts from SR 14 also reveal that the use of plasma screens contributes to the access of information after hours.

5.10.8.5 Adding some visual elements to marketing regions

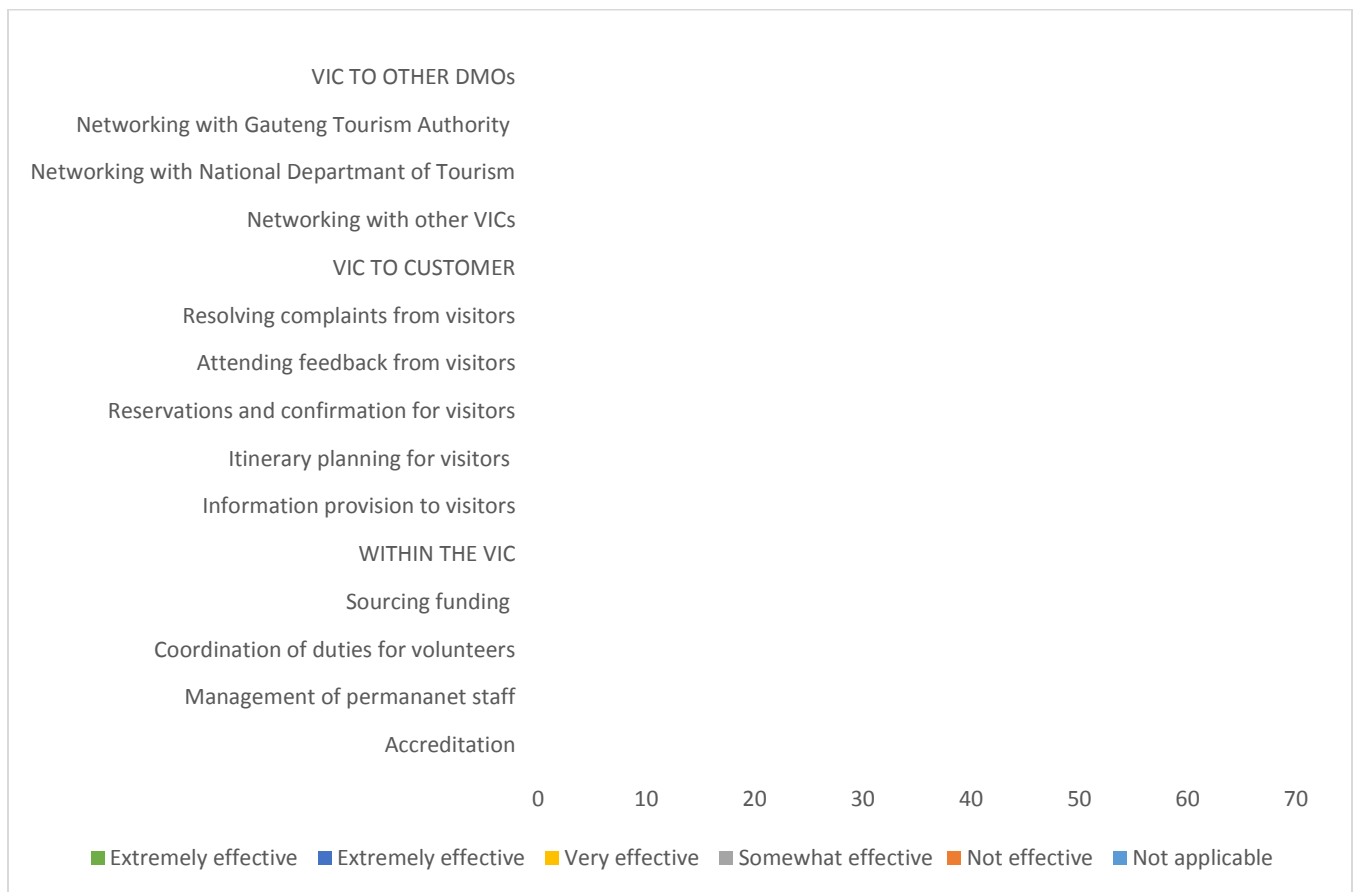
Only SR 5 stated *"[YouTube] adds visual elements to marketing"*. The use of YouTube was not extensively identified by the SRs, however its importance has been underlined in the Ipswich case study (Section 3.4.4.2).

In summary to technology adoption and usage (Sections 5.10.7 and 5.10.8), it is evident that ICTs have not been widely adopted and their use is still limited. There are inroads to adopting new ICTs with regards to social media, particularly Facebook. Social media platforms such as Twitter, YouTube and Flickr are not widely used. There is extensive adoption and use of traditional ICTs such as email and websites, which are not interactive. The study revealed that traditional platforms are by far the most used by staff to serve visitors. Furthermore, the traditional platforms are considered easier to use, as compared to web-based platforms. This is consistent with an earlier discussion in the literature indicating the relative influence of traditional methods, as compared to web-based platforms (Section 3.3.1). Recent literature in VICs is directing efforts towards ICTs, particularly social media, as one of the most influential platforms. This presents a challenge to management to improve and increase the adoption and extensive use of ICT-based platforms. Management need to ensure that staff are equipped to use these ICTs, in order to derive maximum benefit for both visitors and for the staff. This could be accomplished through the training of VIC staff.

5.11 EFFECTIVENESS OF GAUTENG VISITOR INFORMATION CENTRES IN VARIOUS ACTIVITIES

SS – Q 4.1; SRO 3(i) to 3(v)

The staff respondents were asked for their opinions with regard to a number of activities related to the effectiveness of their VICs. The activities were split into three categories, namely **effectiveness within the VIC, effectiveness of VIC for customers, and VIC effectiveness regarding other organisations**. For each of the categories, several activities were identified and a five-point Likert scale ranging from ‘Not applicable’ to ‘Extremely effective’ was provided. The responses are presented in Figure 5.21.



5.21 SRs opinions on effectiveness of their VICs

5.11.1 Effectiveness within the VIC

In this first category, four activities were assessed namely: accreditation, management of permanent staff, co-ordination of duties for volunteers and sourcing funding. The activities are presented next, starting with accreditation.

5.11.1.1 Accreditation

All SRs except one completed this question. Of these, 45.8% indicated that accreditation is not applicable to their VICs; whilst 12.5% indicated that accreditation is not effective. A quarter (25%) stated that accreditation is somewhat effective; whilst 12.5% indicated that it is very effective. Only 4.2% indicated that accreditation is extremely effective. In general, it could be established that accreditation was not regarded as being valuable as most of the SRs did not understand VIC accreditation. The majority indicated that accreditation does not apply to their VICs. It could be pointing to the fact that there are perhaps no province-wide minimum standards to which Gauteng VICs adhere. Perhaps respondents did not understand the question properly because it did not outline the minimum standards for accreditation. Broadly speaking, the accreditation requirements relate to internal operations seeking to improve service delivery within the VICs. However, this question was extensively covered in the key informant survey for detailed analysis which is dealt with in Part 2 (Section 5.19).

5.11.1.2 Management of permanent staff

With regard to the management of permanent staff within the VICs, all the 25 SRs participated and 48% of these indicated that the management of permanent staff within their VIC is very effective. Slightly above a quarter (28%) indicated that it is somewhat effective. An evenly split proportion (12%) indicated that the management of permanent staff is not effective; and that it is not applicable, respectively within their VICs. What is striking from this finding is that, there is no VIC wholly run by volunteers, so the management of permanent staff needs to be effective and applicable. In the main, less than half (48%) indicated that the management of permanent staff is effective; while the remaining were unsure. It can therefore be concluded that management of staff in Gauteng VICs may not be effective. Poor management of staff may also result in poor service delivery (Section 3.3.3).

5.11.1.3 Co-ordination of volunteers

Cumulatively, the majority (54.1%) stated that the management of volunteers is effective; whilst a quarter (25%) stated that it is somewhat effective. Less than a quarter 12.5% indicated that it is not effective; while 8.3% indicated that it is not applicable. This could mean they do not employ volunteers at the VICs. It appears that VIC management performs better in the management of permanent staff than it does in the management of volunteers.

5.11.1.3 Sourcing funding

From the results, 29.2% and 20.8% stated that sourcing funding for VIC operations is not applicable, and is not effective, respectively; whilst another 29.2% stated that sourcing funding is somewhat effective. The minority (16.7%) indicated that sourcing funding for the VICs is effective; whilst 4.2% stated that it is extremely effective. The findings seem to point to the fact that the VICs in Gauteng are mainly funded internally by the local government under which they belong. This is corroborated in the key informant survey, which established that more than half of the VICs in Gauteng fall under the local government in which they are located. Secondly, Deery *et al* (2007) identified that local governments play a key role in the funding of VICs. With regard to alternative sources of funding, Gauteng VICs are not effective in sourcing these. This finding is at variance with the global cases coming from Britain, Canada and New Zealand, as well as related academic literature, which has pointed to new income streams for VICs in the wake of budget cuts and the increased uncertainty of government funding. For example in Britain, VICs have implemented income-generating streams to offset their operating expenses and in Australia, i-SITEs are reaping benefits from these income generating streams. In contrast to this, other literature has indicated that VICs are the purview of local government; and therefore local governments are responsible for their funding. However, based on recent global trends, VICs are shifting to income generating streams (Carson *et al*, 2005; Deery *et al*, 2007; Intervistas, 2010). The next section presents the second category in VIC effectiveness namely, the effectiveness of VIC activities available to support the customer.

5.11.2 VIC effectiveness for the customer

In this second category, five types of activities were identified relating to VIC effectiveness for the customer. These are presented next. The reader is reminded that the statistics are presented in Figure 5.21.

5.11.2.1 Information provision

With regard to information provision, 80% indicated that the VIC is very effective; whilst 4% indicated that it is not effective; and 16% indicated that it is only somewhat effective. Poor information could be due to lack of training; or to lack of knowledge on the destination. Management is challenged to improve staff knowledge through regular training and familiarisation. In the main, most of the Gauteng VICs are effective in their information provision.

5.11.2.2 Itinerary planning for visitors

With regard to itinerary planning for visitors, the majority (36%) indicated that it is very effective; and 16% extremely effective. Slightly above a quarter (28%) claimed that it is only somewhat effective. Twelve percent of the SRs indicated that itinerary planning for visitors is not effective and eight percent claimed that it is not applicable. It could be the fact that itinerary planning is an emerging trend among Gauteng VICs and perhaps they are not yet familiar with it.

5.11.2.3 Reservations and confirmations for visitors

Forty percent regarded reservations and confirmations for visitors as largely not applicable to VICs; whilst those that believe it is applicable to VICs, largely regarded it as not effective (8%); and 32% as somewhat effective. Twelve percent claimed that reservations and confirmations are very effective and eight percent regarded it as effective. This finding resonates with Question 3.3, which established that most of the VICs with website access do not have an interactive functionality, particularly an online booking service.

5.11.2.4 Attending to feedback from visitors

Responses from the SRs indicate that below half (45%) claim that attending to feedback from visitors is effective; whilst slightly more than half (52%) believe that it is somewhat effective. Only 4% indicated that attending feedback from visitors is not applicable. This could be explained by the fact that most of the contact with visitors is predominantly traditional; and feedback is attended to promptly. It could be due to the fact that VICs do not engage with visitors after the visit to share feedback on their experience during the visit.

5.11.2.5 Resolving complaints from visitors

Slightly below half (48%) claimed that resolving complaints from visitors is effective; whilst 40% claimed that it is somewhat effective. A total of 4% and 8% claimed that it is not applicable and not effective, respectively. The answers received could be due to lack of understanding and poor awareness of how staff should engage with visitors.

5.11.3 VIC effectiveness regarding other DMOs

The final category pertained to the effectiveness of the VICs in interacting with other destination organisations. Three organisations were identified and the responses are presented next.

5.11.3.1 Networking with other VICs

The sharing of ideas between VICs in the region was rated poorly. Only a quarter (25%) indicated that networking with other VICs in the region is very effective; whilst 4.2% indicated that it is extremely effective. Half (50%) indicated that networking with other VICs is somewhat effective. Less than a quarter (16.7%) stated that networking is not at all effective; whilst 4.2% indicated that networking with other VICs is not applicable. By and large, networking among Gauteng VICs is weak; and this could be impacting negatively on information dissemination in the whole region. Firstly, it limits cross-selling of products; and secondly, this lack of networking contributes to inconsistent messages. This could have a negative impact on the visitors – especially when they visit another VIC in the adjoining region and receive a different welcome. From these findings, it can be concluded that most VICs in Gauteng operate independently; and there seems to be no active network between them. This is a missed opportunity to share intelligence among VICs, with regard to marketing the destination, as well as what tourists expect.

5.11.3.2 Networking with the National Department of Tourism

With regard to networking with the National Department of Tourism, slightly above half (52%) claimed that their networking with the department is very effective; whilst 4% claimed that it is extremely effective. Slightly above a third (36%) indicated that networking with the National Department of Tourism is somewhat effective. A small number (4%) claimed that networking with the department is not applicable; and another 4% claimed that networking with the department is not effective at all.

5.11.3.3 Networking with Gauteng Tourism Authority

There is very effective (44%) networking between the Gauteng Tourism Authority and the VICs, with another 28% claiming that the networking is extremely effective. A fifth indicated that the networking is somewhat effective; whilst 4% claimed that networking with the GTA is not applicable; and it is not effective, respectively. It is interesting to note that almost three quarters (72%) are networking with the provincial body. They could be benefiting from the professional development opportunities, as a result of sharing ideas with this regional body.

To summarise Section 5.11, the researcher conducted a Friedman's test for the three categories namely: 'Effectiveness within VICs', 'VIC effectiveness for the customer' and 'VIC effectiveness regarding other DMOs'. This was done to determine whether the VICs in Gauteng are performing better in any of the categories. This was done via a Friedman's exact test for each of the categories. A Friedman's test was considered useful due to the limited sample size and the data which was poorly distributed. The means

for the three categories were not statistically different: Within the VIC (1.66), VIC to customer (2.16) and VIC to other DMOs (2.18) at exact sig 0.102. These are presented in the table below.

Table 5.13 Friedman’s exact test for various VIC attributes

Average ranks per three categories		Exact Test Statistics ^a	
	Mean Rank	n	25
q4.1_Within VIC	1.66	Chi-Square	4.667
q4.1_VIC to Customer	2.16	df	2
q4.1_VIC to DMO	2.18	Asymp. Sig.	.097
		Exact Sig.	.102
		Point Probability	.007
		a. Friedman Test	

The test indicates that, on average, there is no difference between the means of the three categories. Therefore, there is no category in which the Gauteng VICs are doing better than the other. VICs should improve their effectiveness across the three categories to ensure a superior service to the customer.

5.12. STAFF RECOMMENDATIONS FOR VISITOR INFORMATION CENTRES: STAFF PERSPECTIVES

SS – Q 4.2a, 4.2b, 4.2c, 4.2d; Primary Research Objective

The concluding question on the staff respondent survey was open-ended; and it solicited staff suggestions regarding VIC operations in respect of **information provision, customer care, use of technology and face-to-face communication**. A generic option ‘Other’ was included for SRs to provide additional options, which did not fit under the given options. The section partly addresses the Primary research objective of this research study: to develop a best practice framework for VICs in Gauteng Province. Suggestions from the SRs are discussed under the four areas starting with information provision.

5.12.1 Staff recommendations: Information provision

Question 4.2 asked SRs to state changes they believe are required to improve the performance of VIC in meeting visitor expectations in relation to information provision. In respect of information provision, the responses gathered from the surveys were qualitatively analysed. As a result of the iterative process, overarching and recurrent themes were identified, namely the training of VIC staff, product knowledge, information dissemination and improving the quality of information. A few key themes are lifted out of Figure 5.22 and discussed in this section.

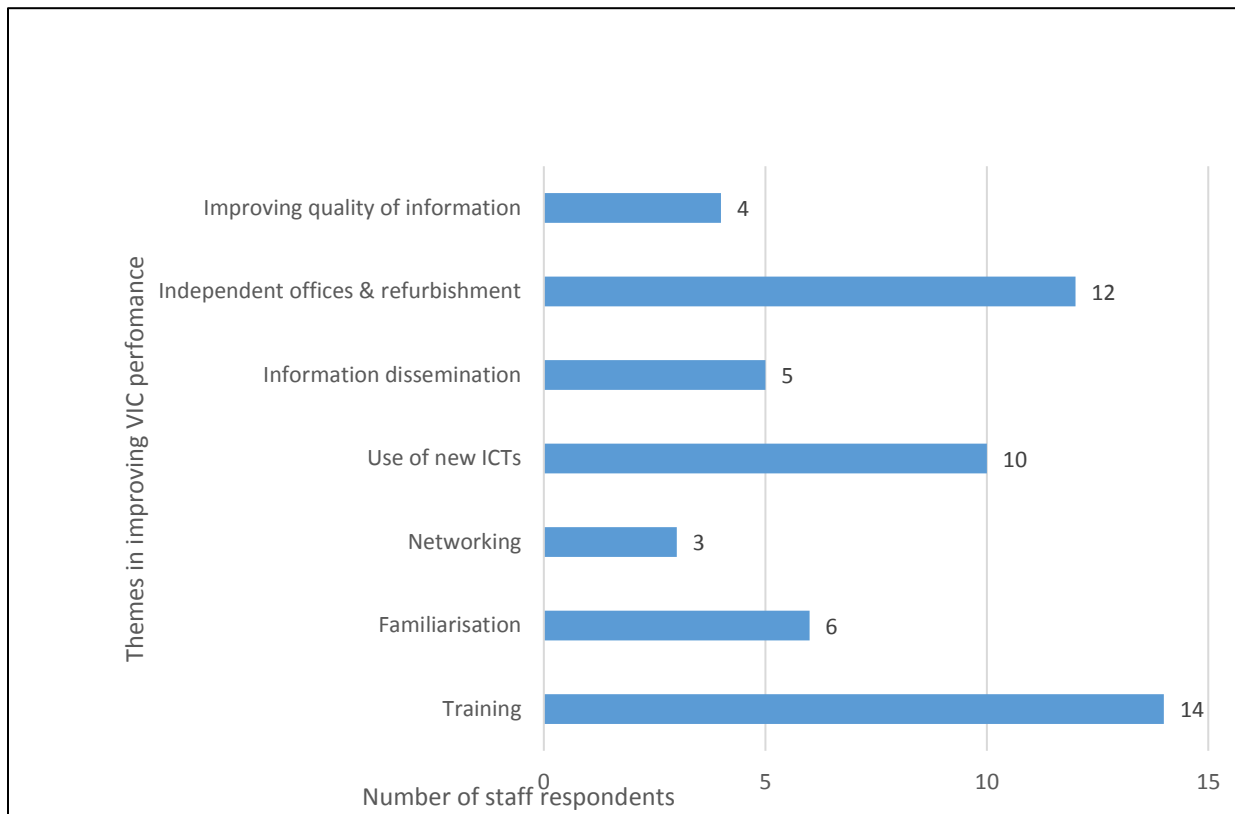


Figure 5.22 Themes to improve Gauteng VICs: Staff perspectives

In respect of improvements in **information dissemination**, the recurrent theme from the SRs was that staff training is required to improve the performance of VICs. Fourteen SRs stated **training** in general, while ten specified training **in the use of new ICTs** and six suggested training in **product knowledge particularly through familiarisation tours**. The following examples are presented:

SR 2: “...take familiarisation tours to all products within the destination to improve the destination knowledge of the staff.”

