

# Critical Success Factors for Developing and Managing Agri-Tourism: A South African Approach

Christelle Charlien van Zyl and Peet van der Merwe  
North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa

[ChristelleCvanZyl@gmail.com](mailto:ChristelleCvanZyl@gmail.com)

[Peet.VanDerMerwe@nwu.ac.za](mailto:Peet.VanDerMerwe@nwu.ac.za)

**Abstract:** While the agri-tourism sector is constantly growing, academic research on the development and management of this sector is limited in South Africa. The agri-tourism sector includes over thirty different activities and attractions. These can be categorised as outdoor recreation, educational experiences, entertainment, hospitality services or on-farm direct sales. It can be challenging to identify a single method for sustainability and success. Although many farmers develop agri-tourism products/services on their farms to generate additional income, several fail because of a lack of planning and management. Part of this planning is to identify the critical success factors needed to successfully manage an agri-tourism business. Research on the critical success factors of agri-tourism has been conducted in several countries, including India, the USA, Europe and Taiwan; however, a South African approach has not yet been investigated. This study aims to identify critical success factors needed to develop and manage agri-tourism within South Africa, based on various agri-tourism activities and attractions. By following a qualitative research method, these factors were identified through semi-structured in-depth interviews with farmers already managing a successful agri-tourism business. The findings indicated themes such as market research and marketing, customer satisfaction, staff including the need for employees to be happy, financial and business planning, employees' and employer's personalities, location and having a unique concept. These themes include elements such as a constant offering of quality products and services, being enthusiastic about your product/service, and understanding what your client wants. Many of these findings are consistent with the success factors identified in other countries, such as customer satisfaction, providing a quality product, good marketing methods and good customer service. As many respondents indicated a lack of prior planning and business analysis when developing their agri-tourism business, these success factors may be used as guidelines for South African farmers who do not know where to start when considering agri-tourism their farms.

**Keywords:** agri-tourism, farm tourism, critical success factors, South African farm, Western Cape

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## 1. Introduction

Several researchers describe tourism as the world's largest industry (Pham, Andereck and Vogt, 2019:1; Zhao and Li, 2018:1). Vanhove (2011:10) divides the tourism industry into five sectors: attraction, accommodation, transport, travel organisers and destination organisation. Similarly, Saayman (2013:17) divides the tourism industry into primary and secondary aspects. The primary aspects consist of transport, accommodation and catering, entertainment, attractions and services. The secondary aspects consist of agriculture, marketing and information, geography and more. This provides a literary introduction to "agri-tourism" since the primary aspects can be linked with agriculture (a secondary aspect). Unfortunately, the literature has no universal definition of agri-tourism (Hollas et al, 2021:1). Chase (2019:338) defines agri-tourism as "a commercial enterprise on a working farm or ranch conducted for the enjoyment, education, and/or active involvement of the visitor, generating supplemental income for the farm or ranch".

Agri-tourism offers a wide variety of advantages to the farmers offering it, the local community involved with it, and the tourists who take part and enjoy it (Hollas et al, 2021:1). These advantages include generating an additional income, creating job opportunities, educating tourists, adding value of agriculture products, boosting the local community and uplifting communities (Myer & De Crom, 2013:301; Van Zyl, 2019:46). As a result of these advantages, agri-tourism is a growing sector within the tourism industry (Hollas et al, 2021:1).

According to Luo, Fan and Shang (2021:6), there are several advantages to identifying the critical success factors, for example it can improve the tourist experience, lead to a more satisfied tourist experience, better allocate tourism destination resources, and give the tourism business a competitive advantage. Therefore, this study focuses on the critical success factors that farmers must consider to successfully develop and manage an agri-tourism business on a farm. Firstly, this article focuses on a literature review of what agri-tourism is and discusses previous research on the critical success factors of agri-tourism around the world, including Italy, the USA, Taiwan, Thailand and India. Next, the research method will be discussed, including the study area, the data collection procedures and data handling and analysis. The results will focus on the characteristics of the respondents, on popular agri-tourism products that they are currently being offered and will discuss the critical

success factors identified in this study. Finally, the conclusion will include the study's limitations and future research opportunities. The following section will start with the literature review.

