UNLOCKING THE POTENTIAL OF ADVENTURE TOURISM IN LESOTHO

Bongani Hoohlo[1], Shikha Sharma[2*]

[1&2]Chandigarh University, Mohali, India

Correspondence author: shikhasharma.uithm@cumail.in

Abstract. Adventure tourism in Lesotho offers a unique blend of outdoor experiences, including hiking, mountain biking, and cultural immersion. This study investigates the potential of adventure tourism, emphasizing its growing popularity, economic benefits, and challenges related to infrastructure and sustainable development. The research also explores how tourism benefits local communities and contributes to the preservation of Lesotho's natural environment. With targeted marketing and investment, Lesotho can establish itself as a key destination for adventure seekers.

This chapter analyzes the tourism assets in Lesotho, exploring ways to improve the performance and sustainability of the tourism industry. The study highlights the need for better utilization of existing infrastructure and the development of new tourism products. In 2011, Lesotho welcomed 398,000 tourists, generating USD 35 million in revenue, representing 1.4% of the country's GDP. Tourism is recognized by the government and international organizations as a sector that can reduce poverty and absorb low-skilled labor.

Adventure tourism has the potential to drive economic growth in Lesotho, utilizing its unique landscapes and cultural heritage. However, challenges such as poor service quality, lack of digital marketing, inadequate infrastructure, and environmental mismanagement hinder its full development. This study emphasizes the need for improved tourism management, including investments in workforce development, digital marketing, sustainable tourism, and marketing strategies. Addressing these issues will help position Lesotho as a leading adventure destination, fostering sustainable development and enhancing its competitiveness in the global tourism market.

Key words: Adventure tourism, Lesotho tourism, economic benefits, sustainable development, infrastructure, local communities, cultural heritage, tourism development, environmental management, digital marketing, ecotourism.

1 Introduction

Lesotho is situated between 28° and 30° South latitude and between 27° and 30° East Longitude. It is surrounded by the Republic of South Africa. It has a land area of 30 355 Square kilometers. The country is commonly divided into four zones, known as the mountain zone which comprises 65 percent of the land area, the lowlands (19 percent), the foothills (8 percent), and the Senqu Valley (8 percent) (Figure 1.1). Lesotho is distinct in that it is the only country in the world where the lowest elevation is 1500m above sea level (Gill,1994). With its highest elevation at 3500m, the country also boasts the highest Elevation in Southern Africa and the second highest in Africa as a whole – a feature which has earned it a number of epithets, for example, "Kingdom in the Sky", "Roof of Africa" and "Switzerland of Africa".

Tourism is regarded as a fundamental element that fosters economic growth, serves as a transformative agent, and provides a means for reducing poverty. Its importance is anticipated to increase in the coming years World Travel and Tourism Council 2019; (Țîțu, R, 2016). The tourism sector encompasses a diverse array of services, and the caliber of these services plays a crucial role in influencing tourists' choices to return to a destination. This situation presents a challenge for decision-makers, who must

enhance service quality to maintain competitiveness in the market (Haghkhah, Nosratpour, Ebrahimpour & Hamid, 2011; Jovanovic & Ivana, 2016). Adventure tourism, one of the fastest- growing sectors in global travel, has seen significant development in recent years, especially in outdoor activities and exploration.

 Lesotho, often referred to as the "Kingdom in the Sky," is a small, landlocked country in the southernmost part of Africa, entirely surrounded by South Africa. Renowned for its distinctive geography, Lesotho features high elevations and divers landscapes, with its altitude surpassing 1,000 meters, making it the only country in the world to lie entirely above this height. The potential for adventure tourism in Lesotho is considerable due to its distinctive geographical characteristics, which feature high-altitude terrains, rivers, and a variety of ecosystems. Adventure tourism includes activities such as trekking, mountain biking, rock climbing, and pony trekking, all of which are especially favored in this area. Lesotho's economy is primarily rural, and its ability to generate income is closely tied to how effectively it can utilize its natural resources. Key resources for the country include land, water, and labor.Lesotho faces significant challenges with high rates of underemployment and unemployment, particularly in its rural regions. Over 85 percent of households in Lesotho are located in rural areas, where poverty levels are notably higher compared to urban settings. The country's climate, characterized by mountainous terrain and inadequate agricultural practices, results in minimal economic returns from the primary sector, which is agriculture. Consequently, households that primarily depend on farming or livestock for their income experience the highest levels of poverty (World Bank, 1995).