SR 3: “Embark more on knowledge trips...”.

SR 7: *"To be more in touch with the product owners."*

SR 10: *"...and engagement with stakeholders."*

SR 12: *"...more information about sites, history and its heroes."*

SR 17: *"...product knowledge and training".*

These findings are replicated in previous studies, which pointed to regular familiarisation tours, as one of the most common and effective methods of keeping the VIC staff abreast of changes in the local tourism products and immediate locality (Ballantyne & Hughes 2004; Ballantyne *et al*, 2007; Hobbin, 2012). In-depth destination knowledge influences the travel behaviour of tourists (Wong & McKercher, 2011).

SRs made significant reference to **a desire to improve quality of information** disseminated through the VICs. It has been previously discussed as one of the roles of VICs in Gauteng Province; and consequently in this section, it is highlighted as one of the areas in which training needs to be conducted for Gauteng VIC staff. Five SRs indicated that there is need for training in the area of **information dissemination**. The following excerpts from the surveys substantiate this finding:

SR 5: *"Improve information dissemination"*.

SR 6: *"Improve tourism information dissemination"*.

SR 10: *"Effective information collection...."*

SR 21: *"Improve content of our brochures"*.

These findings resonate with the literature discussed in Section 2.7.1.3, which underscores the need to equip VIC staff with skills to disseminate the information effectively. Much of the literature argues that the depth of the information and advice provided directly depends on the staff; since this is a function of their training and experience. Therefore, this type of training must be undertaken upon hiring, or for the duration of the employment of a particular employee. The underlying reason is to ensure that staff skills are kept relevant for the delivery of a better service within the VIC (Arana *et al*, 2015; Deery *et al*, 2007; Wong & McKercher, 2011). Three SRs identified the need for **interactive VIC websites to improve networking** with customers and service suppliers (SR 8, 11 & 13). Some examples follow:

SR 8: *"Establishment of interactive VIC website, as soon as possible; as information changes overnight, so as to enable us to update and respond to visitors' feedback with ease to meet visitors' needs."*

SR 11: *"Include website ...in information dissemination."*

SR 13: “Develop a website and getting information captured by the VIC presently.”

These quotes underpin the importance of interactive websites in the dissemination of tourism information. Recent trends allude to customers, as the image-makers of a destination; thus, there is a need to engage with them in developing this image. Twelve of the SRs indicated the need for free standing **well refurbished VICs**. SR 1 stated that “... move the VIC from the traditional municipal-owned building to spaces that potential tourists numbers occupy”.

In summary, this section has presented some of the themes highlighted by SRs to improve the performance of VICs with regards to information dissemination. SRs indicated the need for training in product knowledge, use of ICTs and improving the quality of information within the VICs. SRs outlined the need for interactive websites and independent well-refurbished offices. The next section discusses further improvements in respect of customer care.

5.12.2 Staff recommendations: Customer care

Question 4.2 in the staff survey requested SRs to state what improvements they believe are required to improve the performance of VICs in meeting visitors’ expectations in respect of customer care. Figure 5.23 presents the themes which were highlighted by the SRs.

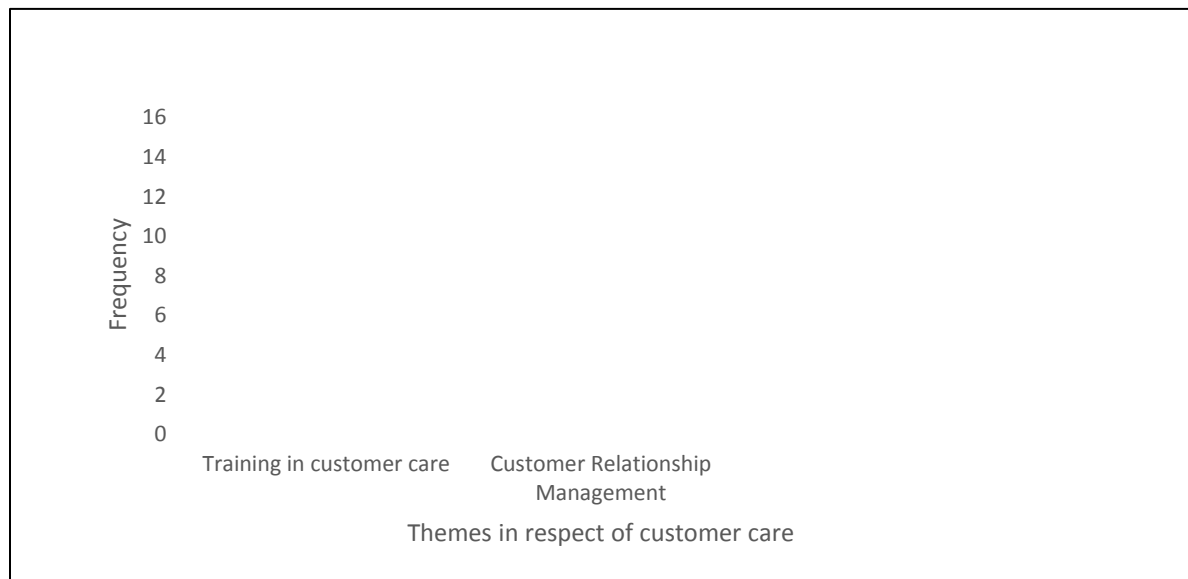


Figure 5.23 Training required by Gauteng VICs staff: Customer care

In respect of customer care, two themes were identified namely training in customer care and a customer relationship management program. Sixteen SRs expressed the need for **training in customer**

care while three highlighted the need for a **customer care relationship management program** within VICs. Some examples follow:

SR 2: “... Annual refresher courses on customer service for VIC staff and effective CRM.”

SR 11: “... Extra training to volunteers in customer care.”

SR15: “More workshops for youth in tourism on customer care.”

SR 20: “Proper training in customer care and handling customers’ issues.”

SR 25: “More regular training on customer care.”

From the examples given, it appears that a sizeable number of staff (16) are in need of **training in customer care**. The need for this training is to ensure that service is beyond the visitors’ expectation within the VICs. This finding is also mirrored in the literature. Good customer care is believed to be one of the motivations for tourists to patronise the VICs, and therefore it is very critical to VIC performance (Ballantyne *et al*, 2009; Draper 2016; Minghetti & Celotto, 2013).

Three SRs raised the need for a **customer relationship management program** (SRs 1, 2, 20). In particular, SR 1 alluded to the need to “*establish a customer-care program to address unfortunate incidents*”. This program entails engaging with visitors at all the stages of the visitors’ journey, ensuring that visitors are enjoying their stay in the destination and any unfortunate circumstances are minimised. In cases where they arise, they are dealt with instantly and promptly to the visitors’ satisfaction. This is regarded as one of the important ways of gaining the confidence of the visitors. This is also highlighted in the literature that engaging with visitors upon arrival, during, and in the after-visit stages would assist VICs to deal with customers concerns timeously.

In summary to Section 5.12.2, the SRs indicated that there is need for staff training staff in customer care and a customer relationship management programme to deal with incidents. The next section discusses improvements required in respect of ICTs.

5.12.3 Staff recommendations: ICTs

Question 4.2c in the staff survey requested SRs to state improvements required in their VICs with regards to technology. The researcher conducted a thematic content analysis of the responses and the themes are presented Figure 5.24, and will be discussed. Funding and acquisition of new ICTs, and training in ICTs and training in the use of social media will be discussed concurrently as they overlap.

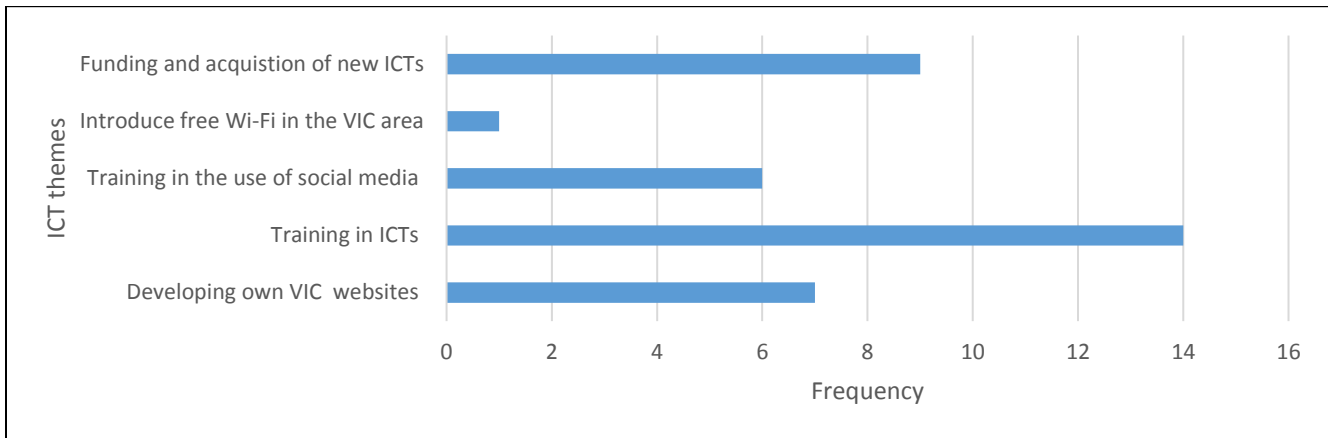


Figure 5.24 Improvements required by Gauteng VIC staff: ICTs

5.12.3.1 Funding and acquisition of new ICTs

Funding and acquisition of new technologies within VICs emerged as one salient feature. These are discussed concurrently as they overlap. Nine SRs highlighted the need for the acquisition of new technologies within VICs. Evidence to support this can be found in the following excerpts:

SR 1: *"Update our technology used to do our work to nowadays."*

SR 5: *"Acquire more technological equipment, such as computers."*

SR 6: *"... Funding is needed for more computers for the association."*

SR 9: *"Current technological devices to be brought into place (I pads and computers)."*

SR 15: *"Additional equipment for state-of-the-art VICs."*

SR 18: *"Improve technology for better statistical capturing system."*

SR 23: *"Introduce I pads with information on Gauteng (attraction and activities)."*

This finding is consistent with the literature, which has argued that VICs should be consistently on the look-out for new ICTs, which can improve their service delivery to potential tourists. This finding is consistent with Berdard's (2008) model in relation to the acquisition of new technology, which argues that for an organisation to thrive in an information-intensive environment, it must learn about and embrace all aspects of information technology.

5.12.3.2 Free Wi-Fi in the VIC area

One SR identified the need to provide **free Wi-Fi in the VIC area** to improve accessibility of information. Free Wi-Fi result in infogratication among visitors, resulting in optimising their experiences within the destination. This is also underlined in literature (Section 3.4.4.1).

5.12.3.3 Training in new ICTs and the use of social media

Fourteen SRs indicated the need for training in ICTs in general, while six SRs indicated the need for training in the use of social media. Some examples follow:

SR 2: *“Training of staff to use technology in the VIC.”*

SR 13: *“More training on ICTs.”*

SR 16: *“IT training e.g. in the social media.”*

SR 18: *“...training on ICTs regularly.”*

SR 21: *“Training on the use of technologies in the provision of information.”*

SR 25: *“More training on the use of new ICTs and introduction of Wi-Fi in the VICs.”*

The importance of training in ICTs has been mirrored in the literature in Berdard’s (2008) pyramid of the technological adaptation on new technologies (Section 3.4). Training has been placed on top, in order to highlight its strategic importance in a knowledge-based society or industry, such as the tourism industry. The Ipswich and i-SITEs case studies, which are discussed in the literature (Section 3.4.4.1), further strengthen the importance of training.

5.12.3.4 Developing own VIC websites

Seven SRs identified the need to develop own VICs websites. In particular, SR 3 stated that *“We need to develop our own website...”*. It is interesting to note that, the very SRs who indicated that they do not have a VIC website are the ones who identified this need. This section focused on the improvements required in Gauteng VICs in respect of new ICTs.

In summary to Section 5.12.3, there is need to train staff in the use of ICTs particularly social media. VICs should also strive to provide Wi-Fi and increase budgets towards ICTs in order to acquire new ICTs. SRs also identified the need to establish their own VIC websites to improve information accessibility. The next section discusses improvements suggested by the staff in respect of face-to-face communication.

5.12.4 Staff recommendations: Face-to-face communication

Section 5.12 deals with staff recommendations for VICs. Thus far, the researcher has dealt with information provision (5.12.1), customer care (5.12.2) and ICTs (5.12.3). This final section deals with face-to-face communication. Question 4.2d asked SRs to highlight their suggestion to improve VIC performance in respect of face-to-face communication. Three themes were identified by the researcher

namely: training in face-to-face communication, adding passion to work and introduction of uniforms for staff. Each of the themes is discussed.

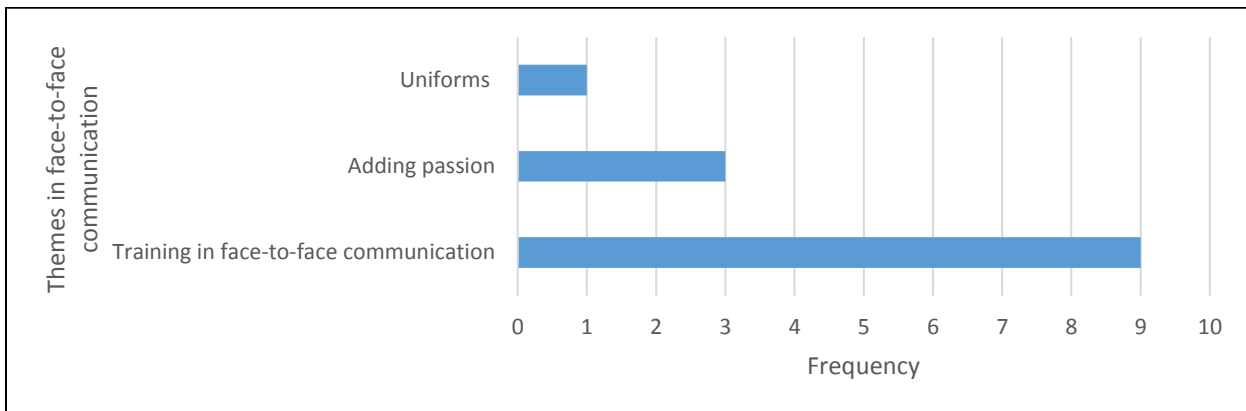


Figure 5.25 Improvements required by VIC staff: Face-to-face communication (n= 12)

5.12.4.1 Training in face-to-face communication

Half (12 out of 25) of the SRs responded to this question. Three SRs clearly stated that there is a need for training regarding face-to-face communication. Some examples follow:

SR 9: *"More training to be provided for front-office staff."*

SR 12: *"Workshops on face-to-face communication."*

SR 21 & 23: *"Regular training on face-to-face communication."*

The responses above underscore the importance of training in face-to-face communication. This finding resonates with the literature which highlights the fact that visitors may visit the VICs, in order to speak to knowledgeable and friendly staff.

5.12.4.2 Passion for work

Three respondents highlighted the need for staff to add passion in conducting their work. The following are examples:

SR 2: *"... take every visitor as important and treat them specially, treating them with great respect."*

SR 3: *"Be passionate about our work and take every inquiry seriously."*

SR 17: *"Optimised professional service."*

5.12.4.3 Uniforms for VIC staff

One SR suggested giving a professional look to the VIC staff by providing staff with uniforms. Ballantyne and Hughes (2004) strongly suggested the introduction of uniforms across all the accredited VICs' staff to ensure uniformity. This could aid in the protection of a brand.

With regards to the option of 'Other' staff recommendations, SR 18 highlighted the need for the refurbishment of the VIC, in order to make them more user-friendly.

In summary to Section 5.12, SRs indicated that there is a need to provide training in all four areas namely information provision, customer care, technology usage and face-to-face communication. The training should be provided regularly. Familiarisation tours is the preferred method when delivering training on information provision. With regards to customer care, SRs suggested that a customer relationship management programme be run in order to deal with incidents. Training in social media usage was a common recommendation among all the SRs. There is need to seek more funds to assist in acquiring new ICTs. Finally, with regards to face-to-face communication, SRs indicated the need for training, adding passion to their work, as well as issuing uniforms to allow for uniformity in all Gauteng VICs.