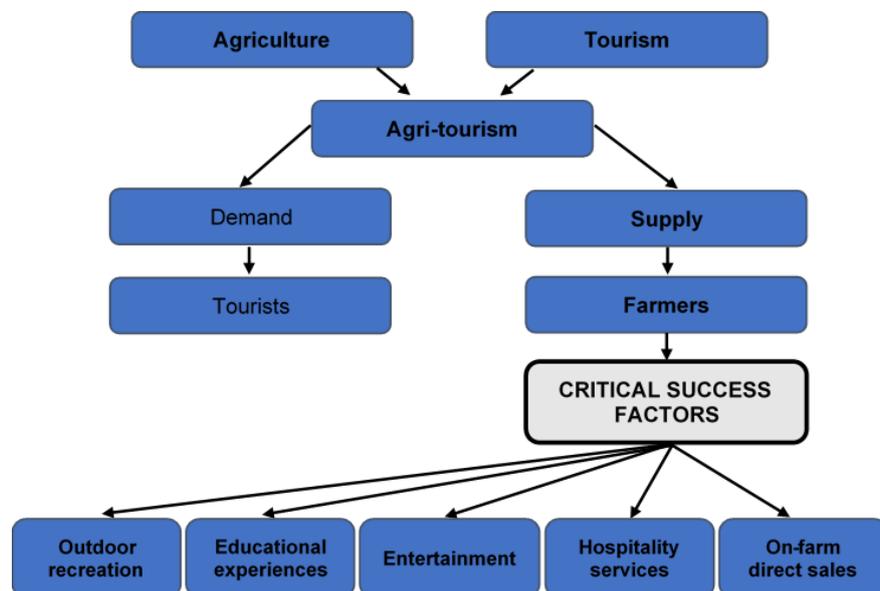
## 2. Literature review

This section will focus on the tourism industry and how agri-tourism forms a part of this industry. It will discuss different definitions of agri-tourism and then identify previous research focusing on the critical success factors.

### 2.1 Background to agri-tourism

The tourism industry can be divided using different methods. Vanhove (2011:10) uses five sectors, Saayman (2013:17) uses primary and secondary aspects, and Wearing and Neil (1999) divides the tourism industry into *mass tourism* and *alternative tourism*. According to Christou (2012:2), mass tourism focuses on large groups with fixed programmes that develop everywhere (commercialisation), designed for tourists who are price conscious (in order to maximise the tourism product). On the other hand, alternative tourism focuses on single or small groups with personalised programmes that are only developed in suitable areas, specifically designed for tourists who are value-conscious and want to optimise the tourism product. Based on the characteristics of each type of tourism, agri-tourism can be categorised as *alternative tourism*.

Agri-tourism can be described as the amalgamation of the agriculture and tourism industries (Weaver, 2004:518). This study is based on the farmers' perception, and therefore focuses on the supply side of agri-tourism. Figure 1 illustrates this amalgamation, along with the supply side of agri-tourism. According to Bernardo, Valentin and Leatherman (2004:1), all agri-tourism products can be divided into five categories. This includes outdoor recreation (e.g. hiking trails, fishing, hunting), educational experiences (e.g. wine tasting, farm tours, museums), entertainment (e.g. festivals, barn dance, concerts), hospitality services (e.g. farm stay, weddings, restaurants) and on-farm direct sales (e.g. u-picking, farm stalls). Luo, Fan and Shang (2021:8) state that while the environment, nature and operations of the different tourism sectors differ, the critical success factors associated with each sector may also differ. Thus, the aim of this study is to identify the critical success factors that farmers deem important to successfully manage an agri-tourism business, as illustrated in Figure 1.