The government has been using various methods to alleviate poverty in rural areas, and one of the approaches is to use tourism projects to enhance employment and income opportunities for rural communities. This approach has been seen as an effective way to promote economic development in peripheral regions that have limited resources. Recent efforts in tourism, such as the establishment of pony trekking associations, serve as examples of tourist activities located inrural regions. These initiatives aim to provide rural communities with opportunities to enhance their income and elevate their social standing (Government of Lesotho, 1996).
However, there has been a growing apprehension regarding the negative impacts associated with mass tourism, which has prompted advocates to push for more sustainable approaches to tourism development (Cater and Goodall, 1994; Craik, 1991; 2 Murphy, 1994; Oppermann, 1997; Sharpley, 1997; Theobald, 1994). This method is pertinent to the ongoing tourism developments in Lesotho, considering the environmental sensitivity of many rural areas. Additionally, it aligns well with the values held by local communities.

Lesotho boasts breathtaking mountainous landscapes, rich cultural heritage, and diverse outdoor activities, making it a prime destination for adventure tourism. From rugged hiking trails and pony trekking to off-road adventures and winter sports, the country holds immense potential to position itself as a leading adventure tourism hub in Southern Africa. However, despite these natural advantages, Lesotho's adventure tourism sector remains largely underdeveloped due to challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, limited digital marketing, low service quality, and poor environmental management. Unlocking the full potential of this sector requires strategic interventions to enhance tourism services, improve accessibility, and promote the country's unique adventure experiences to global markets.

This study explores the key factors influencing adventure tourism in Lesotho, identifying both opportunities and barriers to its growth. By employing a qualitative research approach, including interviews with stakeholders and analysis of existing tourism practices, this research aims to provide insights into improving the adventure tourism landscape. The findings will offer practical recommendations for policymakers, tourism operators, and investors to drive

sustainable growth, enhance visitor experiences, and position Lesotho as a premier adventure tourism destination.

With over 80% of its landmass lying above 1,800 meters (5,900 feet) above sea level, Lesotho is home to unique adventure landscapes, including the Maloti-Drakensberg Trans frontier Conservation Area and Sehlabathebe National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Despite these natural assets, the country's adventure tourism sector remains underdeveloped, limiting its contribution to economic growth and job creation.

The United Nation's World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) research reports that tourist arrivals Surpassed 1 billion for the first time in 2012. Despite occasional shocks, international tourist Arrivals have enjoyed virtually uninterrupted growth – from 277 million in 1980 to 528 million In 1995, and 1.035 billion in 2012. Developing countries are playing an increasingly prominent Role in this growing sector. Tourism is one of the top three exports for the majority of developing counties and for at least 22 LDCs (including Lesotho) therefore,Tourism development has been identified by the Lesotho government, International Monetary Fund as well as the United Nations World Tourism Organization as a sector that will reduce Poverty as well as absorb many low or semi skilled labor. Boosting the tourism sector in the Kingdom will inevitably work towards alleviating poverty in the Kingdom overall. If developed Well, tourism could effectively lead a LDC country like Lesotho out of poverty like it did for other developing countries.

Tourism in Lesotho currently contributes about 5.1% to the country's GDP and employs thousands of people, but the sector has not reached its full potential due to inadequate infrastructure, limited global marketing, poor service quality, and environmental mismanagement. Comparatively, neighboring South Africa attracts millions of adventure tourists annually, largely due to better promotional strategies and investment in tourism infrastructure. Unlocking the potential of adventure tourism in Lesotho could significantly boost local economies, increase employment opportunities, and enhance revenue generation through eco-tourism, hospitality, and cultural tourism.