5.13 CONCLUSION TO PART 1

This section concludes Part 1 of the analysis which covered the entire staff survey and Question 1.5 in the key informant survey. **Section 5.1** covered how the analysis would proceed, the abbreviations used in Chapter 5 and a flow diagram to guide the reader. **Section 5.2** focused on the characterisation of the SRs, KIRs and the characterisation of the VICs. In respect of the SRs, respondents were millennials around the age of 34 years, dominated by females. On average, the SRs possessed a Diploma in Tourism or a related field, except for two SRs who had a matric qualification with extensive experience in the tourism industry of over 10 years. In respect of KIRs, eight participated and 67% of them were males. Their ages ranged from 42 years to 63 years. The majority (50%) of VICs were owned by the local government, two by the provincial government (GTA), one was owned by the Chamber of Commerce and the last one was an independent organisation.

Section 5.3 focused on the most important functions of Gauteng VICs. All the eight KIRs concurred with the rest of the SRs that VICs are responsible for the dissemination of information in a region, marketing and promotion, providing an interface to the tourists, protecting the history of a location, and providing a platform for engagement with the local community. Three quarters of the SRs indicated that their VICs do not offer a substitution function, while no VICs offered services to the community. The SRs and the

KIRs concurred that their respective VICs influence visitor behaviour, with the greatest influence being on the decision to visit, followed by the length of stay.

Section 5.4 elaborated further on the impacts of VIC information on visitor behaviour. It explored how the VIC staff influence the behaviour. Staff influence visitor behaviour by recommending attractions which are not on the visitors' itineraries, effective communication with the visitors, and providing up-to-date information. **Sections 5.5** and **5.6** explored the VICs functions beyond those discussed in Section 5.3 (Four-Plus model), but it is evident that Gauteng VICs do not provide any other services to the community besides catering for the visitors.

Section 5.7 focused on information dissemination and the equipping of staff. The section focused on various VIC attributes which determine the effectiveness of VICs. In relation to product knowledge and face-to-face communication, the SRs ranked themselves high (above 90%). For telephone etiquette and product knowledge in the adjoining region, the SRs scored less than 72%, showing a need for training in these areas. With regards to information dissemination resources, all SRs indicated that their VICs are largely using traditional resource which are easy for the staff to use.

In **Section 5.8**, there is also use of new ICTs which are not extensively embraced by the VICs. The notable one embraced is Facebook in engaging with visitors. Other social media platforms such as Twitter and TripAdvisor are not widely used by the Gauteng VIC staff. Most of the VICs do not have their own websites, let alone interactive ones. The VICs access information through third-party websites, such as the local government or provincial government websites.

Section 5.9, focused on the frequency of training in respect of face-to-face communication, telephone etiquette, customer service and information provision. The findings reveal that training is conducted inconsistently and irregularly. Where training is offered, it is offered annually. The findings also revealed that there is a positive correlation between frequency of training and whether the training is adequate.

The SRs indicated that they have undergone training externally, but this training appears to be largely inadequate as more than 75% indicated the need for more training in ICTs, particularly social media marketing.

Section 5.10 explored some ICTs which the SRs thought their VICs should look into going into the future. The SRs identified social media platforms (Twitter, Instagram, TripAdvisor) and interactive websites. These platforms were considered for their accessibility, convenience, cost effectiveness, user-

friendliness and modernity. Roaming ambassadors equipped with i-pads were also identified as an option to consider going into the future.

Section 5.11 focused on the effectiveness of VICs in various activities categorised into three categories namely: effectiveness within the VICs, effectiveness for the customer and effectiveness regarding other DMOs. A Friedman's test was conducted to find out the category in which the Gauteng VICs are doing best. The findings revealed that there is no one category in which the VICs are performing. This challenges management to improve their effectiveness across the three categories.

Section 5.12 of the analysis concluded with changes required to improve the performance of Gauteng VICs. The findings revealed that training is required across four areas namely: information provision, customer care, use of new ICTs and face-to-face communication. With regards to information provision, it appears SRs prefer familiarisation tours. SRs also suggested moving the VIC to independent structures which are spacious and friendly. They have noted a need to increase budgets in order to acquire new ICTs. New uniforms have been proposed to ensure uniformity across the province. This section made up Part One of the analysis. Part Two covers the remaining KIS questions.

PART 2

KEY INFORMANT RESPONSES EXCLUDING KIS Q 1.1-1.5

5.14 INTRODUCTION

The preceding part of this chapter presented the findings in respect of SRs. The inquiry broadly covered three themes, namely: the functions of VICs; information dissemination and equipping of staff; and technology uptake and usage within Gauteng VICs. Part 2 presents the primary research findings of the eight KIRs who participated in the study, which addresses SRO 3(iv) and 3(v). The findings of the KIRs are presented under three main themes namely: funding for VICs (Sections 5.15 to 5.18); VIC networking and accreditation (Section 5.19); and general views on improving VIC performance (Section 5.20). The reader is reminded that Table 5.1 contains the abbreviations used in Chapter 5. Part 3 presents the best practice framework consolidating both the staff and key informant recommendations buttressed by the relevant input from literature. The characteristics of the KIRs was already presented in Section 5.2.2 of Part 1. Questions from the key informant survey relating to the functions of VICs was also dealt within Part 1.

5.15 CURRENT STATE OF GAUTENG VISITOR INFORMATION CENTRES: FUNDING

KIS – Q 2.1, 2.2a, 2.2b; SRO 3(iv)

Question 2.1 in the KIS asked the KIRs how their respective VICs are funded, in as much as it affects their operations. This section first addresses the adequacy of VIC finances and, secondly, the impact thereof. Four KIRs indicated that their VICs receive funding from the local government authorities, under which they belong; while two VICs receive funding from Gauteng provincial government as they fall under its ownership. Only one VIC indicated that it is a division of the local Chamber of Commerce; and therefore, it is self-funded as a business. One KIR indicated that the VIC which he is involved is an independent organisation.

In Question 2.2a, KIRs were requested to express to what extent their finances were adequate. A five-point Likert scale, ranging from 'not at all adequate' to 'extremely adequate' was developed to assist with the analysis. Of the eight KIRs, who participated in this study, seven of the KIRs indicated that their finances were **not at all adequate**; while one indicated that their funding was rather **inadequate**. No KIRs indicated that their financing was adequate. It appears that VICs in Gauteng are inadequately financed, with the majority of the VICs lacking the necessary budgetary requirements.

5.16 THE IMPACT OF INADEQUATE FUNDING ON VISITOR INFORMATION CENTRES' OPERATIONS

KIS – Q 2.2b; SRO 3(iv)

Question 2.2b asked KIRs how their VICs were affected by the lack of adequate finance. The current section aims to understand the impact of inadequate funding on the VICs. The thematic content analysis of surveys identified five themes, as follows: poor service delivery; not able to modernise; constrained marketing activities; stifled progress on projects; and shortages on office supplies. The frequencies in these themes are depicted Figure 5.26; and each of them will be discussed subsequently.

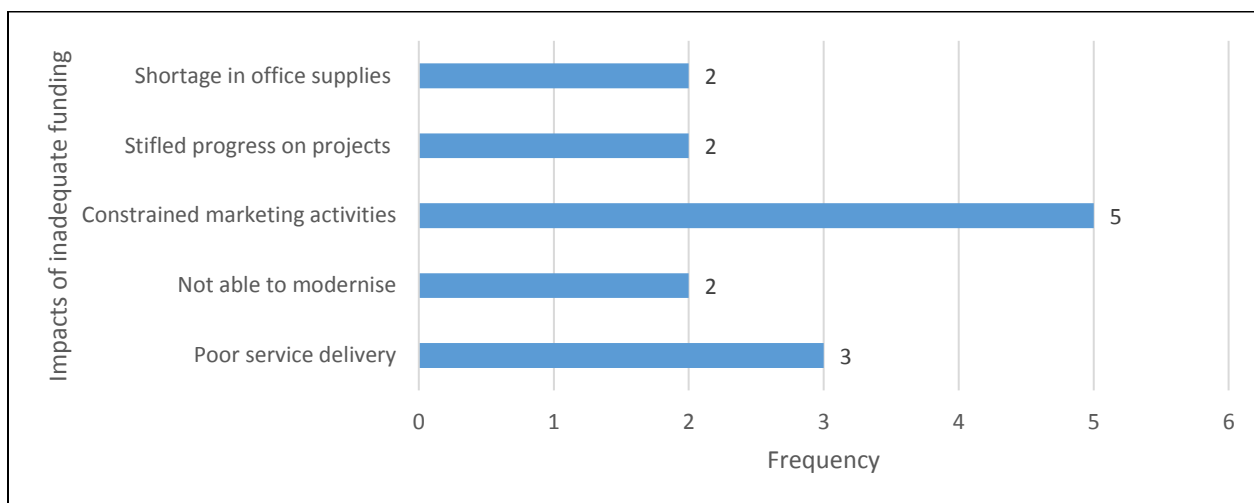


Figure 5.26 The impacts of inadequate funding in Gauteng VICs

5.16.1 Poor service delivery

The responses coming from three KIRs confirm a similar finding, indicating that inadequate finance results in poor service delivery. KIRs 1, 2, 3 and 4 indicated that they are not able to discharge their functions effectively; as they are not able to use other platforms for information dissemination and marketing. The following examples confirm this finding:

KIR 1: “... insufficient finances for e-marketing...information dissemination leading to poor service delivery.”

KIR 2: “We can’t fully execute all our operations.”

KIR 4: “We cannot provide good information to visitors.”

From the majority of the KIRs, there is a consensus on the effects of financial inadequacy and its impact on the operations of the VICs. None of the respondents indicated that lack of adequate finance is of no

effect to operations. It is evident that inadequate funding has an adverse impact on the service delivery within Gauteng VICs. This has also been corroborated in earlier studies (Draper, 2016).

5.16.2 Not able to modernise

The KIRs indicated that inadequate finance has hampered Gauteng VICs' efforts to bring their information dissemination efforts up to a modern state. KIRs 1, 3, 4, 5, 8 indicated that they are unable to modernise their service offering, to match it to the international standards. The following excerpts extracted from the KIRs surveys confirm this finding:

KIR 3: "... bring it up to par with other similar VICs internationally."

KIR 5: "We are unable to modernise our service offering and bring it up to the international standards that our visitors expect."

These KIRs generally felt that the lack of finance hinders them in embracing other platforms, which can modernise the dissemination of tourism information. It requires minimal expenditure to be available on the digital platforms, which literature indicated (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Mistilis & Gretzel, 2014a). However, a significant investment is required to acquire the hardware and to train staff. The platforms identified were social media and interactive websites.

5.16.3. Constrained marketing activities

The KIRs felt that the lack of adequate finance had stifled their marketing activities. KIR 6 expressed that *"... we could not attend important meetings, such as the Tourism Indaba."* Marketing and promotion are two of the functions identified by both KIRs and SRs. This indicates that VICs are not able to render one of their critical functions. KIR 1 further stated that the *"budget is insufficient for e-marketing strategies..."*, and therefore the VIC could not engage in extensive marketing of the destination. Studies have found that the Internet has revolutionised operations particularly in tourism, where organisations have to appeal to the global markets. This presents a missed opportunity for most Gauteng VICs. The following opinions from the KIRs confirm this finding:

KIR 1: "information-dissemination, product development...are hampered."

KIR 3: "We are unable to modernise our service offering and bring it up to the international standards that our visitors expect."

KIR 4: "We cannot give proper information to visitors; because we can't attend other important meetings, such as the Tourism Indaba."

It appears that Gauteng VICs are operating on constrained budgets; and they do not have enough funds to invest in new technologies to bring their service up to international standards.

5.16.4 Stifled progress on projects

While the responses elicited from the KIRs mainly focused on the impact of financial shortages in service delivery, KIR 5 alluded to the lack of capital expenditure to refurbish, to make the VICs modern and attractive to the public. The literature highlighted the importance of attractive VICs, as a drawcard, since appearance and looks can be indicative of the dominant culture in the destination, indicating that the VICs has been embraced by the locals (Intervistas 2010).

It is further noted that VICs can meet the visitors' information demands by providing a personal service in a pleasant and welcoming environment. While this relationship cannot be discussed extensively, it provides an insight and a motivation for VIC managers to bring their centres up to modern standards.

5.16.5 Shortages in office supplies

KIR 3 and 6 state that they lacked power and office accessories at their VIC therefore affects their operations negatively. In particular, KIR 6 state that *"We lack power and office accessories."* The respondent further noted that other accessories such as toners for printers could not be replaced thereby affecting service delivery.

To summarise Section 5.16, it is evident that all VICs in Gauteng operate on inadequate budgets and this is affecting their operations negatively. Inadequate budgets result in poor service delivery, stifled marketing efforts, as well as failure to modernise operations to match the international standards. The next section explores how VICs allocate their budgets within the scope of their operations.

5.17 BUDGETARY ALLOCATIONS FOR GAUTENG VISITOR INFORMATION CENTRES

KIS – Q 2.3; SRO 3(iv)

The question aimed to have a rough idea of the size and how Gauteng VICs spend their budget allocations. This question was not widely attempted by the KIRs; as two KIRs indicated that the information was too confidential for the study. To amplify this finding, KIR 4 stated that the budgetary information is *"not available to survey"*. Another two KIRs indicated that they were not privy to the information requested; as it was done centrally at the municipal level. The other three KIRs did not even attempt the question. Only one respondent managed to provide limited details of income and

expenditure for the years 2014 to 2016. With regard to funding, this particular VIC received a grant from the municipality; and the amount thereof could not be disclosed. There was a consistent expenditure of R0.5 million from the years 2014 to 2016. While these findings could not be applied across all Gauteng VICs, they may be indicative of the situation of all other VICs with regard to funding for their operations. From the above information, it is evident that most of the VICs declined to provide their budgets; and therefore, a holistic picture on how most of the VICs are funded could not be established. Therefore, the information gathered in this part of the questionnaire may not be reflective of the Gauteng VICs; and therefore, it needs to be treated with caution.

With respect to how the income indicated above was spent, the KIR indicated that of the R0.5 million received, R0,11 million is spent on consumables (toner, stationery); whilst R0,39 million was spent on marketing material, which included CDs, maps and brochures. The KIR clearly indicated that the R0.5 million does not include VIC staff salaries, stock for sale, equipment and insurance. For this particular VIC, it can therefore be concluded that the VIC is inadequately financed. This is substantiated by the fact that salaries, which from the literature review constitute the largest chunk of VIC expenditure, were covered by the municipality.

From the limited data from one of the Gauteng VICs, two important observations are apparent. First, this particular VIC did not have alternative income apart from the grant from the municipality. Secondly, the VIC's marketing efforts appear to be predominantly traditional, characterised by printed maps, brochures and face-to-face communication. This could be stifling the VICs capacity to embrace ICTs and other online platforms to market their destination.

From the Ipswich and I-SITEs case studies reviewed in Chapters 2 and 3, there is a growing trend among VICs to generate income. Despite the general consensus that VICs do not generate income for themselves, some VICs are generating limited revenues to help offset expenses. The literature has discussed various factors influencing the VICs' ability to generate income; and these include location, income streams and the amount of products, amongst others. In spite of all these potential income streams, indications are that Gauteng VICs are poorly financed; and they do not have any initiatives underway to generate further income.

KIS – Q 2.5a; SRO 3(iv)

With regard to making the VICs self-sustaining financially, KIRs were evenly split with four KIRs agreeing that they have initiatives underway to make VICs self-supporting; while another four indicated that they do not have any efforts to make their VIC self-supporting. While it was difficult to draw conclusions from this data, most of the extant literature points to additional revenue streams. It is also observed that the ability of VICs to generate their own income is influenced by the flexibility they are given by their owners, their location, the amount of products and the opportunities available for income generation.

However, individual VICs may need to identify more opportunities for generating income and cost-saving measures, such as co-location and delivering value-added services, such as interpretation in respect of sensitive attractions. There is another view from research that pursuing income-generating activities would detract VICs from their core function of information dissemination. In this light, Deery *et al* (2007) recommend that VICs should strike a correct balance between their core functions and revenue generation.

KIS – Q 2.5b; SRO 3(iv)

Of the VICs, which indicated that they have efforts underway to make their VICs self-supporting, they were requested to specify the initiatives which they were pursuing. Three out of the four KIRs mentioned a subscription scheme, which they are proposing, in order to raise extra income. Only one KIR mentioned fundraising, without specifying the exact activities in which the VIC would need to engage. It is interesting to find that some of the activities identified by the KIRs are consistent with those in the literature. While limited options have been identified by the KIRs, literature has identified several options, which include interpretation in respect of sensitive attractions, seeking donations, online booking services (which are popular with Australian VICs), ticket sales for events, arranging for conferences and the sale of packaged attractions or holidays (Sherfield, 2002; Tourism & Events Queensland, 2013b). These fundraising opportunities are based on the premise that the VICs would bring value to the targeted clientele, in order to derive the desired revenue.

In **summary to Section 5.17**, it is evident that funding for Gauteng VICs is not very strong. Several VICs could not present their source of funding. Despite the lack of this comprehensive information, the study found that most of the VICs' finances are inadequate, which has largely affected service delivery, particularly on information dissemination, the capacity to modernise their operations, ICT adoption and usage, and offering training. It was also determined that most of the VICs do not have income-generating

streams, which could subsidise their expenses, thus making the situation worse. The next section presents the current situation of VICs with regard to accreditation, as the second theme in the operation of successful VICs, from the perspective of the KIRs.