Source: Adapted from Van Zyl (2019:4) and Bernardo et al (2004:1)

**Figure 1:** A framework for the supply side of agri-tourism

Various definitions of agri-tourism in the literature include: “The business of making farms travel destinations for educational and recreational purposes” (Schilling et al, 2006:9); “Agri-tourism is a term that can be used to describe nearly any activity in which a visitor to the farm or other agricultural setting contemplates the farm landscape or participated in an agricultural process for recreation or leisure purposes” (Tew and Barbieri, 2012:216); “An evolving form of rural tourism which is targeted at mainly urban consumers” (Rogerson and Rogerson, 2014:93); and “A business conducted by a farm operator for the enjoyment and education of the

public, to promote the products for the farm, and thereby generating additional farm income” (Krishna et al, 2020:18).

Emerging themes in these definitions are *visitors to a farm, education, recreation and enjoyment*. Therefore, this study uses the definition provided by Van Zyl (2019:19), as it combines various definitions and agri-tourism elements to define agri-tourism as “*any activity or attraction that allows the tourist to visit a working or commercial farm for the purpose of education, enjoyment or to be actively involved in the day-to-day activities of the farm*”.

## **2.2 Previous research**

Various researchers worldwide have investigated what farmers view as critical success factors for their agri-tourism business. Using keywords such as *critical success factors* and *agri-tourism*, research conducted in different countries were identified from the last five years (2017 to 2021).

### **2017 research in Italy:**

According to Broccardo, Culasso and Truant (2017:23), the *employees* of an agri-tourism business is critical to the success of an agri-tourism business. This includes both family members and community members employed within the agri-tourism business. Another critical success factor identified is *financial analysis*. The respondent's access to funding and their plans to use those funds are critical to planning.

### **2017 research in the USA:**

Comen (2017:10) identified *location* as the number one critical success factor for agri-tourism. For example, tourists choose their farm stay/accommodation based on its location and proximity to other tourist attractions (Khanal and Mishra, 2014:67). Secondly, *financial/enterprise analysis* was another critical success factor identified by this researcher. This includes financial planning and budgeting and keeping records of all business aspects. Thirdly, Comen (2017:12), identified *focus on the customer* as the most widely discussed in literature. This includes creating a strong connection and offering a quality product/service. Finally, other critical success factors identified by this researcher include *developing a strong brand* (farm identity) and *marketing*.

### **2018 research in Taiwan:**

Based on their research in Taiwan, Liu, Ho and Liu (2018:5) agree that developing a *strong brand* (farm identity) is critical to any agri-tourism business. These researchers elaborate that the *popularity of the farm* and the *good-will* that the farm/agri-tourism business has to offer are important. Secondly, *creating customer loyalty* is another critical success factor. Liu et al (2018:7) adds that customer loyalty is based on the customer experience. An appeal to the five senses (sight, smell, taste, touch and hearing) contributes to the customer experience.

### **2019 research in Thailand:**

With the focus on farm stay, an agri-tourism products, Suchartsuthatham (2019:17) identified six critical success factors. *Management* includes financial planning and human resources. *Design* focuses on trends and the visual impact the farm has on the tourists' experience. The remainder of the critical success factors include *government support, competition, differentiation, and a viral marketing strategy*.

### **2020 research in India:**

According to Krishna et al (2020:19), the dimensions of success are physical, psychological, socio-personal, operational and institutional. Based on their research conducted in India, Krishna et al (2020:19) identified five critical factors for any agri-tourism businesses' success. First, the *farm's physical location* is influenced by the attractiveness of the place, the availability of basic amenities on the farm and the distance to nearby cities/towns. Second, *customer satisfaction* is influenced by the quality of the service, the commitment of the employees and the safety and security of the tourists. Thirdly, *resource management* (farm resources) is not only a critical success factor but can also be linked to high-profit orientation. Fourthly, *promotion and publicity* are key factors that include advertising and marketing, good positioning in the market, and developing good

relationships with tourists. Finally, *government support* was listed as the least crucial factor when considering a successful agri-tourism business. This includes timely and subsidised credit to agri-tourism businesses and research.