2 Literature Review

According to (Theobald, 1994; Murphy, 1983)The tourism sector is among the most rapidly expanding industries globally and has the potential to enhance both directly and indirectly the living standards of host communities. The adventure travel sector is experiencing rapid growth within the tourism industry, particularly in developing countries. However, this swift expansion has prompted significant concerns regarding the potential harm to the social, cultural, and environmental aspects of the host destinations However, some initial methods are applied in order to reduce the significant impact of these discussed matters such as issuing and presenting knowledge about eco-tourism and sustainable practices to the travelers as well as the local communities. This act will not only improve the betterment life standard of the local communities but it will also improve the eco-system. The term "sustainable" can be defined as approaches or practices that can be upheld over an extended period without exhausting resources or inflicting considerable damage on the environment. It includes multiple aspects, such as ecological well-being, social fairness, and economic stability. The Brundtland Report, published by the World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987, highlighted a key concern regarding sustainable development. It defined sustainable development as a process that fulfills the current needs of society while ensuring that future generations have the capacity to satisfy their own needs.

In various studies related to tourism, there has been significant attention given to the sustainability of the resources that tourism relies on (Saarinen, 2006). According to Tosun (2001), for tourism development to be considered sustainable, it must fulfill certain criteria:Enhance not only the economic development of the nation but also that of regions and localities, ensuring that the benefits are equitably distributed among all segments of society.Involving local residents in the planning and decision-making processes related to tourism development ensures that their voices are heard. This engagement fosters a sense of ownership and pride in their community, which is vital for building self-esteem.Contribute to the fulfillment of essential and perceived needs of individuals previously marginalized in local tourist areas.Sustainable development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs, by balancing social equity, economic growth, and environmental protection.Assist communities in achieving liberation from oppressive material circumstances and from subservience to nature, ignorance, other individuals, suffering, institutions, and rigid beliefs.

Due to explorative and descriptive nature of this study, review of relevant literature was Ideal for the study to obtain new insights into a phenomenon and determine priorities for Further research. The research was guided by a theoretical framework based on tourismModels drawn from sustainable development paradigms. In this regard, considerationsOf sustainable tourism, sustainable development and community participation are central To the study. The relevant literature review was done before commencement of the field Research. This facilitated better understanding of critical issues and served to guide the Interviews and data gathering process more effectively. In Kumar's (1989, p. 7) words Well formulated flexible framework helps to sharpen the focus of an inquiry and keep the interviews focus on critical issues." This helps in the formulation of concepts and hypotheses before field research, thus providing a guideline for the selection of data Collection instruments (Bailey, 1987; Garbers, 1996).Relevant background information to the study was collected from primary and secondary Sources. Primary sources were personal communication with concerned parties and Minutes of meetings. Secondary sources included books, government records and Documents such as government development plans and reports, project reports, monthly And yearly reports, minutes of meetings and statistical data from government Departments. Moreover, published and unpublished studies were also used. Publicity Brochures. Leaflets produced by the pony trekking centers, particularly Basotho Pony and Malealea and magazines were sourced.

This report aims to illustrate the economic benefits of adventure tourism in Lesotho, and showcasing the different adventure tourism activities of the nation also the popularity of the tourism sector is throughout recent years and how it has changed. The report will also look at the obstacles faced by Lesotho's infrastructure and sustainable development of how these factors impact and benefit the nations tourism industry.

2.1 Challenges Facing Adventure Tourism Development in Lesotho
Adventure tourism in Lesotho, while holding significant potential for economic growth and community development, faces several challenges that hinder its full realization. These challenges can be categorized into environmental, socio-economic, infrastructural, and governance-related issues.

2.2 Environmental Challenges
Lesotho's unique mountainous terrain and biodiversity are both an asset and a challenge for adventure tourism. The country is prone to environmental degradation due to overgrazing, deforestation, and climate change. These factors threaten the natural landscapes that attract tourists. For instance, increased soil erosion can lead to loss of trails used for trekking and other outdoor activities. Additionally, the impact of tourism itself can exacerbate these environmental

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issues if not managed sustainably. The construction of tourism facilities often encroaches on natural habitats, leading to biodiversity loss.