5.18 ACCREDITATION AND VISITOR INFORMATION NETWORKS

KIS – Q 3.1; SRO 3(v)

The previous section addressed funding for VIC operations, in as much as it affects service delivery within VICs. This section explores accreditation and visitor-information networks; and how Gauteng VICs connect with each other, to ensure uniform service delivery. Question 3.1 asked KIRs to indicate how they contact staff from other VICs. KIRs were requested to choose from the given options namely: ‘do not contact them’, ‘daily’, ‘once a week’, ‘monthly’, ‘quarterly’, ‘annually’, ‘irregularly’ and ‘do not know’. The reponses are presented in Figure 5.27.

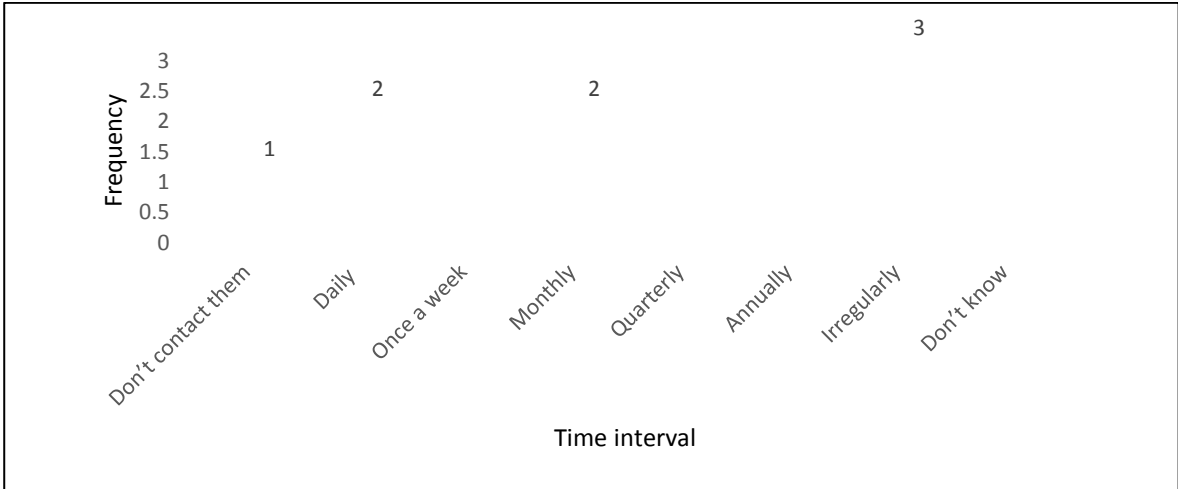


Figure 5.27 Frequency of contacting other VIC staff

There is currently a low level of interaction between VICs. Three KIRs indicated that they contact the other staff irregularly; while the other four were evenly split, with two making the contact daily, and another two making the contact monthly. Only one KIR indicated that they do not contact staff in other VICs.

KIS – Q 3.3; SRO 3(v)

Question 3.3 in the KIS asked KIRs how the contact was made. Figure 5.28 presents the findings. Almost all the communication that takes place is through e-mail, followed by landline and cellphone. This further confirms a wider use of traditional platforms for communication within VICs.

5.18.1 ICT platforms used to contact other staff

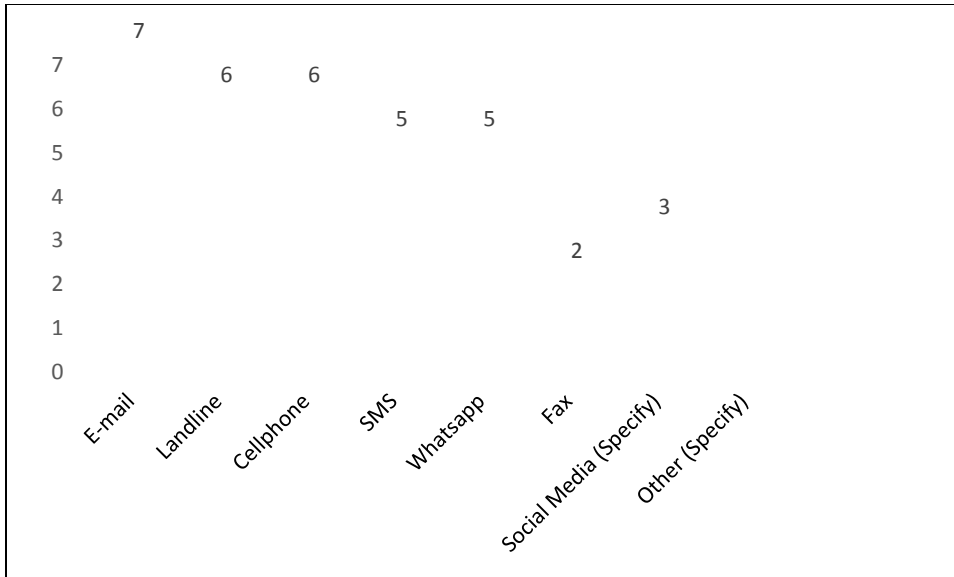


Figure 5.28 Staff's use of web and ICTs for communication

From 5.28 above, the majority (7 out of 8) of KIRs used e-mail to contact staff, followed by the landline and the cellphone, which recorded six out of eight, respectively. Five indicated that they usually contact other staff using SMS's and WhatsApp's, respectively. Two indicated that they use faxes and three use social media. No KIR indicated any other applications, besides those identified previously. They could have felt that the list provided was comprehensive enough. Perhaps the use of ICTs is relatively new to the KIRs; and therefore, they may not have extensively embraced them in their operations.

From the responses gathered from the KIRs, it was observed that a lot of the staff predominantly make use of traditional communication methods, which are e-mail and landline. Perhaps these are the only platforms available for use within the VICs. From this observation, one can, therefore, conclude that the VIC staff in Gauteng Province have not yet embraced modern collaborative ICTs for communication.

This finding underpins the assertion by Deery *et al* (2007) and Mistilis and D'ambra (2008), who indicated that VICs make contact with visitors and other staff, predominantly by using traditional methods, such as brochures, landline and face-to-face communication. This could be regarded as consistent with the VIC traditional role of disseminating information and resolving the information requirements of their clientele. Despite this finding being consistent with previous studies, more recent studies in VICs, particularly on ICTs, point to interactive and collaborative platforms, where visitors are not only consumers, but also producers of the information; and as such, they are now regarded as 'prosumers'. Precisely, and whatever the reason, Gauteng VICs are predominantly using traditional methods for

communication. These may be regarded as being out-of-touch with the modern and technologically savvy visitor.

It is not evident whether the communication is province-wide, which may result in lack of consistency in the information provided. This may suggest that VICs are operating in isolation; and therefore, there may be considerable variation of information and services offered by Gauteng VICs. There was an observation that contact between VICs was not done consistently at regular intervals by the majority of the KIRs respondents. Previous research indicates that visitors do not only seek information about the local area, but also that of adjacent regions (Ballantyne & Hughes, 2004).

This lack of consistent communication across the province could present a challenge to provincial tourism managers; as the province could be inconsistently promoted by various VICs. This presents a challenge to management, who should ensure consistent communication across VICs in the promotion of their destination, as well as improvement of the visitors' experience. While interaction between centres is very low, there is keen interest among other staff to find out how VICs close-by are managing their operations which seems to suggest that a network can thrive, which could help to share best practices, challenges and information for the benefit of visitors.

5.18.2 Reasons for contacting staff in other VICs

KIS – Q 3.2; SRO 3(v)

Question 3.2 asked the KIRs to state the purpose for contacting staff in other VICs. The researcher conducted a thematic content analysis and identified three themes as presented in Figure 5.29. The themes are discussed in turn following Figure 5.29.

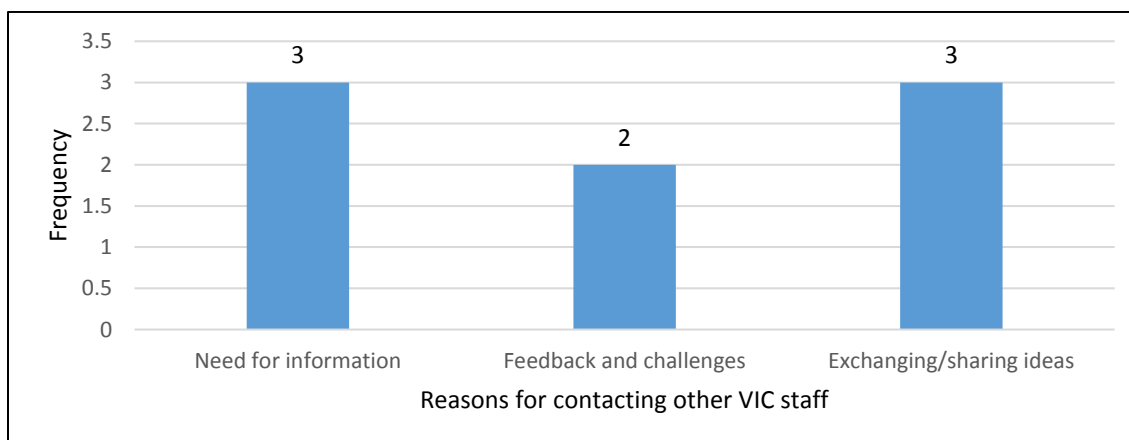


Figure 5.29 Reasons for contacting other VIC staff

5.18.2.1 Need for information

Three of the eight KIRs mentioned the need for information, including information on attractions in the region close-by. KIR 2 stated that he wanted *“information on attractions”*. This finding is consistent with the literature, which emphasised that VICs should have networks, where they exchange pertinent information regarding destinations. This ensures cross-selling and consistent messaging across the destination. What is of interest is the fact that, there is some kind of information exchange amongst certain VICs in Gauteng, which is one of the minimum expectations for accreditation. The other two KIRs mentioned that they would be requesting brochures from the adjoining region. This finding suggests some form of cross-marketing between the VICs.

5.18.2.2 Exchanging/Sharing ideas

Three KIRs indicated that they contact each other, in order to share ideas. In terms of accreditation, it is a widely held view that information and ideas should be shared amongst VICs in a network, in order to ensure the consistency of services across the network. While the extent and frequency with which ideas are shared was inconsistent, it is interesting to note that there is a somewhat limited sharing of ideas among certain VIC staff in the province.

5.18.2.3 Feedback and challenges

One of the reasons why VIC staff contact each other was to get feedback and to discuss any challenges. The examples from KIR 4 and KIR 5 follow:

SR 4: *“To check on the operations and receive feedback on challenges that might have been encountered.”*

SR 5: *“To discuss issues and share challenges,”*

KIRs 1 and 3 noted the salient features typical of VICs in a network. They both pointed to advertising events, inviting tours and joint ventures in relation to hosting visitors. It has been acknowledged that VICs should seek to have a network, from which they could cross-sell products; and where possible promote products in the adjoining region, in order to ensure a seamless service to the potential visitors. The finding that some KIRs contacted other staff from other VICs with regard to tours and joint ventures is consistent with the literature. It is therefore reassuring to note that VICs are seeking to add value to both their respective regions and adjoining regions. The next section explores how the contact is made.

5.18.3 Managing connections among VICs

KIS – Q 3.4a; SRO 3(v)

Question 3.2a asked KIRs what they had done to maintain a sense of connection with other VICs. The researcher conducted a thematic analysis of the responses and identified three themes, namely: attending meetings, joint familiarisation tours, and constant telephone and social media chats. These responses are presented in Figure 5.30.

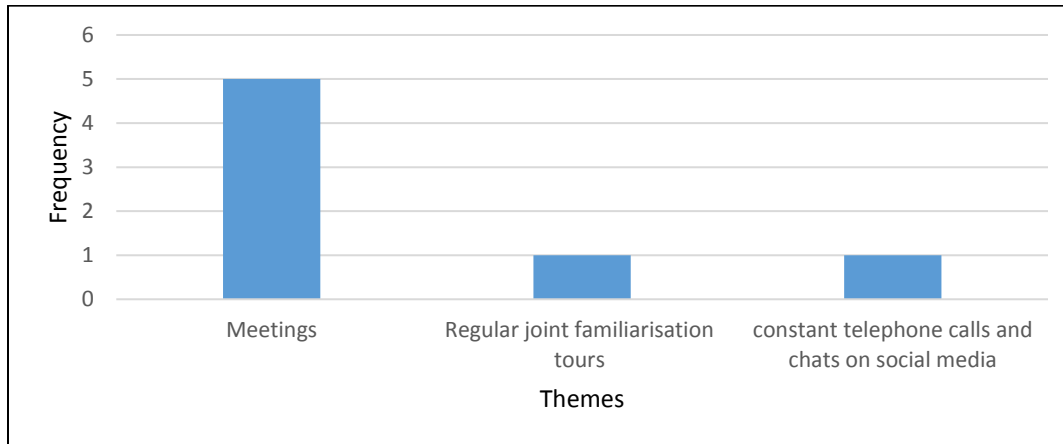


Figure 5.30 Strategies to maintain a sense of connection with other VICs

Five KIRs indicated that they attend **regular meetings**, where they update each other. The following excerpts from the KIR surveys confirm this finding:

KIR 1: *“Attend general and stakeholder meetings.”*

KIR 2: *“We attend general managers’ forums.”*

KIR 3: *“We conduct regular meetings.”*

KIR 4: *“We conduct monthly meetings.”*

The meetings are one of the major instruments used by KIRs to maintain a sense of connection with other VICs. This finding underscores the discussion in the literature that networks are valuable elements in the information-exchange process at all levels. To this end, VICs need to be in constant touch with one another, in order to share information, which could improve visitors’ experience, both in the current and adjoining regions (Deery *et al*, 2007).

Two KIRs identified **joint familiarisation tours** with other VIC staff and the service providers. While Ballantyne *et al* (2009) and Deery *et al* (2007) identified regular familiarisation tours, as a means of training to up-skill the VIC staff; the current study suggests that regular familiarisation could also add to

maintaining contact between the stakeholders, particularly when they are jointly-hosted. This is an interesting finding.

Only one KIR indicated that he maintains a sense of connection with other VIC staff through constant **telephone calls and regular chats on social media**. The following excerpt expresses this finding:

KIR 6: *“through regular calls and chats on social media.”*

KIR 5 also indicated engagement with other colleagues at meetings. This alludes to some effort being made from managers to engage with each other. It is also important to further note that the use of social media, particularly in VICs, has been regarded as significantly shaping the nature of information dissemination. While this has been the narrative from the literature, evidence from the current study indicates a low uptake of these platforms by managers in Gauteng VICs. In cases where a VIC belongs to a network of VICs, attending a conference is one method mentioned in literature, used to maintain a sense of connection, from which the VIC reaffirms its position in the distribution network, shares ideas and connects with other VICs (Deery *et al*, 2007; Tourism & Events Queensland, 2013b).

In the current study, evidence of a network amongst Gauteng VICs does not emerge clearly; and there is no mention of attending scheduled conferences. This does not align with global cases cited in the literature, where the VICs belonging to a network are required to attend conferences, as part of their accreditation. For example, in the i-SITEs network in New Zealand (Section 3.4.4.1), conference attendance is not only regarded as an affirmation of their position in the distribution network, but also as a part of their regular training for i-SITEs managers, which is crucial for maintaining standards within respective VICs. The findings also indicated very few examples of contact between staff in the various VICs. The next section explores what KIRs have done to improve a sense of connection with other VICs.

5.18.4 Strategies to improve connections with other Gauteng VICs

KIS – Q 3.4b; SRO 3(v)

Question 3.4 asked KIRs to state what they had done to improve their sense of connection with other VICs. Five KIRs responded to the question; and the majority interpreted the question as being similar to the previous Question 3.4a (requesting what they had done to maintain a sense of connection with other VICs). KIR 1, however, mentioned that *“I added myself to a database, where we communicate ... to ensure that we cross-sell each other’s destinations”*. This response indicates an effort by the manager to improve on the current status.

5.18.5 Accreditation of Gauteng VICs

KIS – Q 3.5a, 3.5b; SRO 3(v)

Question 3.5a asked KIRs to respond ‘yes’ or ‘no’ if their VIC was accredited by a recognised tourism board, association, agency, or structure. The responses are presented in Figure 5.31.

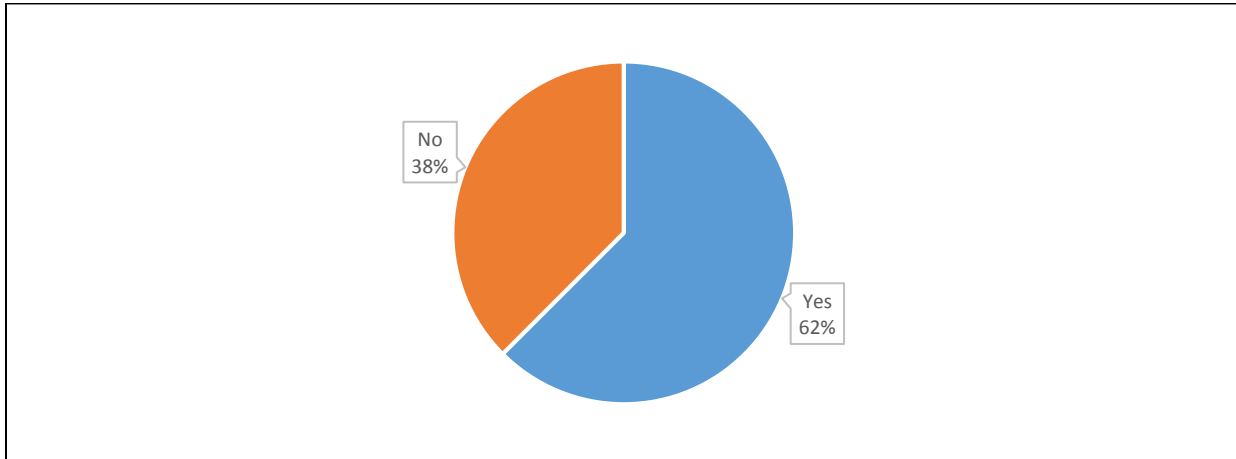


Figure 5.31 The proportion of accredited VICs

Five VICs claimed that they are accredited; while the minority (three) indicated that they do not have any accreditation. Secondly, KIRs who had answered ‘yes’ or ‘no’ were asked ‘What type of accreditation do you have?’