#### **2020 research in India:**

Another study recently conducted in India by Kumbhar (2020:140) simply lists the following critical success factors: *location, financial and business analysis, understanding marketing elements* and *identifying customer needs and expectations*.

#### **2021 research in the USA:**

Quella et al (2021:10) identified four key success factors of agri-tourism, based on farmers' responses located in five different states in the USA. Firstly, *excellent customer service* was identified and included elements such as knowledgeable staff, a clean property, high-quality products and memorable experiences. Secondly, *partnerships and collaboration* were important themes. This can be between farm employees and the farm owner, between the farm and other businesses, or between the farm and outside resources. Thirdly, *marketing and technology* were identified. This focuses on being able to identify your target market (marketing) and being able to use social media platforms (technology) to reach that target market. Finally, *work ethics* were listed. This ranges from the skills of the management team to the employees' passion.

#### **2021 literature review around the world:**

Baipai, Chikuta, Gandiwa and Mutang (2021:1782) conducted a literature review, focusing on success factors for sustainable agri-tourism. This review included 105 online publications from five different continents (Asia, USA, Europe, Australia and Africa) that were published online between 2007 and 2021. After analysing the different publications based on their main themes, 19 factors were identified. The top 3 success factors include *agri-tourism products, conservation of biodiversity, and skills and competence*. Since less than 8% of the publications focused on Africa and more than 40% focused on Asia, these factors may differ from South African farmers' factors.

In conclusion, the literature had identified several critical success factors for an agri-tourism business. The most frequently mentioned factors include *customer service* (focus on the customer, customer loyalty, customer satisfaction, customer needs, quality customer service), *financial planning* (financial planning, resource management, business analysis), *marketing* (target market, promotion, technology, promotion, brand identity), and *location* (proximity to amenities, towns/cities, local tourist attractions). The following section will focus on the research method used within this study.

### **3. Method of research**

This study focuses on the Western Cape, a province in South Africa located in the southwest of the country. This province was selected based on its geographical area. It is rich in natural resources and agriculture, is home to many of South Africa's largest tourist attractions, and offers a wide variety of agri-tourism products (Van Zyl and Saayman, 2019). In order to gain an in-depth understanding as to what farmers view as critical success factors, *qualitative research methods* were used (Burns and Bush, 2014:146; George, 2019:148). Previous research on critical success factors have been discussed, but not within a South African context. Therefore, the method of research focuses on an *exploratory research design* (Burns and Bush, 2014:101; George, 2019:149). As each of the respondent's answers was based on their own experience, a *phenomenological approach* was followed (Daniel and Harland, 2018:39; Scribbr, 2020). This section focuses on the study area, on the data collection process (interviews), and discusses how the data was processed and analysed (qualitative data coding).

#### **3.1 Study area**

A qualitative research approach was used to gather primary data through semi-structured in-depth interviews. The research population was all farmers located in the Western Cape Province of South Africa that are currently offering agri-tourism on their farms. *Figure 2* illustrates the nine provinces of South Africa. The Western Cape Province can further be divided into six districts: the West Coast, City of Cape Town, Cape Winelands, Overberg, Garden Route, and the Central Karoo.



Source: Adapted from Mappr (2021)

**Figure 2:** A map of South Africa and the Western Cape

### 3.2 Data collection procedures

A semi-structured interview schedule was designed for this qualitative research. The interview schedule was divided into two sections, namely *Section A: Demographic profile*, and *Section B: Agri-tourism Development*. However, for this article, only the results from Section A (demographic profile) and the results from questions focusing on critical success factors in Section B will be discussed.