2.3 Socio-Economic Challenges
The socio-economic context in Lesotho presents significant hurdles for adventure tourism development. Many local communities depend on subsistence agriculture and have limited access to education and resources necessary for engaging with the tourism industry effectively. This dependency creates a scenario where local populations may not benefit from the economic opportunities presented by adventure tourism. Furthermore, there is often a lack of awareness or understanding of how to market local attractions or engage with tourists effectively.

Additionally, the dependency theory suggests that tourism can perpetuate inequalities rather than alleviate them (Oppermann, 1993). This means that while foreign investors may profit from adventure tourism ventures, local communities might remain marginalized without adequate support or involvement in decision-making processes.

2.4 Infrastructural Challenges
Infrastructure in Lesotho is often inadequate to support the demands of adventure tourism. Poor road conditions limit access to remote areas where many adventure activities take place, such as pony trekking or hiking in national parks like Bokong Nature Reserve. Furthermore, there is a lack of essential services such as accommodation facilities and tourist information centers that can enhance the visitor experience.

Investment in infrastructure is crucial; however, financial constraints often prevent necessary developments from occurring. Without proper roads and facilities, attracting international tourists becomes increasingly difficult.

2.5 Governance-Related Challenges
Governance plays a critical role in shaping the landscape for adventure tourism development in Lesotho. There are often conflicts between government policies aimed at promoting tourism and local community interests (Saarinen & Wall-Reinius, 2019). The imposition of regulations without community consultation can lead to resentment among locals who feel excluded from the benefits of tourism initiatives.

Moreover, issues related to land ownership complicate matters further; as new tourist enclaves are developed on land traditionally used by local communities for agriculture or gathering resources (Kilipris, 2005). This creates tensions between preserving cultural practices and advancing economic interests through tourism.

2.6 Strategies for Unlocking Potential
Infrastructure Development: Investing in transportation networks and hospitality services is essential to improve access to remote regions where adventure activities are common. It is essential, as better road networks, adventure-friendly facilities, and digital access can enhance the overall experience for tourists. Upgrading routes to popular sites like Sani Pass and Sehlabathebe National Park, along with developing eco-lodges and adventure gear rental services, can significantly boost accessibility and comfort for visitors.

Training and Capacity Building: Creating training initiatives for local communities will improve their abilities as tour guides or service providers within the adventure tourism industry. **Marketing Campaigns:** Strategic marketing efforts aimed at international tourists can help establish Lesotho as a top destination for adventure tourism. Improving marketingefforts should position Lesotho as "Africa's Ultimate Adventure Destination" by leveraging international campaigns, strengthening its online presence, and collaborating with travel agencies to create specialized adventure tourism packages

Service improvement: Focusing on eco-friendly methods in adventure tourism can draw environmentally aware travelers while safeguarding natural resources. Training programs for

tour guides, hospitality staff, and adventure service providers can enhance professionalism and safety, while certification programs ensure high-quality services. Encouraging community involvement in tourism-related businesses can also create job opportunities and promote cultural exchange.

2.7 Sustainable tourism and environmental conservation: must be prioritized by implementing eco-tourism policies, improving waste management at key attractions, and introducing controlled tourism zones to prevent environmental degradation.
Investment and policy support: play a vital role in unlocking Lesotho's adventure tourism potential. The government can attract private sector investment through incentives like tax breaks and grants while forming strong public-private partnerships to develop adventure tourism hubs. By integrating these strategies, Lesotho can harness its unique landscapes and cultural heritage to establish itself as a premier adventure tourism destination, fostering economic growth and sustainable development.

3 Methodology

Research methodology refers to the structured approach and techniques used in conducting research, gathering data, analyzing information, and deriving conclusions (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Yin (2017) further elaborates that research methodology encompasses the entire framework of a research study, including its design, structure, and the selection of research methods, data collection strategies, and data analysis techniques. A well-structured research methodology is essential to ensure the accuracy, reliability, and applicability of research findings.