Only two KIRs indicated that they had accreditation from the Gauteng Tourism Authority; while the others had accreditation from the National Department of Tourism. The other four indicated that they do not have any accreditation; whilst the remaining two stated that they are registered with the National Department of Tourism. Overall, there is lack of evidence to indicate the presence of a thriving VIC network in the province.

For a network to thrive, there is a need for strong leadership – both at the national level and at the state or provincial level – to provide direction. The majority indicated that they are affiliated with the National Department of Tourism, which is a vantage point, from which to pilot a successful VIC network.

5.18.6 The contribution of accreditation in improving standards

KIS – 3.5c; SRO 3(v)

Question 3.5c asked KIRs to state how accreditation has helped their VICs to maintain standards. The researcher conducted a thematic analysis and the resultant themes are presented in Figure 5.32. Each of these themes are then briefly discussed.

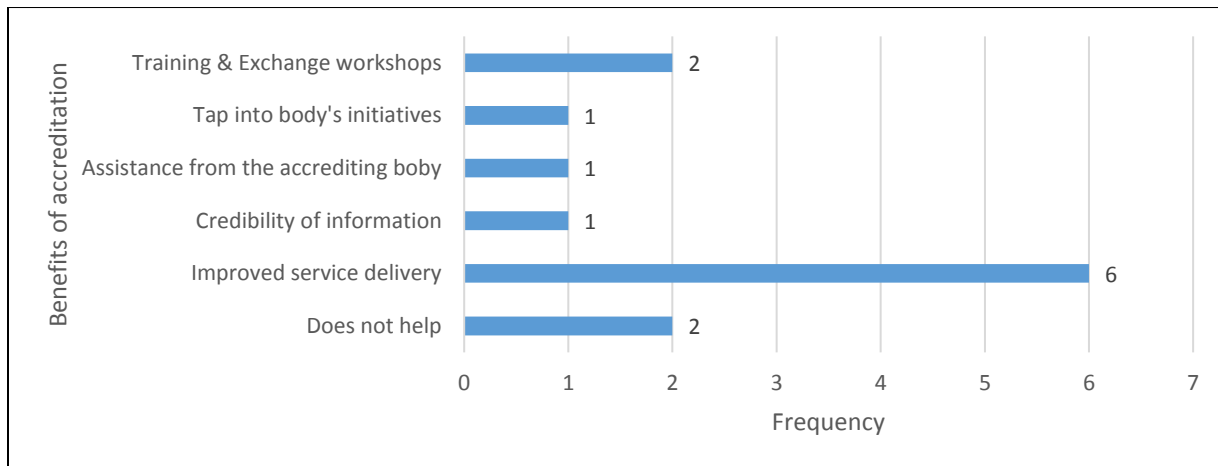


Figure 5.32 The contribution of accreditation in maintaining standards

Two KIRs indicated that accreditation **does not help** them in maintaining standards especially when it is not attached to any funding.

Six KIRs stated the benefits of accreditation, as presented above. Three quarters of the KIRs indicated that accreditation helps them **to improve their service delivery**. KIR 3, stated that *“we are able to tap into the initiatives these accrediting body involves themselves in”*. The initiatives identified were **training and exchange workshops**, which assist them in improving service delivery. Besides benefiting from these initiatives, the other theme identified was the **credibility of the information**, which they provide to visitors. The responses align with previous research, that accreditation helps in fostering high standards in the provision of information to visitors, sharing ideas and ensuring best standards among VICs (Ballantyne & Hughes, 2004; Hobbin, 1999; Tourism & Events Queensland, 2013b).

KIR 2 stated that accreditation helps them **to get assistance from the accrediting body**. While the type of assistance was not stated by KIR 2, literature underscores the importance of accreditation, with regard to marketing, scheduled training and periodic audits to check compliance, which accrues as a result of affiliating with the accrediting board (Section 3.6.3.2).

While encouraging practices and benefits have already been outlined, the major challenge highlighted is the lack of a funding arrangement underpinning the accreditation. In general, the results indicate that the accreditation of VICs has been viewed as a positive factor that contributes to the maintenance of minimum standards in the provision of information.

5.18.7 Future benefits of accreditation

KIS – Q 3.5d; SRO 3(v)

Question 3.5d asked KIRs if they thought that accreditation would help them in the future. A thematic content analysis was conducted and three themes were identified. These are presented in Figure 5.33 and are then discussed.

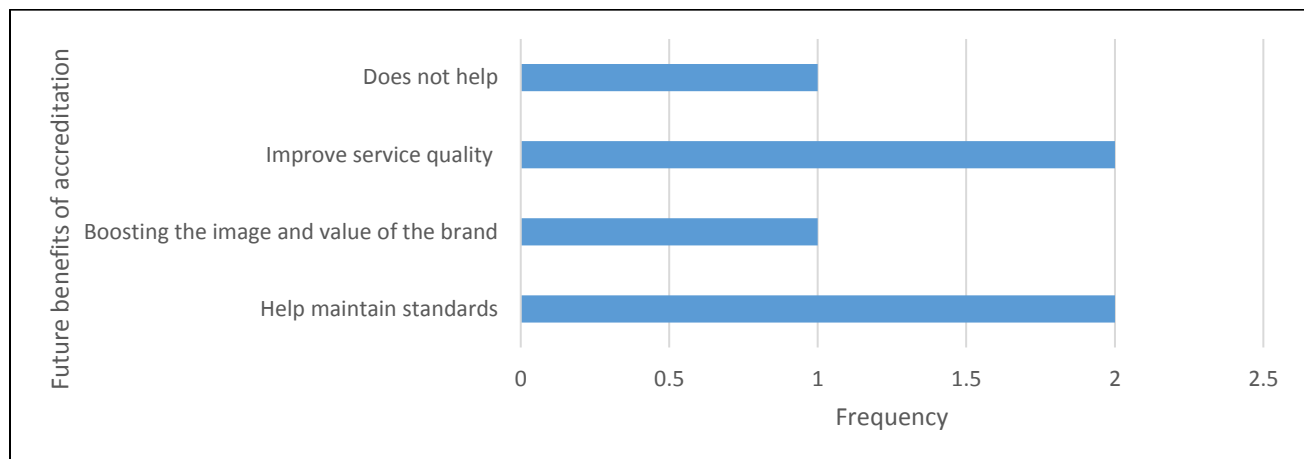


Figure 5.33 Future benefits of accreditation

The responses elicited indicated mixed opinions from the KIRs. Five KIRs stated unanimously that it brings positive benefits. The following excerpts extracted from the KIRs outline some of the benefits:

KIR 2: “... *boosting the image and adding value to the brand.*”

KIR 3: “... *could help to improve service quality.*”

KIR 4: “... *could help in bringing and maintaining standards at the same level, as other VICs of the same accreditation nationwide.*”

From the submissions above, it may be concluded that the majority of KIRs acknowledge the benefits of accreditation. Two KIRs mentioned that accreditation will help them **maintain standards** within their VICs; whilst another two indicated that it will help them to **improve service quality**. Only one KIR mentioned that accreditation **boosts the image and the value of the brand**. Those that had previously indicated negative sentiments on the benefits of accreditation continued to hold these opinions. They

indicated that accreditation would help; but it is not fundamental, unless it is coupled with a funding model. KIR 7 stated that accreditation will “...*help if coupled with a funding model*”. Seemingly, the most significant factor, which is crucial underpinning all the operations of the VICs, is funding.

There is evidence relating to the fact that most of the VICs are underfunded; and hence, they are not able to execute their duties to the best of their ability. Only one KIR indicated that they would reap the benefits of accreditation when the VIC is fully fledged to provide the basic VIC functions.

All the KIRs provided their opinions, which were cross-cutting and in several instances had converging opinions. It is important to note that most of the manifest themes from this question tended to be consistent with the literature; and in the main consistent with the findings discussed earlier. The general opinion coming from the findings presented above is that accreditation is of help to VICs. In order for this to be of the greatest benefit, accreditation should be coupled with a funding mechanism, which enable VICs to meet the accreditation requirements.

In summary to Section 5.18, there is limited evidence to confirm the existence of an active network among Gauteng VICs. The results indicate that communication which can be used to sustain a thriving network is done inconsistently with other VICs not involved. The communication is usually done using traditional methods through e-mail or over the telephone. There is no sustained sense of connection among VICs either through ICTs, workshops, meetings or familiarisation tours. It appears that VICs affiliated to the National Department of Tourism regard this affiliation as accreditation, which could be misleading. There is an appreciation of accreditation among KIRs and it is well received when tied to a funding mechanism. The next section explores the recommendations from the KIRs which can improve the performance of VICs in Gauteng. This forms the third and final theme in Part 2.

5.19 IMPROVING THE PERFORMANCE OF GAUTENG VISITOR INFORMATION CENTRES: PERSPECTIVES OF KIRs

KIS – Q 3.6; SRO 3(i) to 3(v)

Question 3.6 on the KIS asked KIRs to express their views on what improvements are required to improve the performance of VICs in Gauteng Province. The question was open-ended. The responses were analysed in a qualitative manner, by identifying the main themes through content analysis. A summary of the responses partly answers SRO 3, and the Primary research objective for this research. The themes are presented in Figure 5.34 and are then discussed.

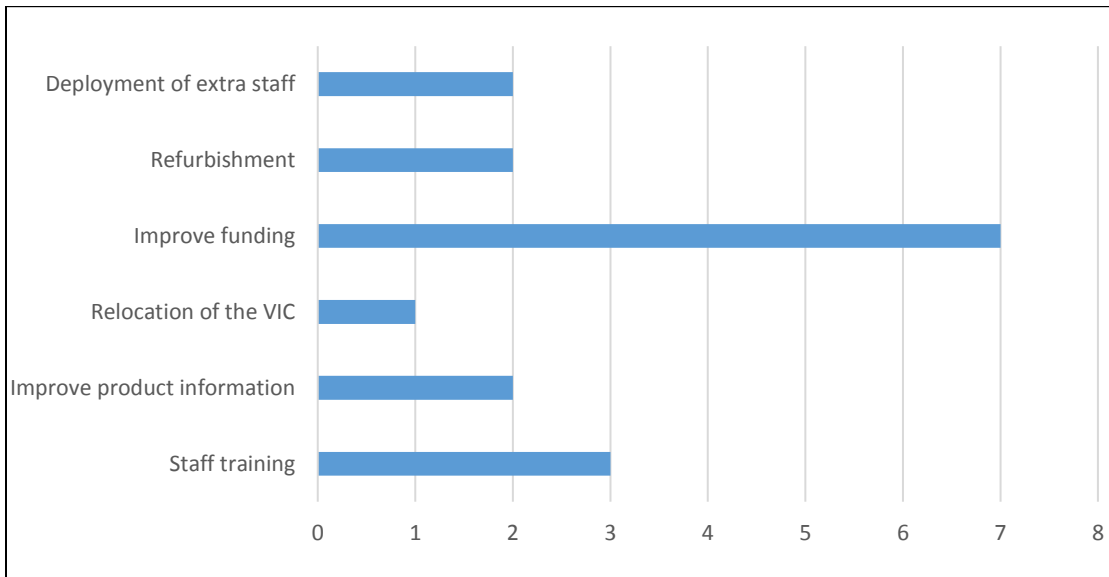


Figure 5.34 Best practice strategies to improve the operation of Gauteng VICs

The responses converged on ICTs uptake and usage, VIC staff training, improving product information, funding and accreditation. Divergent comments and opinions from some of the KIRs focused on the relocation and the refurbishment of the VICs, the deployment of extra staff, such as tourism monitors and the acquisition of memorabilia (destination branded products such as cups, jackets and hats).

The most recurrent theme in improving the operation of VICs was **funding**. Seven KIRs mentioned funding as one the most important factors which need improvement. The lack of adequate funding for VICs had knock-on effects on the uptake and the usage of new ICTs within Gauteng VICs. The excerpts from KIRs provide examples:

KIR 2: “...need for...funding....”

KIR 3: “...need for local regional and national funding.”

KIR 4: “We need funding for upgrading...”

The above excerpts strengthen the fact that funding is one of the critical factors in the improvement of VICs, to meet visitors’ expectations. This finding aligns with earlier studies in VICs (Mistilis & Gretzel, 2014a; Tourism & Events Queensland, 2013a) and with the staff responses, which identified that most of the VICs are underfunded. To cover this gap, some VICs, especially those in developed nations, have resorted to business models, which enable them to raise additional revenue.

Besides the themes that were discussed previously, a number of factors were raised by some KIRs. Some of the KIRs suggested **changing the current location** and **refurbishing the VIC**, to enable them to meet visitors' expectations. KIR 2 stated the following:

KIR 2: "Most importantly, the positioning has to be done right (have the VIC positioned in locations where most of the tourist traffic is). Currently, our VICs are based in buildings owned by the municipality, in order to avoid rental costs."

Refurbishment of the VICs was also underlined by KIR 3. In terms of refurbishment, KIR 3 stated that *"...infrastructural improvement is critical to bring our VICs and services we offer up-to-standard"*.

From these excerpts, two important factors are clear. Location and design of the VICs become important factors to consider, when planning to establish or relocating a VIC (Draper, 2016, Tourism & Events Queensland, 2013b). While this is acknowledged in the literature – that relocation could improve the effectiveness of VICs – this study aimed to consider internal efficiency closely.

While the divergent comments mainly focused on themes beyond the limits of the current study, future studies could consider more themes, in order to holistically improve both the supply side and the demand side variables, particularly incorporating location, refurbishments and design.

Other KIRs' opinions pointed out that there was a need, not only to **deploy extra staff** to the VICs, but also within the destination as a whole, in the form of tourism monitors to ensure safety and best experience for the tourists. KIR 4 underlined the need for **staff training** in order to improve service delivery, particularly in information dissemination and product knowledge. One KIR mentioned the need to **improve product information** among staff which is achieved through training.

5.20 CONCLUSION TO PART 2

Part 2 of this chapter has reported the main findings from eight KIRs, who are the managers of the VICs under study. The findings presented the results of the current state of Gauteng VICs. It is evident that most of the VICs are funded by the local municipalities and provincial governments (only two VICs are funded by the Gauteng Tourism Authority). Only one VIC claimed to be under the Local Chamber of Business and Commerce. No VIC was funded by the National Department of Tourism. The results mainly focused on the two themes of funding of VIC operations and accreditation and visitor information networks, which were directed to the key informants, due to the nature of the information required. Part 2 also briefly covered a third theme, namely general views on improving VIC performance.

A major finding, which characterised the current state of VICs in Gauteng Province, was that most Gauteng VICs are inadequately financed. This has knock-on effects on the operations of the VICs in terms of staff development, service delivery and accreditation and visitor information networks. KIRs identified a number of ICTs, which could be utilised within VICs to improve the service delivery. It appears that these ICTs have not been widely embraced by most of the VICs, which are still reliant on the traditional platforms for communication, namely landline, e-mail and face-to-face communication. While there was an appreciation of the contribution of new ICTs, particularly collaborative technology in improving service delivery, these platforms have not been widely adopted. Further findings indicate that service delivery, particularly uptake and the use of ICTs, is generally limited due to inadequate finance. It appears that most of the VICs are not accredited by a recognised body; and this culminated in varied service levels among Gauteng VICs. There is no evidence of a thriving network among Gauteng VICs. Most of the managers showed an appreciation of the benefits of ICTs, accreditation and VIC networks, both currently and in the future, there is limited adoption and uptake, largely due to inadequate budgets. The final part of Chapter 5, Part 3, presents the best practice framework for Gauteng VICs.

PART 3

BEST PRACTICE FRAMEWORK FOR GAUTENG VISITOR INFORMATION CENTRES

5.21 INTRODUCTION TO BEST PRACTICE FRAMEWORK FOR GAUTENG VISITOR INFORMATION CENTRES

The best practice framework identified and developed innovative approaches to support Gauteng VICs in improving quality and effectiveness for visitors. In developing this best practice framework, the researcher started with a literature review, case studies and examples on VICs globally, to provide a best practice evidence base. This literature provided a benchmark and informed the empirical part of the study, which consisted of two custom-designed research instruments used to gather primary data. Data was gathered from VIC staff and management to understand the current situation in Gauteng VICs. The findings are presented in Chapter 5, with brief summaries following each major section in Parts 1 and 2. These findings were compared with the literature and recommendations were provided by the researcher. Therefore, the best practice framework is a culmination of three pertinent aspects, namely:

- Summaries which are presented after each major section in Parts 1 and 2 of Chapter 5. The summaries reflect the major findings from staff and key informant respondents.
- The best practice literature, examples and case studies as per Chapters 2 and 3.
- Recommendations by the researcher based on the findings.

The best practice framework for Gauteng VICs is presented in Figure 5.35. It is structured hierarchically over four areas of which Gauteng VICs should aim to achieve. These areas emerged strongly from this research and formed part of the secondary research objectives namely:

1. Information dissemination and the equipping of staff;
2. Technology adoption and usage;
3. Funding for VIC operations; and
4. Accreditation and visitor information networks.

For the purposes of a concise best practice framework, the 'Functions of VICs' are integrated within these four areas due to the overlap between them. Under each area are key themes and strategies that need to be implemented to improve the effectiveness of Gauteng VICs. Each of these are briefly explained in

the sections that follow, and include, implementation actions that should be followed to operationalise this framework.

The best practice framework will directly benefit the work of the existing and future VICs by exposing them to best practices globally, and enabling them to implement best practice strategies in various destinations. Furthermore, the framework provides a documented guide for the National Department of Tourism, Gauteng Tourism Authority and VIC management which could assist in ensuring a consistent approach to service delivery. It provides a yardstick for VICs in South Africa, particularly those in Gauteng Province, to assess their service levels and methods to enable continual service improvement. Most importantly, the framework provides locally targeted approaches that can inform practice and service improvement.