As the exact population size of this study is unknown, a *non-probability sampling method* was used (Burns and Bush, 2014:155; Queirós, Faria and Almeida, 2017:374). According to the literature, a sample size of 5-25 interviews (Creswell, 1998:64) or at least six interviews (Morse, 1994:225) would be sufficient. Based on an internet search of agri-tourism products in each province district (convenient sampling), 110 farmers were invited via email participate in the study and 33 interviews were conducted. All interviews were face-to-face, while the majority took place on the farm where the agri-tourism business is established (32 of the 33).

### 3.3 Data handling and analysis

All interviews were recorded (with consent) and later transcribed by the researcher using Microsoft® Office Excel 2016, together with the field notes. The data was first organised and prepared before it was analysed (Tracy, 2013:184). Next, the data coding started by identifying keywords or phrases (Daniel and Harland, 2018:101; Tracy, 2013:189). Once the primary coding phase was complete and a codebook created, a second coding phase was completed to examine each of the codes identified critically. This allowed the themes to be discussed in detail (Akinyode and Khan, 2018:169; Creswell, 2009:197).

## 4. Preliminary results and discussions

This section focuses on the results gathered from the interviews and the interpretation of these. First, the characteristics of the respondents are discussed (the demographic profile), followed by a list of popular agri-tourism products. Finally, the critical success factors are identified and discussed.

### 4.1 Characteristics of respondents

The demographic characteristics of the respondents are displayed in *Table 1*. Respondents were both male (61%) and female (39%), which is significant as previous research on agri-tourism in South Africa only had an 8% female response rate (Van Zyl, 2019:112). Most respondents were born between 1960 and 1979 (57%), indicating an average age of 51.88 years. Only eight respondents (24%) indicated that they had only completed matric, while all other respondents had some form of tertiary education ranging from a diploma to a master's degree.

Based on the role/position of each respondent on the farm, not all respondents took part in the final questions, identifying the size of the farm and percentage of the farm that is open to tourists. Most respondents indicated the farm is less than 500 hectares (52%), while the smallest farm is 0.5 hectares, and the largest farm is 16 000 hectares. While Baipai et al (2021:1785) identified size of farm as a (less important) critical success factor in the literature, this article indicates that agri-tourism can be implemented on any size farm.

**Table 1:** Respondent characteristics

Variable	Category	Number of respondents	Percentage
<b>Gender (n=33)</b>	Male	20	61%
	Female	13	39%
<b>Year born (n=33)</b>	1990 – 1999	3	9%
	1980 - 1989	5	15%
	1970 – 1979	8	24%
	1960 – 1969	11	33%
	1950 – 1959	6	18%
<b>Highest level of education (n=33)</b>	Matric	8	24%
	Diploma	16	48%
	Degree	3	9%
	Honours degree	3	9%
	Master’s degree	3	9%
<b>Total farm size (n=29)</b>	< 500 ha	15	52%
	500 – 4 999 ha	8	28%
	5 000 – 10 000 ha	2	7%
	> 10 000 ha	4	14%
<b>Percentage of the farm open to tourists (n=30)</b>	< 5%	6	20%
	5% – 49%	4	13%
	50% – 95%	4	13%
	> 95%	16	53%

#### 4.2 Popular agri-tourism products

Respondents were asked what type of agri-tourism products they offered on their farms. All 33 respondents participated in this question. Most of the respondents were offering *farm stay/accommodation* on their farms (64%) with assorted options, such as a bed & breakfast, guesthouse, cottage, chalet, caravan stand, camping site and dormitory. Similar results were found by Van Zyl and Van der Merwe (2021:544) when considering the whole of South Africa with the exception of hunting that was not found to be a popular agri-tourism activity in this study. Broccardo *et al.* (2017:8) found that almost all the respondents in their study in Italy were currently offering *farm stay/accommodation* (91%) on their farms. This also includes different options such as a guesthouse and camping.

Another popular agri-tourism product found in this study is the *sale of own products* (64%). These results include u-picking operations, roadside stands/farm stalls, wine sales, and farmers’ markets. Again, Broccardo *et al* (2017:8) found similar results as 80% of their respondents indicated the *sales of own agricultural products*.