For this study, the researcher adopted a mixed-methods approach, which integrates both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies within a single study (Bryman, 2016). This approach was chosen to leverage the benefits of both research paradigms, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem. Quantitative research involves gathering numerical data through structured surveys, experiments, and statistical tools to identify trends, correlations, and statistical generalizations. On the other hand, qualitative research seeks to explore deeper meanings, perceptions, and contextual factors by using interviews, observations, and non-numerical data analysis. The combination of these methods allowed for a holistic exploration of adventure tourism in Lesotho.

One of the main advantages of mixed-methods research dominantly, secondary research is its ability to capitalize on the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Quantitative data ensures statistical precision, allowing researchers to establish relationships between variables, identify patterns, and make generalized conclusions. Meanwhile, qualitative data provides in-depth insights into the socio-cultural and environmental aspects influencing adventure tourism in Lesotho. This dual approach enabled the researcher to develop a well-rounded understanding of the sector's potential and challenges.

The use of multiple data sources and methods In mixed-methods research enhances the validity and reliability of findings through a process called triangulation. This approach involves cross-verifying information by comparing qualitative insights with quantitative statistics. In this study, quantitative data helped establish broad trends in Lesotho's adventure tourism industry, while qualitative insights provided a deeper understanding of tourist experiences, perceptions, and challenges. By integrating both, the research achieved a more accurate and balanced representation of the topic. Quantitative data offered a macro-level perspective, identifying the scale, frequency, and statistical relationships within the adventure tourism sector in Lesotho. Meanwhile, qualitative data provided a micro-level understanding by capturing personal experiences, motivations, and barriers encountered by stakeholders in the industry. This holistic approach enriched the study's findings, ensuring both breadth and depth in the analysis.The

integration of qualitative and quantitative data enhances the practical relevance of research findings. The statistical significance of quantitative insights, combined with the contextual depth provided by qualitative data, ensures that the study's outcomes are actionable. Decision- makers in Lesotho's tourism sector can use these findings to develop evidence-based policies, improvetourism infrastructure, and create targeted marketing strategies that promote adventure tourism in the region.

Every research methodology has inherent limitations, but combining quantitative and qualitative techniques helps mitigate these shortcomings. For instance, qualitative research was used to shape the design of quantitative surveys, ensuring that key variables and tourism trends were accurately captured. Conversely, statistical trends derived from quantitative data highlighted specific areas that required further qualitative exploration. This dynamic interplay between methods strengthened the overall research design, reducing potential biases and knowledge gaps.

CONCLUSION

Lesotho has immense potential for adventure tourism, thanks to its breath-taking high-altitude landscapes, diverse outdoor activities, and close proximity to South Africa. With rugged terrain perfect for activities like skiing at Afriski and high-altitude sports training, the country could become a prime destination for adventure seekers and nature lovers. However, realizing this potential requires addressing key challenges, such as the lack of sufficient accommodation in key tourism areas and limited marketing aimed at adventure travellers. Investing in better infrastructureparticularly lodging and transportand forming partnerships with regional tour operators could help attract more visitors and keep tourism revenue within Lesotho rather than losing it to South Africa. Expanding adventure tourism beyond seasonal skiing to year-round activities like trekking, water sports, and cultural experiences would also make the industry more sustainable. Community involvement is essential to ensure that tourism benefits local people and supports poverty reduction efforts. While obstacles like climate change and limited funding remain, targeted policies and strategic promotion could help Lesotho position itself as a top adventure tourism destination, driving economic growth and creating jobs.

Lesotho possesses immense potential to become a leading adventure tourism destination, with its rugged landscapes, rich cultural heritage, and unique high-altitude environment offering diverse opportunities for outdoor recreation. However, despite these natural advantages, the sector remains underdeveloped due to infrastructure challenges, inadequate marketing, low service quality, and environmental mismanagement. To unlock this potential, strategic interventions are required, including improving infrastructure, enhancing digital marketing, investing in skills development, and implementing sustainable tourism policies. By fostering collaboration between the government, private sector, and local communities, Lesotho can transform adventure tourism into a key economic driver, creating jobs, boosting local businesses, and increasing its competitiveness in the global tourism market. If effectively developed and managed, adventure tourism can not only contribute to economic growth but also promote environmental conservation and cultural preservation, ensuring long-term sustainability for the industry and the nation as a whole.

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