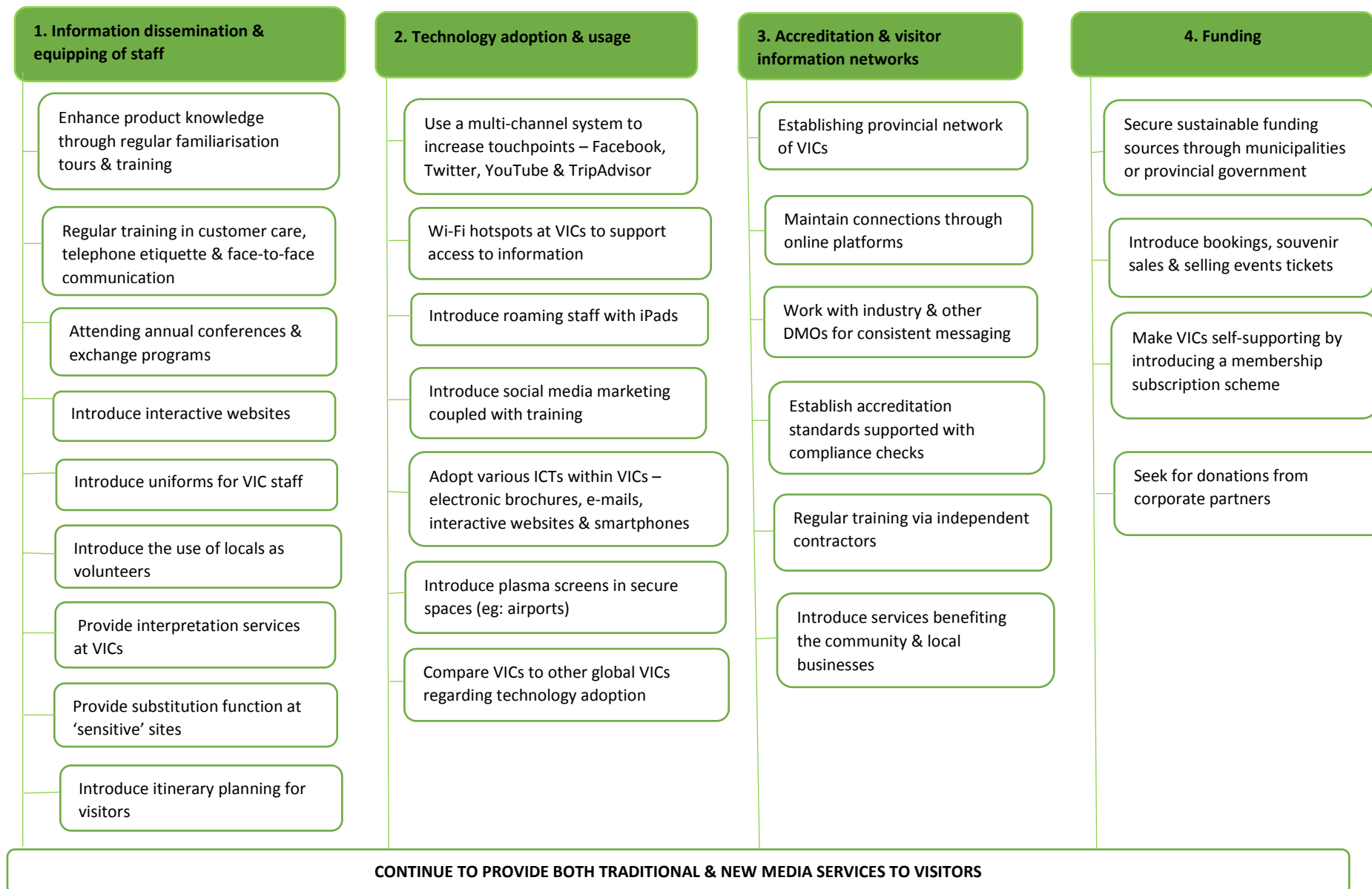


Figure 5.35: Best practice framework for Gauteng VICs

The key areas are presented next starting with Column 1, which focuses on information dissemination and equipping of staff. The actions which need to be implemented are presented within each section.

5.21.1 Information dissemination and equipping of staff

In respect of information dissemination and equipping of staff, Gauteng VICs need to improve staff **product knowledge through training and regular familiarisation tours**. This training should also cover **customer care, telephone etiquette** and **product knowledge**. Gauteng VICs should also attend important conferences such as the Tourism Indaba where they can exchange ideas.

VIC staff do not only need to be familiar with the information and services provided in their destination; but they should also visit the attractions, and events in other tourism regions close by. These **familiarisation trips** could enable staff to effectively provide in-depth information and recommendations.

Gauteng VICs need to develop their **own interactive websites** to disseminate tourism information. Interactive websites do not only inform visitors about the destination offerings; but also educate them on how to optimise their experiences. Well-customised websites would enable visitors to access information on the region easily and will assist visitors in developing their itineraries.

Gauteng VICs need to launch a **volunteer program where locals from** the community work as volunteers at local VICs. This encourages support from the community as well as optimises visitors' experience at the destination as a result of increased human contact. VIC management could provide **uniforms** to provide a professional look for the staff.

Another essential function, which Gauteng VICs may consider, is the offering of **interpretation** at their VICs. It is a widely adopted practice as it increases the involvement of visitors within the destination; and it provides a more memorable experience as well as protecting visitors against on-site hazards. Interpretation is an effective marketing practice for regions given the heightened involvement of visitors. It also shows commitment and passion to the development of tourism.

For VICs which are close to 'sensitive sites', they need to provide **substitution** for actual site visits to protect the resource. This is beneficial to the destination, as well as the VIC.

VICs in Gauteng should consider **itinerary planning** for visitors. This enables VICs to effectively influence visitors' plans, length of stay and expenditure particularly for those with loosely planned itineraries.

These will help to outline the diversity of the destination thereby providing a clear experiential visit for the customer. This function would not only benefit the VICs but also the destination as a whole.

5.21.2 Technology adoption and use within VICs

Column 2 focuses on the adoption and use of technology within Gauteng VICs. The increase of ICTs, and the digitisation of tourism information has resulted in a number of touchpoints, and several sources of information are readily available to visitors. These touchpoints could be used by potential visitors to customise their travel.

It is recommended that Gauteng VICs adopt a **multi-channel system**, which would enable VICs to engage with all visitors on all touchpoints. The multi-channel system would need to include **online systems, person-to-person contact, and roaming ambassadors**. In respect of online systems, VICs need to focus their attention on **multi-channel systems used by the visitors**. VICs need to adopt **various ICTs** which include electronic brochures and local radio stations. This would ensure that VIC services and products would be meeting the changing needs of the visitor. It is envisaged that a greater number visitors will be helped in virtual sphere than face-to-face.

More importantly, VICs need to be aware of the online-usage behaviours of the most dominant markets to their destinations. One of the emerging best practices is to **investigate how other destinations are using and embracing technology** to further the services offered at VICs, and how they are meeting visitors' current demands. Monitoring trends from other jurisdictions can assist VIC management in adjusting their approaches according to consumer behaviour, as well as to better manage their own operations. Notable developments include **wandering travel counsellors equipped with i-pads**, who go out to offer on-the-spot counselling on the streets with high footfall. Gauteng VIC managers would need to consider going out to provide information, rather than waiting in their offices.

Gauteng VICs should consider engaging on **social media** extensively at all stages of the visitor journey. Policy changes have to be undertaken within the VICs to allow staff in contact with visitors to be active on social media, as part of their responsibility, so that personalised and trusted information can be provided to visitors for their trip planning. Engaging with visitors consistently in a timely manner on various social media platforms and devices adds to the competitiveness of the destination and contributes to developing a destination image which is desired.

In respect of social media, VIC management need to **embrace various social media platforms**, such as TripAdvisor, Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp. Maintenance of social media sites is of importance in

business management and success. It is argued that tourism organisations that do not adopt social media lack competitive advantage. In this light, Gauteng VIC management are advised to utilise all the social media platforms at their disposal. This could be leveraged by **empowering staff through training**. The training needs to specifically focus on online engagements with potential tourists, as well as online marketing and information dissemination. Social media marketing is based on real time conversations and therefore, VICs should utilise these platforms to be successful in meeting visitors' expectations.

VICs may also need to consider the installation of **high definition TV screens in the VICs**, which staff can use to interact with the visitors. These can also be used in more secure places, such as at the airports. VICs could sell advertising space on these screens, which would then contribute to the generation of extra revenue.

Free Wi-Fi at VICs is emerging as one of the requested services by the travelling public, which Gauteng VICs need to provide. This improves destination accessibility; and increases the satisfaction of the visitors when they navigate their electronic devices for free. Within their centres, VIC management need to provide computer access to visitors, where the VIC staff could be on standby to assist.

Gauteng VIC management need to develop their own **interactive websites**. Functional VIC websites are essential in attracting visitors to the area, especially when they are linked to various social media platforms, where staff can engage with visitors. These websites can be made **transactional where** visitors can purchase services online.

5.21.3 Accreditation and visitor information networks

Column 3 focuses on the accreditation of VICs and visitor information networks to improve VIC effectiveness. In this respect, there is a need for a provincial approach to the provision of tourism information. A **provincial network of VICs** needs to be established which guides the implementation of standards and assists in co-ordinating the efforts of each of the VICs within the province. This can be established as a VIC incorporated body under the GTA or as an association of VICs under Gauteng Province. Funding could be partly from GTA, a grant from the National Department of Tourism and subscriptions from individual VICs. This organisation would be responsible for establishing the minimum standards of information provision, and to acknowledge genuine VICs. All genuine VICs throughout Gauteng Province which comply with these standards could then be registered and accredited.

The network needs to have common characteristics, such as defined roles for VICs, consistent, high-quality audits for VICs, defined training schedules for managers and staff and scheduled monitoring of VIC services, in order to build capacity and develop capabilities.

The leadership should be capacitated to ensure **compliance and reviewing the standards** to ensure that they align with current consumer trends. This would ensure uniform and minimum standards to be maintained across the province. In cases where there are skills gaps, the network could be mandated and capacitated to develop relevant training material and render it to Gauteng VIC staff, to ensure that the minimum standards are maintained. This would contribute not only to the development of skills; but it would also provide career opportunities and allow for succession within the VICs. Some of the quintessential skills required in the operation of VICs are:

- product knowledge;
- customer services;
- information dissemination, with particular attention to use of ICTs and social-media skills; and
- telephone etiquette.

The network may require a limited staff complement, who would be responsible for the day-to-day operation of the society. This could be a manager and an administrative assistant; and where more services are required, these can be outsourced. For example, staff training, can be outsourced to an independent contractor. This would ensure the sustainability and the effectiveness of the network.

From the analysis of VICs from other jurisdictions, there is evidence that the broader the networks to which the organisation is affiliated, the more the experiences, competencies and opportunities it derives. This interaction should not only be between VICs but also with **industry and other DMOs**. This improves the image of the destination, thereby bringing more business to the destination.

The leadership should ensure that all the Gauteng VICs co-operate in tourism information dissemination, develop strong links among them, and share information regularly on the destination. Networking among the VICs is essential to enable a pro-active approach to advising the visitors on travel options and opportunities throughout the duration of their visit. Much of this **connection can be maintained via online platforms**. Such a regional approach provides a greater chance of visitor dispersal and increases visitors' length of stay.

VIC staff need to attend annual **conferences** in which the staff receive and exchange ideas with other VICs from their region, or an adjoining one.

In addition to the VIC traditional roles, Gauteng VICs extend their information networks and services to **cater for local businesses and the local community**. Gauteng VICs may provide meeting rooms for communities or provide information for new residents moving into the locality or city. This improve VICs' visibility, patronage and importance. This function would require implementation on a case-by-case basis, in the context of each VIC's operating environment, ownership and management structure. This would ensure that all the stakeholders are accommodated. In instances where VICs are owned by the local government, they can handle council enquires. In circumstances, where limited non-tourist functions are integrated, VICs could charge a nominal fee to offset their operating expenses.

5.21.4 Funding for VIC operations

Gauteng VICs need to **source secure, sustainable and diverse sources of funding** in order to meet visitors expectations. This is the focus of Column 4. VICs need to approach their respective municipal authorities for secure forms of funding. VICs also need to consider other revenue generating activities such as **selling events tickets, souvenirs and offering bookings** at a commission. The revenue generated can help VICs to offset some of their expenses.

Gauteng VICs also need to make their VICs self-supporting by introducing **membership subscription schemes** in return for marketing their businesses. VICs located within the airport could sell marketing space on their plasma screens, which would widen their financial base. Additionally, VICs may seek **donations from corporate partners** who have a passion for tourism in their local areas.

5.22 CONCLUSION TO PART 3

In summary, the best practice strategies for Gauteng VICs have been spread over four overarching areas namely information dissemination and equipping of staff; technology adoption and use; funding for VIC operations; and accreditation and visitor information networks. As Gauteng VICs aim to improve in these areas, the overall VIC effectiveness is assured. The notable finding from both staff and key informant respondents is that, VICs meet visitors' expectations via different channels: face-to-face, email and ICTs. Different channels are used by different visitors at different stages of the visitor journey. Therefore, face-to-face contact is still important, but it has to be utilised together with new media strategies in response to technologically savvy tourists. This approach ensures that the service quality and attention to the visitor is not lost. The best practice framework underpins an integrative approach in which the VICs need to continue to provide both traditional and new ICTs to visitors to enhance tourists' co-creation experiences and generate added value. This is indicated at the bottom of the framework, and runs across

all four columns. Doing this will provide competitive advantage for each VIC as a key touchpoint, as well as for Gauteng Province as a whole.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the conclusion and recommendations from the study as well as re-visiting the objectives. The primary research objective was to develop a best practice framework for VICs in Gauteng Province in order to improve the effectiveness of these VICs. To address the primary research objective, the following secondary research objectives were identified:

1. To conceptualise VICs within the context of the tourism industry;
2. To conduct a literature review and explore examples and case studies on the operation of successful VICs;
3. To ascertain the opinions of staff and managers through surveys on the current situation in Gauteng VICs, focusing on:
 - i. Functions of Gauteng VICs;
 - ii. Information dissemination and the equipping of staff;
 - iii. Technology adoption and usage;
 - iv. Funding for VIC operations; and
 - v. Accreditation and visitor information networks.
4. To compare practices in the operation of Gauteng VICs with the best practices internationally.

The secondary objectives identified above guided the study. The findings from this study were presented in Chapter 5. These findings are based on a sample of 25 VIC staff selected through a snowball sampling process (for the staff survey) and eight key informants selected via purposive sampling process (for the key informant survey). All the respondents were employed at the eight VICs, which were all registered on the National Department of Tourism website. The staff survey focused on three key areas namely functions of Gauteng VICs; information dissemination and equipping of staff; and technology adoption and usage within VICs. These areas aligned with Secondary Research Objectives 3(i), 3(ii) and 3(iii) respectively. The key informant survey focused on accreditation and visitor information networks and funding for VIC operations which aligned with Secondary Research Objectives 3(iv) and 3(v) respectively. All the surveys were informed by literature and aligned with secondary research objectives in order to make a contribution towards answering the primary research objective.

This chapter presents the pertinent conclusions based on the results in Chapter 5. The implications of the study to VIC management, provincial tourism and national tourism authorities are outlined. Limitations of the study and suggestions for future research are also presented. The summaries and conclusions follow the order of the objectives, as set out in Chapter 1.

6.2 SECONDARY RESEARCH OBJECTIVE 1: CONCEPTUALISATION OF VISITOR INFORMATION CENTRES IN THE TOURISM INDUSTRY

The first secondary research objective of this research was the conceptualisation of VICs in tourism. This was accomplished in Chapter 2 and Part 1 of the research findings. The literature and the findings both corroborated that VICs are still important features in the tourism industry. VICs were found to impact on the visitors' travel plans, the attractions to be visited, the length of stay and the amount of money to be spent at the destination. These impacts were directly linked to the functions of VICs, namely: tourism information and dissemination, marketing and the promotion of tourism attractions, and offering a face-to-face interface with the visitors. The quality of visitor information services provided at the VICs is essential in influencing the visitors' choice of attractions, length of stay and level of expenditure especially when the visitors are already at the destination.

6.3 SECONDARY RESEARCH OBJECTIVE 2: TO CONDUCT A LITERATURE REVIEW AND EXPLORE EXAMPLES AND CASE STUDIES ON THE OPERATION OF SUCCESSFUL VISITOR INFORMATION CENTRES

Secondary Research Objective 2 of this study was to conduct a literature review and explore examples and case studies on the operation of successful VICs. The literature identified a number of themes critical in the management of VICs internationally. These themes are: information dissemination and equipping of staff; technology uptake and usage; and accreditation and visitor-information networks.

In respect of information dissemination and equipping of staff, the nature of the staff employed in VICs (which included volunteers, permanent and part-time staff) were discussed. The use of locals as volunteers in VICs is one of the trends which is being adopted internationally. Critical skills which are considered salient for VIC staff in service delivery in VICs were explored, namely: customer service, information dissemination, face-to-face communication and telephone etiquette. It was established that most of the VICs send their staff for training in these areas as a measure to improve their effectiveness. Finally, literature underlined the importance of these traditional platforms within VICs, and emphasised

that they cannot be speedily and easily replaced by ICTs (Ballantyne *et al*, 2009; Wong & McKercher, 2011; Minghetti & Celotto, 2013). Therefore, VICs need to continue to provide these services at their centres.