Outdoor excursions that were well-represented in this study, include *hiking trails* (58%) and *cycling/mountain biking* (55%). Chase (2019:338) also identified hiking and other recreational activities as popular in the USA. *More than half of the respondents mentioned farm tours* (52%), and Comen (2017:8) agrees as 52.7% of respondents also indicated that they are currently offering farm tourism in Virginia, USA.

This concludes that the most popular agri-tourism products currently being offered by more than 50% of the respondents are farm stay/accommodation, sale of own products, hiking trails and farm tours.

#### 4.3 Critical success factors identified

In an open-ended question, respondents were asked what they deemed to be the critical success factors for implementing and managing an agri-tourism business. Thirty-two of the thirty-three respondents participated in this question (97%). While this question is very subjective and each respondent had their own motives for providing a specific answer, seven clear themes were identified. *Table 2* summarises the main themes.

**Table 2:** Critical success factors

Nr.	Factors	Number of respondents	Frequency
1	Market research and marketing	14	44%
2	Customer satisfaction	14	44%
3	Employees	13	41%
4	Financial and business planning	10	31%
5	Personality	9	28%
6	Location	8	25%
7	Unique concept/selling point	6	19%

*Market research and marketing (44%)* is one of the critical success factors identified with the highest frequency. This factor includes basic marketing of the agri-tourism business (traditional or social media), creating a positive image and brand recognition, and understanding who the tourists are, what they want and what they need. Respondent 10 stated, “You must offer that guy what he wants through and through” and respondent 33 added, “Offering people something by being in tuned with what they are looking for, but not everyone is your client.” This factor was also identified in the literature as a critical success factor by Comen (2017:10), Liu et al (2018:5), Krishna et al (2020:19), Kumbhar (2020:140), Quella et al (2021:10), and Baipai et al (2021:1785). Suchartsuthatham (2019:18) promotes a *viral* marketing strategy to ensure the maximum number of tourists are aware of the agri-tourism business.

*Customer satisfaction* is the second factor with the highest frequency (44%). Again, this factor was identified in the literature by several researchers as a critical success factor of agri-tourism (Comen, 2017:10; Krishna et al, 2020:19; Kumbhar, 2020:140; Liu et al, 2018:5; Quella et al, 2021:10). This factor includes providing a quality product/service, creating a positive tourist experience, giving individual attention to tourists, and listening to tourist feedback. According to Baipai et al (2021:1785) the range and quality of the agri-tourism product was indicated as the most important critical success factor based on 105 publications around the world. Suchartsuthatham (2019:17) adds that the design (physical layout) of the agri-tourism business can also contribute to customer satisfaction. Alfoqahaa (2018:184) found that the highest contributor to a successful small and medium-sized enterprise, is excellent customer service. Respondent 2 stated that “You must consistently and constantly deliver the same product.” Respondent 14 added, “Service, service, service. You must under-promise and over-deliver.”

The third most mentioned factor in this study was that of the *employees* (41%). Many respondents feel that they are only as strong as their weakest employee. Therefore, respondents placed an immense value on their employees, and many invested in them through further education and development. Other employee factors include making sure the staff are happy, listening to the staff, and including them in business discussions. Respondent 6 said, “Your workers must be satisfied and happy and from there you can do almost anything” and respondent 7 quoted, “Teamwork makes a dream work.” This is significant find, as this factor is not found commonly in the literature. Broccardo et al (2017:23) identified family members and local community members as a critical success factor for an agri-tourism business in Italy, while Baipai et al (2021:1785) list family involvement and community participation as two separate critical success factors.

*Financial and business planning* (31%) was also a frequently mentioned theme. This includes budgeting, keeping track of sales, day-to-day planning, stock management, having a feasible plan to be sustainable, constantly developing, and having a long-term commitment to the business. Respondent 26 pointed out, “Financial discipline is point number one, to keep a good record of everything.” Unfortunately, many respondents indicated that a lack of planning before implementing the agri-tourism products was as a challenge that took time to overcome. While Broccardo et al (2017:23) and Comen (2017:10) only mention financial planning, Kumbhar (2020:140) identified both financial and business planning as a critical success factor of agri-tourism.