With regard to technology uptake and the usage, some key areas were explored that influenced their use. The Bedard model (2008) was discussed, and it highlighted that technology adoption is determined by training and funding. The literature proceeded to critically review the existing and emerging technologies, which could be used in VICs to improve service delivery. The ICT platforms identified and discussed were collaborative technologies (UCG), particularly social media, interactive websites and free Wi-Fi.

In respect of accreditation and visitor information networks, the i-SITEs case study from New Zealand was explored in-depth, in order to give an understanding of how accreditation and visitor information networks operate. The literature was integral in laying the background for the research, and in identifying themes worthy for consideration in the empirical part of the research, which was explored in Secondary Research Objective 3.

The chapter provided a comprehensive and critical review of the literature in the research themes relevant to VICs. The results of the literature review represent the aggregate overview of past research in VICs, outlining what has been studied – and by implication, what has not been studied. The major contribution of this literature is its integrative, synthesised conceptual overview of the essential themes in the operation of VICs. This provided a holistic view, forming the basis for the design and the development of a best practice framework. In particular, this comprehensive and critical analysis of international best practices was important to provide a solid background in developing research instruments used in the empirical stage.

6.4 SECONDARY RESEARCH OBJECTIVE 3: CURRENT SITUATION IN GAUTENG VISITOR INFORMATION CENTRES

Secondary Research Objective 3 of the research was to understand the current situation of VICs in Gauteng Province. This objective was accomplished by administering self-completed surveys to both the VIC staff and KIRs (managers) with regard to their understanding, opinions and perspectives on current operations. The VIC managers and staff were targeted since they are critical players in charge of quality-service delivery at the VICs, and ultimately the success of the VIC, and the destination at large. This has been extensively covered in Chapter 4 in the unit of analysis section (Sections 4.4.1 and 4.4.2).

A comprehensive understanding of the current situation in Gauteng VICs entailed the development of comprehensive surveys for both managers and staff. Both surveys were developed after the pertinent literature on the successful operation of VICs had been addressed. The procedures followed to develop the research instrument were also documented in the methodology (Chapter 4). The themes identified in the literature formed the crux of the empirical inquiry; and were set out as follows:

- Functions of VICs
- Information dissemination and the equipping of the staff
- Technology uptake and usage;
- Accreditation and visitor information networks
- Funding for VIC operations

The major findings in respect of each of the themes are presented respectively.

6.4.1 Secondary Research Objective 3(i): Functions of Gauteng VICs

With regard to the major functions of VICs in Gauteng Province, the general consensus among both SRs and KIRs is information dissemination; and this resonated with the literature discussed previously (Ballantyne *et al*, 2009, Ispas *et al*, 2014; Lyu & Lee, 2015; Swart, 2016). It is interesting to note that both the KIRs and SRs further identified other functions, which in the main resonated with the literature, namely: marketing and the promotion of tourism. This function was consistent with all the respondents. In this regard, the literature noted marketing and promotion as an extension of the information dissemination to potential visitors. The information has to be packaged in an attractive manner, in order to influence tourists' decision-making capacity, with the effect of increasing the amount of tourism expenditure (Mistilis & D'ambra, 2008).

The SRs and KIRs reported that tourist satisfaction could be enhanced through the provision of more accurate and reliable information, particularly when the visitor is already in the destination.

While information dissemination (88%) and marketing and promotion of destination attractions (56%) were the predominant functions identified by the respondents, SRs further identified several salient functions, which included the preservation of history (12%), packaging tours (4%), and customer care (4%). These functions aligned with the Four-Plus model of VIC functioning (Pearce, 2004). The Four-Plus model identified that VICs have the predominant function of disseminating information. Other functions would vary, according to the location of the VIC in relation to the attraction. For example where the VIC

is located closer to a sensitive site, it would be able to protect the attraction by limiting the number of visitors, or redirecting the visitors to less-sensitive sites.

Staff respondents further identified customer care as one of the functions of VICs. As discussed earlier in the literature, at the heart of visitor satisfaction is customer care, which is predominantly achieved through face-to-face communication. Four percent of the staff respondents indicated that face-to-face communication as one of the critical functions which Gauteng VICs strive to fulfil. The majority (100%) identified face-to-face communication as a platform they use to serve customers. What is common from these two findings is that face-to-face communication is widely used within Gauteng VICs. This finding aligns with earlier studies by various authors (Arana *et al*, 2015; Ballantyne *et al*, 2009, Deery *et al*, 2007; Carson *et al*, 2005).

6.4.2 Secondary Research Objective 3(ii): Information dissemination and the equipping of staff

Secondary Research Objective 3(ii) of this research sought to understand the current situation of Gauteng VICs with regard to information dissemination and the equipping of staff. From the survey responses gathered, both KIRs and SRs concurred that there is a gap, particularly in equipping staff in certain skills necessary to execute their duties. Most of the VICs under study are mainly using a passive approach, in which they are waiting for the visitor to seek their services. The findings from the VIC staff and the KIRs indicate that they are mainly engaging with visitors through face-to-face and e-mail lists.

Among the VIC staff, the majority were comfortable with engaging with visitors using traditional platforms, but were less at ease regarding the use of online platforms. The research found that some of the staff did not receive training in all the four critical areas, namely: face-to-face communication, telephone etiquette, customer care and information dissemination. In certain circumstances, where training was offered, it was inconsistent and irregular. This compromised the quality of the services offered in Gauteng VICs.

From the responses gathered, the most predominant type of staff within the Gauteng VICs was the permanent paid staff. It is interesting to note that only one KIR indicated that she had two volunteers (who are not paid), but they declined to participate in the study. Therefore, the researcher could not gather and draw any meaningful conclusions from the perspective of the volunteers. However, it is clear that Gauteng VICs do not capitalise on the use of volunteers, which is one of the missed opportunities.

6.4.3 Secondary Research Objective 3(iii): Technology adoption and usage

Secondary Research Objective 3(iii) sought to understand the current situation of VICs with regard to technology adoption and usage within Gauteng VICs. The evidence from the surveys showed that ICTs were being used at varying levels by the staff; and a variety of ICT-based applications were in use. The applications, which were generally common across all the respondents, were e-mails and websites. Social media sites, particularly Facebook, were extensively used by more than 80% of the respondents. The general consensus among the SRs and KIRs was that ICTs possess a huge potential for VICs to improve their services, despite a low usage of other ICT platforms that currently exist. The study found that VIC staff were aware of the various ICT platforms that could be used in the dissemination of tourism information, albeit with low uptake and inadequate usage.

The significance of ICTs in VICs has been underpinned in the literature. ICTs have been found to disrupt the way of doing business to unprecedented levels, particularly in the VIC sector (Ballantyne *et al*, 2009; Deery *et al*, 2007; Dickinson, Hibbert & Filimonau, 2016; Lu *et al*, 2015; Lyu & Lee, 2015; Swart, 2016). This dissertation has specifically focused on the use of technological platforms in the context of VICs, and how they are applied to the advantage of the VICs. Through the literature review, the research outlined modern ICTs; and how VICs can capitalise on them, to accomplish their functions. Both SRs and KIRs generally agreed that ICTs are of benefit to their industry, particularly in information dissemination. This is largely confirmed in earlier studies by other scholars, who deemed ICTs worthy of adoption by VICs (Lyu & Lee, 2015; Mistilis & D'ambra, 2010). While the current study outlined an appreciation of technology in tourism, it found that most of the VICs in Gauteng have not yet extensively embraced the platforms to their advantage. The results found that the majority of VICs in Gauteng do not have their own websites, let alone interactive ones. The majority of the staff within the VICs could not use some of the ICTs, in spite of an increased appetite to improve their skills in using them.

The results also brought to light that the staff from various VICs have inconsistently embraced social-media platforms, with Facebook being the most widely used platform. Both the literature and the findings identified various platforms which VICs can use to engage with potential visitors (such as interactive VIC websites and social media platforms such as LinkedIn and WhatsApp). However, it was evident that most of the VICs were predominantly using traditional platforms, such as landline, face-to-face contact, and e-mail lists to disseminate information. These are limited in terms of enticing visitors and in terms of engaging with visitors after their trip. It appears Gauteng VICs are not providing extensive social media platforms to engage with visitors; and therefore are not responsive to visitor trends.

The main recommendations coming from the discussion in literature and the primary research findings were that VICs should seek to make use of a range of social media platforms currently available; as well as keeping track of new ICTs, instead of relying solely on Facebook. To this end, VICs should focus on several ICTs in order to enhance their operations. Considering that the modern visitors are becoming hyper-connected, it seems the majority who will be using ICTs, VIC management should extensively use various social media platforms to prevent losing future customers. The adoption of a multi-channel system of ICTs was addressed in the best practice framework.

The applications identified and discussed in the literature, and then included in the surveys, served to highlight how various platforms can be adopted by VICs for executing their operations, in line with current international trends. While the majority of the respondents identified some technological platforms, the more noteworthy were the plasma screens and tablets having an interactive website, which can support e-commerce, and is linked to social media platforms was also highly recommended. To this end, Tussyadiah and Zach (2013) noted that organisations which have become skilled in the use of social media and interactive websites, would be better positioned to transform pertinent customer information into valuable organisational knowledge, useful for competitive advantage.

6.4.4 Secondary Research Objective 3(iv): Funding for VIC operations

Both SRs and KIRs underlined the lack of adequate funding for VIC operations which has affected them negatively. KIRs indicated that they are not able to modernise their operations, adopt several ICTs, and cover office expenses. The information gathered indicates that Gauteng VICs do not have alternative sources of funding and do not generate extra income. The importance of funding has been emphasised in the Bedard model (2008) in literature. VICs need to seek secure sources of funding, including generating their own income. The approaches which VICs may adopt to generate their own income have been included in the best practice framework presented in Part 3 of Chapter 5.

6.4.5 Secondary Research Objective 3(v): Accreditation and visitor information networks

From the information gathered from KIRs, there is no evidence to confirm the existence of a thriving networking and accreditation system. Communication among Gauteng VICs is infrequent, inconsistent and irregular; and some of the VIC staff do not communicate at all with staff in the neighbouring region. Most of the KIRs acknowledged the importance of VIC networking and accreditation, but only if it includes financial benefits from the accrediting organisation. The lack of accreditation and a thriving network is a gap in Gauteng VICs, which can negatively impact on quality service to visitors.

6.5 SECONDARY RESEARCH OBJECTIVE 4: TO COMPARE PRACTICES IN THE OPERATION OF GAUTENG VISITOR INFORMATION CENTRES WITH THE BEST PRACTICES INTERNATIONALLY

As the results were presented, the researcher compared findings from Gauteng VICs with the literature on best practices, as discussed in Chapters 2 and 3. These chapters documented success stories via case studies and examples on the practical application of key areas in VIC management. These chapters provided a baseline with which the research findings could be compared.

6.6 PRIMARY RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

After achieving the secondary research objectives of the study, the researcher was able to design a best practice framework which can be used to improve the effectiveness of Gauteng VICs (Section 5.22). The framework covered four areas critical to VIC operations, namely:

1. Information dissemination and equipping of staff;
2. Technology adoption and usage;
3. Accreditation and visitor information networks; and
4. Funding

Each of these areas comprises a column in the framework, with specific individual items within each column to improve effectiveness. Following the presentation of the framework, each area is discussed and recommendations for implementation are provided.

The best practice framework was produced as the culmination to this study and took into consideration three areas, namely the findings from Parts 1 and 2 of Chapter 5; the literature from Chapters 2 and 3; and recommendations by the researcher based on the findings. The best practice framework is a valuable tool, which clearly outlines possible areas of improvement which reflect worldwide best practices. From this framework, managers can select what is relevant to and achievable for their particular VIC, and what can be afforded based on their available funding.

6.7 REVISTING THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

In Section 1.5, the problem statement which gave rise to the research was outlined. Several research gaps were identified in the context of VICs in Gauteng. Each of these is briefly revisited below in terms of the extent to which they have been resolved.

Based on documentation from the GTA and the National Department of Tourism (Gauteng Tourism Authority, 2012; National Department of Tourism, 2015) the number of VICs is declining particularly in Gauteng Province. If VICs utilise the best practice framework developed in this research, perhaps further decline could be averted. Furthermore, the results of the study could assist in addressing the service levels which are currently below expectation, and not uniform across Gauteng VICs. A further problem identified was that existing models of operation are often obsolete, with limited opportunity to be exposed to best practices. In this respect, the research outlines several examples and case studies which could assist Gauteng VICs to compare with international practices. Regarding the use of obsolete models, the findings verify this, and the framework can assist in practical methods to usher VICs into the 21st century. Furthermore, the literature revealed that there are limited studies conducted from the supply-side perspective of VIC managers and staff and there is need for research in less developed countries. This study addressed both of these, as it focused on the supply-side and was conducted in South Africa. The researcher anticipates that the findings will add to the body of research because this study bridges the gap in terms of limited supply-side research being available, in spite of the fact that VIC staff and managers are so influential in terms of service levels and methods. This research considers their voices, and addresses the areas which were given less attention in literature. From the findings, recommendations are provided which are practical in the African context. It is acknowledged that South African VICs do not have the resources available that their overseas counterparts do, such as New Zealand, Canada and Australia. The best practice framework offers solutions to improve the effectiveness of Gauteng VICs.

6.8 FUTURE RESEARCH AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Despite various noteworthy findings, study limitations are apparent, which point to future research. Best practices in the management of VICs cover a wide range of research themes. Therefore, the themes presented in Chapters 2 and 3 may not be exhaustive. The themes could serve as a reference point for further studies in VICs. Secondly, only eight VICs were surveyed; and, although representative of the targeted population, this meant that the number of surveys obtained was limited. It would be interesting

to conduct the same study with larger samples, which could be repeated periodically, in order to monitor progress and performance. Similar studies should be conducted in other provinces, with different tourism products, and different economic potential. This would allow for generalisation of the findings to a larger industry context.

The use of simple descriptive statistics served to accomplish the main aim of the survey. If the response rate had been higher, more rigorous statistical analytical approaches could have been used which may have yielded further findings. The surveys contained different data variables, which were not continuous; therefore skewness or Kurtosis values could not be established. Parametric tests, such as t-tests and the analysis of variance to establish significance were not used, in spite of the extensive use of nominal and ordinal data.

Literature and the exploratory research findings identified the need for proper planning when establishing VICs. In instances where this is done haphazardly, there is need to move the VICs to areas with higher footfall. This theme was not extensively covered in this study, thus future research could consider present locations and make recommendations. This study identified and focused on five themes. Future research could streamline or broaden the scope of this research (Heinonen, Jaakkola & Neganova, 2018). Furthermore, this research did not establish the relative importance and influence of each of these themes. Further research could establish which themes or combinations are more relevant, to allow for prioritisation in the implementation of the recommendations.

6.9 CONCLUSION

This study provided evidence that VICs are still relevant touchpoints in the tourism industry. They are important in the dissemination of destination information; marketing and the promotion of the destination's attractions; and to provide an interface for tourists while they are still in-destination. Therefore, VICs still have a role to play in determining the tourism activity within a locality. If managed well, they still have the potential to influence travel behaviour within a destination.

The study required primary data to confirm, accept or refute findings from literature. The data was gathered via two research instruments: a staff survey and a key informant survey. The surveys sought to answer the primary research objective which was 'To develop a best practice framework for VICs in Gauteng Province, South Africa'.

The findings from the exploratory study revealed the following:

- Information provided by Gauteng VICs influences visitors to extend their length of stay, their expenditure, and guides them whether to visit attractions in the next region.
- Most Gauteng VIC staff require training in ICTs, social media marketing and online engagements with visitors.
- Paralleling VICs reviewed in the literature review, Gauteng VICs have not extensively embraced ICTs to improve their services, particularly social media platforms.
- Gauteng VICs do not have their own websites, let alone interactive ones.
- The majority of Gauteng VICs do not have accreditation and there is no evidence of a thriving VIC network. There is no strong networking between VICs on online platforms.
- All the Gauteng VICs are small to medium outlets which are inadequately funded. This hinders them in meeting visitors' expectations. Due to lack of funding, VICs could not modernise their services to match the current trends.

The research objectives set at the beginning were achieved. The findings helped to expose the gaps within Gauteng VICs. It was necessary to craft a set of recommendations to address these gaps and propose further measures to improve their effectiveness. This was achieved by developing a best practice framework. This best practice framework is presented in Part 3 of Chapter 5.

The best practice framework provides Gauteng VICs with the areas they need to focus on to improve their effectiveness. It is divided into four key areas as discussed in the literature of Chapters 2 and 3. Following the framework, recommendations were provided to assist in the implementation of the framework.

This study therefore addressed the Primary research objective which was to develop a best practice framework for Gauteng VICs. The researcher envisages that by addressing all the areas highlighted in the framework, Gauteng VICs could be effective in meeting visitors' expectations and placing Gauteng on the tourism map. The findings can also be used by other VICs in South Africa to improve their effectiveness.

The study has offered important insights into Gauteng VIC management with respect to the operation of successful VICs. It has suggested best practices for Gauteng VICs based on successful examples and case studies explored in the literature review. Practical recommendations have been provided on how to implement these best practices. The research has considered the supply side perspective (of VIC staff

and managers), which appeared to be an under-explored research area. The best practice framework developed assists in resolving the research gaps identified at the start of the study.

The contribution made through this study is the development of a best practice framework. The framework is relevant to practitioners who may wish to improve the operational effectiveness of VICs and need recommendations on how to achieve this. The framework drew attention to areas which need to be addressed to improve effectiveness and achieve the desirable service levels. The study noted the integration of traditional methods and new media services as one of the underlying best practices. Furthermore, the study highlighted the need to constantly monitor trends in response to the dominant visitor and global changes in the operation of VICs. The best practices recommended have the potential to respond to the changing needs of visitors and to revitalise the existing VICs, thereby ushering them into the 21st century.

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APPENDIX A
ETHICAL CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE

APPENDIX B
PERMISSION LETTER

APPENDIX C

GAUTENG VISITOR INFORMATION CENTRES

GOVERNMENT OWNED

O.R.Tambo International Tourism Information

Kempton Park

address: O. R. Tambo Airport Road, Kempton Park

telephone: 011 390 3602

web: www.visitgauteng.net

Emfuleni Tourism Information

Vanderbijlpark

address: Corner President Kruger and F.W Beyers Street, Vanderbijlpark

telephone: 016 950 6384

web: www.emfuleni.gov.za

Johannesburg Tourism Company

Parktown North

address: Ground Floor, Grosvenor Corner, 195 Jan Smuts Avenue, Parktown North

telephone: 011 703 5327

web: www.joburgtourism.com

West Rand Tourism Information

Randfontein

address: Corner Park and 6th Street, Randfontein

telephone: 011 411 5272

web: www.wrdm.co.za

Church Square Visitor Information Centre

Pretoria

address: Old Nederlands Bank Building, Church Square, Pretoria

telephone: 012 358 1430

web: www.tshwane.co.za

Hatfield Visitors Information Centre

Pretoria

address: 852 Corner Park and Eastwood Street, Arcadia

telephone: 012 358 1675

web: www.tshwane.co.za

Soweto Tourism Information Centre

Soweto

address: Corner Klipspruit Valley and Union Road, Soweto

telephone: 011 703 5327

web: www.joburgtourism.com

Wonderboom Airport Information Centre

Pretoria

address: Lintveld Road, Pretoria

telephone: 012 567 1188

web: www.tshwane.co.za

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PRIVATE OWNED

Mogale Chamber of Business and Tourism

Krugersdorp

address: 57 Commissioner Street, Krugersdorp

telephone: 011 953 3727

web: www.thewestrand.co.za

Zinikele Association

Benoni

address: 64 Cranbourne Avenue, Benoni

telephone: 011 422 3651

Stonehaven on Vaal Information

Vanderbijlpark

address: Next to Baddrift Bridge Opposite River Sun, Vanderbijlpark

telephone: 016 982 2951/2

web: www.stonehaven.co.za

APPENDIX D

SURVEY 2: STAFF SURVEY

APPENDIX E

SURVEY 1: KEY INFORMANT SURVEY

APPENDIX F

PILOT STUDY REPORT

After developing the research instruments, the researcher piloted them with two people from National Department of Tourism, namely: Director of Research and Manager: Tourism Information Services. The following table comprised the summary of changes resulting from the pilot study.

STAFF SURVEY PILOT FEEDBACK

Section	Question	Changes
Name of VIC		The section on name of the VIC was moved from the bottom of the survey to the beginning.
Section 1: Functions of VICs	1.5a	The word centre was replaced with VIC for consistency
		The word 'attractions' was not changed as this was understood to be clear with staff in the VICs.
Section 2: Information provision & Equipping of staff	2.1	Columns were numbered from 1-4
		Face-to-face contact was added as an important method of providing information to visitors.
		Telephone communication was changed to telephone etiquette.
	2.3	Face-to-face and telephone communication were split into two different questions as they were considered double barrel questions.
	2.4	The type of training offered to staff was specified eg, information provision, customer care, etc.
2.5	The frequency of training was plotted against intervals.	
3: Technology usage at your VIC.	3.1	Questions on the impact and effect of technology were moved to 3.7 after highlighting technologies used by the VIC.
	3.3	The term 'virtual users' was simplified to online users.
4: Other	4.1	The Section was referred to as 'Other' due to its cross cutting questions on funding, accreditation and networking and staff development.
		Coordination of staff was changed to management of staff.
		The coordination of volunteers was made clearer and changed to coordination of volunteers for duties.
		Feedback from visitors was made more specific by changing it to attending to feedback from visitors.
		Complaints from visitors was changed to resolving complaints from visitors.
	4.2	'Funding' was made clearer and became 'sourcing funding'.
		The nature of improvements required were requested under the theme of information provision, customer care, use of technology and face-to-face communication.
5: General	5.6	The question was paraphrased to be clearer.
	5.7	The name of the VIC was moved from the bottom to the beginning of the survey.

KEY INFORMANT SURVEY PILOT FEEDBACK

Section	Question	Changes
1: General	1.3	The question was converted into a tabular format indicating the number of local and international tourists against the peak and low seasons.
2: Funding	Section on donations	The researcher resolved to retain the question as is. This is based on the fact that it is directed to key informants who are knowledgeable and may have an overreaching responsibility to source funds for their VIC operations.
3. Accreditation and VIC networks	3.4	The question on maintaining and improving the sense of connection was split into two as it was a double barrel question.
	3.7	The question was deleted as it was covered in 3.4 above by splitting the two questions.

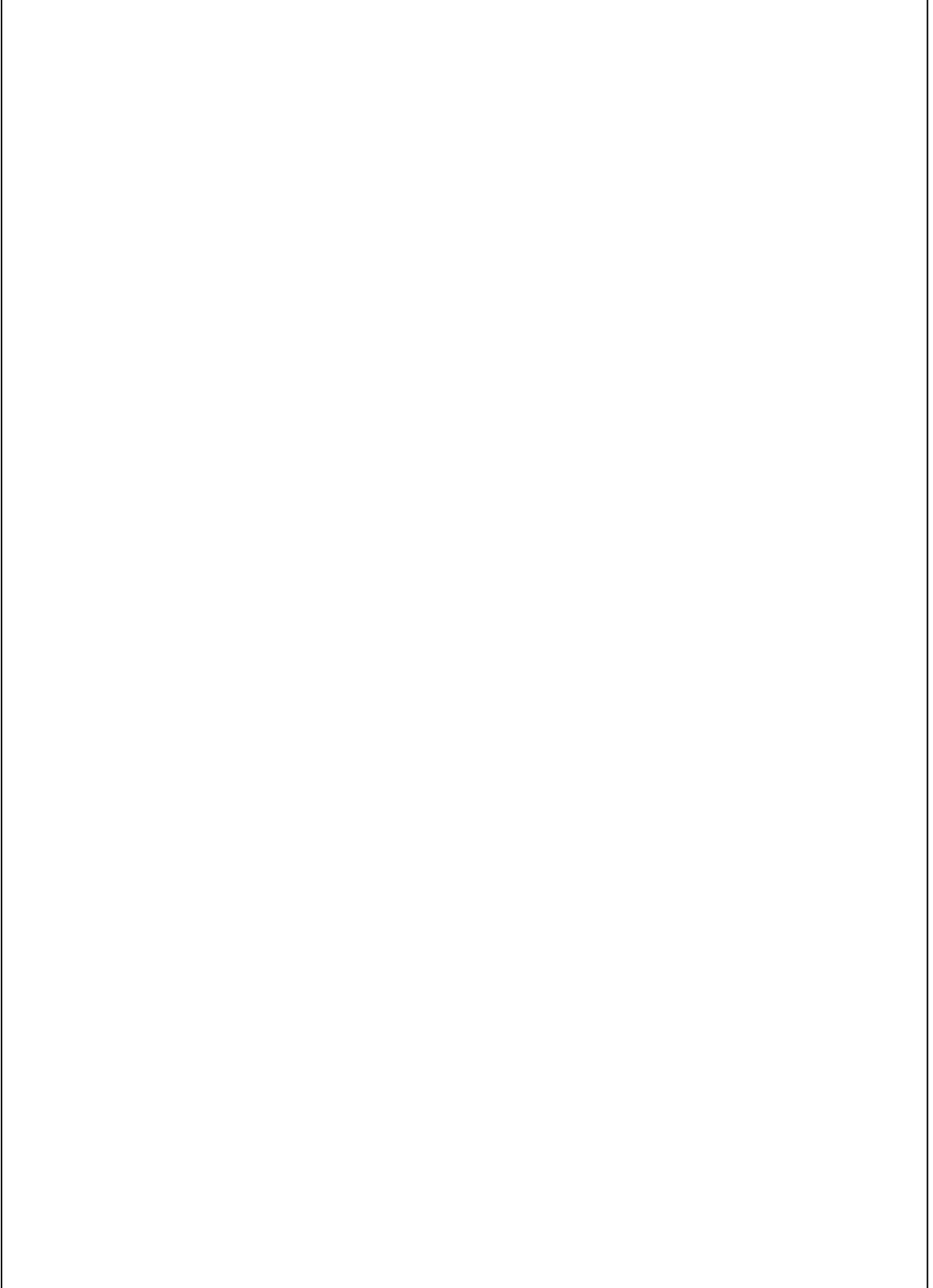
APPENDIX G

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

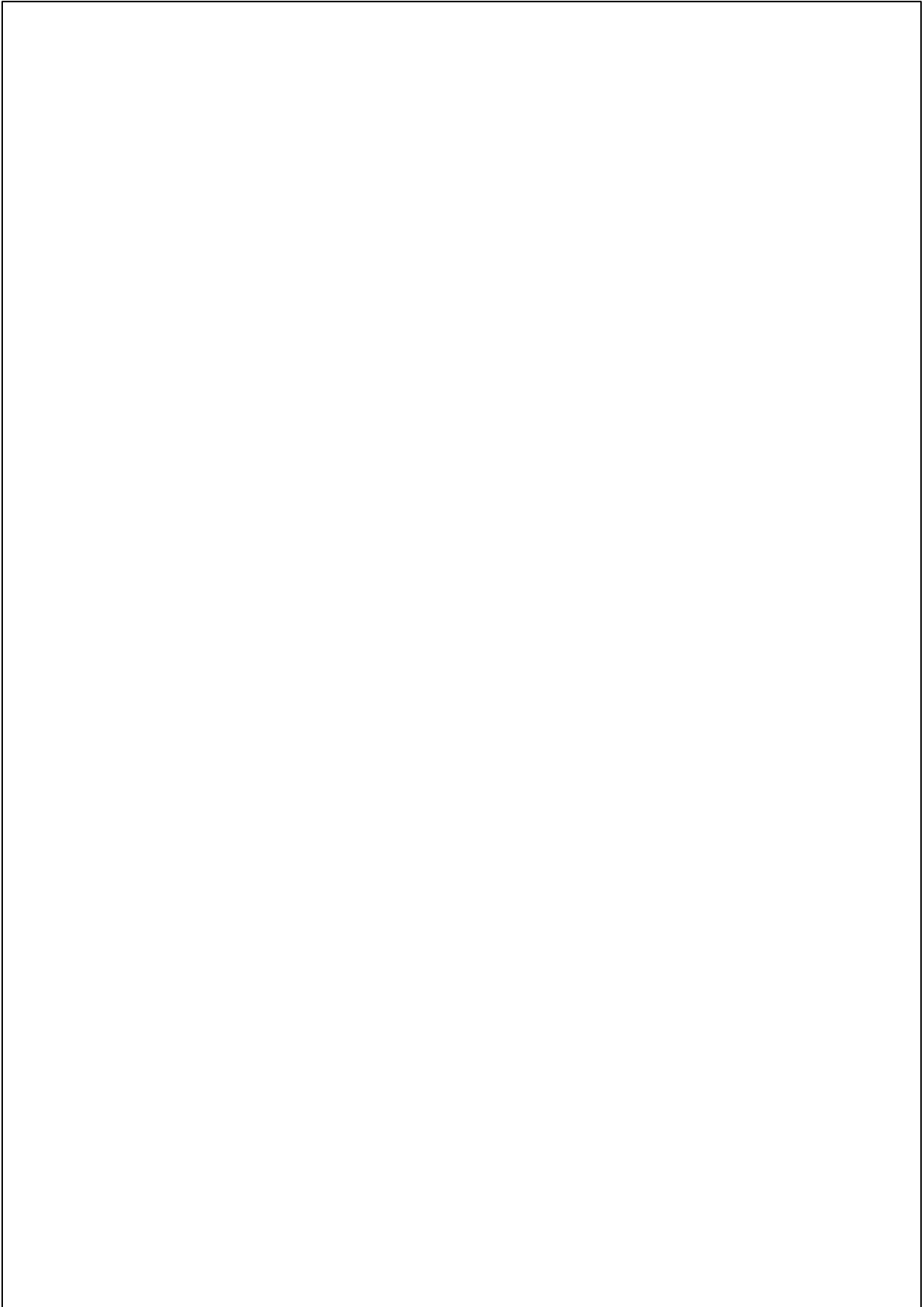
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APPENDIX H

CONSENT TO PARTICPATE

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APPENDIX I



APPENDIX J

THEMES IDENTIFIED THROUGH THEMATIC CONTENT ANALYSIS

For abbreviations refer to Table 5.1

STAFF SURVEY 2

Question	Themes
<p>SS Q 1.1 & KIS Q 1.5</p> <p>In the VIC in which you are involved, what do you think is its most important function?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Information dissemination. 2. Marketing and promotion of destination attractions. 3. Face-to-face communication. 4. Service to the community. 5. Management and tourism development. 6. Customer care.

Questions	Themes
<p>SS Q 1.2b, 1.3b, 1.4b</p> <p>Does the VIC you are involved in influence tourist plans, tourist expenditure and length of stay? If yes explain?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Up-to-date, accurate and relevant information. 2. Effective communication. 3. Recommending attractions not on visitors' itineraries.

Question	Themes
<p>SS Q 2.4b.</p> <p>What training do you feel you still need?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Customer care. 2. Human resources. 3. Telephone etiquette. 4. Information provision. 5. Product knowledge. 6. Sourcing funding.

	<p>7. Social media marketing.</p> <p>8. Planning and research.</p>
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Question	Themes
<p>3.1b</p> <p>Which of the options listed above is the most effective and why?</p>	<p>1. Electronic brochures.</p> <p>2. Twitter.</p> <p>3. Social media.</p> <p>4. E-mail.</p> <p>5. Interactive websites.</p> <p>6. Facebook.</p>
<p>3.1b Reasons why the options listed above are effective.</p>	<p>1. Accessibility.</p> <p>2. Convenience.</p> <p>3. User friendliness.</p> <p>4. Cost effectiveness.</p> <p>5. Modern.</p>

Question	Themes
<p>SS Q 3.11</p> <p>Please list the technologies you think the VIC should look into in the future?</p>	<p>Wi-Fi, On-site electronic website, Social media, e-mail, touch screens, VIC application, videos, Gauteng application, TripAdvisor, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, i-pads, plasma screens, interactive websites.</p>
<p>Reasons why you think it should be looked into.</p>	<p>1. Moving with trends.</p> <p>2. The accessibility of tourism information.</p> <p>3. Extensive reach to potential tourists.</p> <p>4. Bringing information to a modern state.</p>

	5. Adding some visual elements to the marketing of destinations.
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Question	Themes
<p>SS Q 4.2</p> <p>What challenges do you believe are required to improve the performance of your VIC in meeting visitor's expectations in relation to:</p> <p>a. Information dissemination</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Improving quality of information. 2. Independent offices and refurbishment. 3. Information dissemination. 4. Use of new ICTs. 5. Networking. 6. Familiarisation. 7. Training.
<p>b. Customer care</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Training in customer care. 2. Customer relationship management programme.
<p>c. ICTs</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Funding and acquisition of new ICTs. 2. Introduce free Wi-Fi in the VIC area. 3. Training in the use of social media. 4. Training in ICTs. 5. Developing own interactive websites.
<p>d. Face-to-face communication</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Uniforms for VIC staff. 2. Adding passion to work. 3. Training in face-to-face communication.

KEY INFORMANT SURVEY

Question	Themes
<p>KIS Q 2.2b</p> <p><i>This is a follow-up question to Q2.1b, which asked "To what extent is your finance adequate?"</i></p> <p>If not at all adequate or slightly inadequate, how is your VIC affected by lack of adequate finance?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Poor service delivery. 2. Not able to modernise. 3. Constrained marketing activities. 4. Refurbishment. 5. Shortage of office supplies.

Question	Themes
<p>KIS Q 2.5b.</p> <p>Are efforts underway to make the VIC self-supporting? If yes specify?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Running a subscription scheme. 2. Fundraising.

Question	Themes
<p>KIS Q 3.2</p> <p>For what purpose do you contact staff in other VICs?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Need for information. 2. Exchanging/ sharing ideas. 3. Feedback and challenges.

Question	Themes
<p>KIS Q 3.4a</p> <p>What have you done to maintain a sense of connection with other VICs?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Meetings. 2. Regular joint familiarisation tours. 3. Constant telephone and social media chats.

Question	Themes
<p>KIS Q 3.4b</p> <p>What have you done to improve your sense of connection with other VICs?</p>	<p>1. The manager joined himself to the database where we communicate.</p>

Question	Themes
<p>KIS Q 3.5b</p> <p><i>This is a follow-up question to Q3.5a which asked "Is your VIC accredited by a recognised tourism board/association/agency/structure?"</i></p> <p>If yes, what type of accreditation do you have?</p>	<p>1. GTA accreditation</p> <p>2. No accreditation.</p>

Question	Themes
<p>KIS Q 3.5c</p> <p><i>This is also a follow-up question to 3.5a.</i></p> <p>If yes, how does accreditation help you to maintain standards in your VIC?</p>	<p>1. Does not help.</p> <p>2. Improved service delivery.</p> <p>3. Credibility of information.</p> <p>4. Assistance from the accrediting body.</p> <p>5. Tap into body's initiatives.</p> <p>6. Training and exchange workshops.</p>

Question	Themes
<p>KIS Q 3.5d</p> <p><i>This is also a follow-up question to Q3.5a.</i></p> <p>If no, how do you think accreditation could help your VIC in future?</p>	<p>1. Help maintain standards.</p> <p>2. Boosting the image and value of the brand.</p> <p>3. Improve service quality.</p> <p>4. Does not help.</p>

Question	Themes
KIS Q 3.6 What changes do you think are required to improve the performance of VICs in meeting visitor expectations?	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Deployment of extra staff.2. Refurbishment.3. Improve funding.4. Relocation of the VICs.5. Improve product information.5. Staff training.