Nine of the respondents were adamant that the owner/manager/front-of-house needs to have the *personality* (28%) to work with tourists. This includes having a passion for people, having the energy to assist people, being committed to the job, having patience with difficult tourists, and being willing to walk the extra mile for the tourists. Respondent 12 is of the opinion that, “You must have the right personality to be able to work with people. Hospitality is a talent.” A specific type of personality was not identified as a theme on its own in the literature but can be linked to what is needed for ensuring customer satisfaction (Comen, 2017:10; Krishna et al, 2020:19). However, for this study it is a factor on its own as possession of the type of personality described

above might obviate the need for less-educated workers to study further; rather, they might be able to learn on the job.

*Location* (25%) was identified as a less important critical success factor. Some respondents indicated that being far from other tourist attractions was a challenge and extra marketing was needed to make tourists aware of their agri-tourism business. Other respondents were satisfied with their farms' locations. They didn't need any marketing as they were located in a tourist hot spot. Respondent 17 focused on location as, "The proximity of being close to where the tourists are." Comen (2017:10), Krishna et al (2020:19), Kumbhar (2020:140), and Baipai et al (2021:1785) also identified the location as a critical success factor for farms in the USA and India. While considering the accommodation sector, specifically hotels, Fuentes-Medina, Hernández-Estárico and Morini-Marrero (2018:59) identified location as a critical success factor as it can contribute to a tourists' experience.

Finally, respondents identified a *unique concept/selling point* (19%). From a business perspective, respondents were aware that they needed something unique or different to convince a tourist to visit their farm and not a neighbouring farm. Respondents listed their own unique concept as feeding non-traditional farm animals (alpacas and lamas), only selling local products not available in the general supermarket and being situated in the mountains but close to the sea. Respondent 4 added, "You need to have a unique factor. That's why I have the vegetable garden and the recycling and the upcycling." According to Suchartsuthatham (2019:18), farmers should differentiate their agri-tourism products in order to attract more tourists.

In conclusion, this study identified seven critical success factors: market research and marketing, customer satisfaction, employees, financial and business planning, personality, location, and unique concept/selling point.

## **5. Conclusions and limitations of the study**

This study was the first research in South Africa that focused on identifying the critical success factors of an agri-tourism business, therefore also the contribution of this study. Based on the supply side of agri-tourism, farmers identified the critical success factors they deemed as important to develop and manage an agri-tourism business successfully in South Africa, specifically in the Western Cape Province. Therefore, this study contributes to the literature of agri-tourism and provides practical guidelines to farmers who are considering implementing an agri-tourism business in South Africa or who are already managing one. Based on the seven critical success factors identified in this study, the four most crucial factors are market research and marketing, customer satisfaction, the employees, and financial and business planning. When considering the critical success factors (*Table 2*) and most popular agri-tourism products/services (*c.f. 4.2*), it is clear that agri-tourism provides tourists with the opportunity to relax and enjoy the farm, as well as to learn more and be involved in farming activities. While there is research covering a variety of critical success factors within agri-tourism, the themes of employees, personality, and unique concept/selling point are not widely found in the literature.

While data collection was spread across all districts of the Western Cape and represented a large variety of agri-tourism products, the research is still limited to a single province in South Africa and not the whole country. As climate, natural resources and province government regulations differ in all nine provinces, the critical success factors may vary slightly from province to province.

In the Western Cape and South Africa in a larger context, agri-tourism research is still limited, with many opportunities for future research. Based on the three lesser-known themes, future research may focus on the value of employees within agri-tourism, the personality traits needed to manage an agri-tourism business, and on what unique concepts/selling points there are within agri-tourism.

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