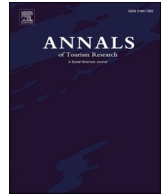




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Research note

Theorising township tourism: Moving beyond the ‘slum’

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Under apartheid, townships were earmarked as neighbourhoods for people of colour as part of the regime’s racial segregation programme. Despite general improvements in basic service delivery since the demise of apartheid (Todes & Turok, 2018), townships remain characterised by precarious living conditions and socio-economic challenges.

The motivations and scope of visits to townships have changed over time. This first guided ‘cultural’ township tours, and propaganda tours with apartheid officials showing so-called ‘model’ townships off to foreign reporters and politicians, date back to the 1960s (Booyens, 2021). In the following decades during the anti-apartheid struggle foreign visitors like human rights activists and observers, diplomats, reporters, and humanitarians frequented townships. After apartheid in the mid-1990s, leisure-based township tourism grew alongside political solidarity and charity work visits (Booyens, 2021; Frenzel, 2016).

Academic writing on township tours first appeared in the early 2000s. At the time, local governments invested in building anti-apartheid struggle heritage monuments, memorials and museums in several townships *inter alia* to stimulate tourism (Booyens, 2021). While concerns about poverty tourism were present from the onset, early observers regarded township tourism as a form of urban heritage tourism (see Hoogendoorn et al., 2020). Around 2009, a ‘slum’ tourism turn in the literature surfaced when certain international authors started to shift the focus away from heritage, pro-poor tourism, and local economic development (Hoogendoorn et al., 2020). These authors politicise townships to highlight concerns about neoliberalism, issues of power, continued depravity, and limited benefits from tourism. Thus, an enduring critique of township tourism centred on the valorisation of urban poverty by privileged foreign visitors – typically drawing on Urry’s ‘tourist gaze’ – emerged. While this critique offers a valid scholarly reading, it is

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one-sided as we argue here. We contend that the most frequently referenced texts styling township tourism as ‘slum’ tourism notably by global North authors – the mainstream literature in our view – dominate debates and sideline alternative interpretations. We stress that it is imperative to consider 1) whether townships should be regarded as ‘slums’ *per se* and 2) the politics of representation, as discussed below.

While there is disagreement about whether the use of ‘slum’ is appropriate for townships (see Frenzel, 2018), on the whole townships are not slums as per human settlement definitions (see Hoogendoorn et al., 2020). Class differentiation (middle-income residents living alongside very poor communities) is evident in large townships like Soweto (Frenzel et al., 2015; Kambule et al., 2024). Importantly, race, rather than poverty, determined township formation under apartheid. The systematic forced removal of persons of colour to townships on the outskirts of cities (Todes & Turok, 2018) differs from slum formation elsewhere in cases where the initial settlement of the rural poor on urban peripheries was informal/unplanned. We, therefore, emphasise that path-dependent urban formation processes result in distinct localised dynamics which differ from place to place. Furthermore, the label ‘slum’ impugns the dignity of township residents and stigmatises their settlements (Hoogendoorn et al., 2020). The uncircumspect use of this label by privileged academics sparks concern about their power and positionality *vis-à-vis* ‘naming’ social phenomena (Tzanelli, 2018). There has been limited engagement in the mainstream scholarship with decolonial theory privileging ‘subaltern’ voices instead to counter the arrogance and epistemic violence of those ‘speaking for others’ (Chambers & Buzinde, 2015; Tzanelli, 2018). Decoloniality urges ‘other’ ways of thinking and knowing about tourism (Chambers & Buzinde, 2015) and, indeed, the places where it occurs.

We, accordingly, suggest that the related social science discipline of urban studies, specifically critical urbanism that draws insights from decolonial theory, provides an avenue for theorising tourism in areas like townships. Critical urbanism offers alternative interpretations of informality, urban complexity, lived experiences, and narratives of marginalised people and places in the global South (Parnell & Oldfield, 2014). While critical urbanism is critiqued for emphasising localism and difference rather than generating generalisable insights, we maintain that researchers fail to develop nuanced understandings of ‘slum’ tourism when they do not pay proper attention to the complexities of places where it occurs. We question the value of comparative research focussed on the commonalities between global ‘slum’ tourism cases – an approach suggested by some authors to overcome the descriptive nature of this body of research and accordingly build theory (see Frenzel et al., 2015). However, an all-encompassing understanding of ‘slum’ tourism might neither be possible (Rogerson, 2014) nor desirable as we argue. Instead of seeking to develop a global theory of ‘slum’ tourism, we propose that there is considerable scope for advancing knowledge of ‘slum’ tourism from the position of ‘place’, in line with recommendations by McCabe (2024) and the locational turn in the social sciences alike.

Place-based interpretations, as employed by some township tourism authors (see Hoogendoorn et al., 2020), are not new to urban tourism studies (Edwards et al., 2008). However, important place-based insights remain marginal within mainstream ‘slum’ tourism literature - studies characteristically adopt a demand-side perspective which filters out the role of place. Normative arguments concerning the touristic valorisation, and the ethics of poverty voyeurism are continuously recycled. Conversely, a supply-side emphasis foregrounds underexamined locational factors like tourism attractions, facilities, infrastructure, socio-economic and -political dynamics, placemaking, urban planning, and the evolution of tourism areas (Edwards et al., 2008; Ma & Hassink, 2013). Below, we draw on our experience of researching township tourism to illustrate how an emphasis on place enhances understanding of the phenomenon.

Over the last 30 years, township tourism has diversified to include restaurants, food markets, arts and crafts shops, adventure experiences and creative tourism, especially in Soweto and Langa where tourism is most developed (Booyens, 2021; Booyens & Rogerson, 2019). Urban theory aids us in going beyond describing tourism to explaining *why* tourism has emerged, diversified, and accordingly evolved, in townships. First, tourism expansion importantly forms part of service sector growth characterised by post-Fordist urban change on a wider scale in South African cities. Second, tourism diversification is a function of leisure-led consumption in townships by visitors and locals alike (Booyens & Rogerson, 2019). For instance, residents and visitors from the greater Johannesburg flock to Soweto’s Vilakazi Precinct restaurants and bars over weekends (Hoogendoorn et al., 2020; Kambule et al., 2024). Third, cultural heritage resources underscore tourism development in townships. This is significant from an evolutionary economic geography perspective: economic novelty (tourism in the case of townships) stimulates area development (Ma & Hassink, 2013) by drawing on core assets (heritage in the case of townships) (Booyens, 2021). Fourth, tourism diversification has created new economic opportunities in townships. We offer recommendations for advancing the township and, indeed, the ‘slum’ tourism scholarship next.

Understanding tourism area development

Evolutionary perspectives on tourism area development highlight the role of tourism in contemporary urban economies (Ma & Hassink, 2013). Tourism area change characteristically leads to touristification (Hagemans et al., 2023), as also observed in townships (Kambule et al., 2024). The micro-geographies of touristified consumption (Hagemans et al., 2023) in places like townships remain under-investigated. Additionally, appropriate policy responses to touristification in low-income areas deserve further, locally engaged, research attention.

Honouring local voices

Decolonial theory emphasises the importance of local voices, particularly of Indigenous peoples, to build theory from the bottom up. Despite some notable exceptions (Hoogendoorn et al., 2020; Muldoon, 2020), there is a general lack of engagement in the mainstream literature with local perspectives not least of township residents, but also local policymakers and stakeholders. The normative conceptualisation of township residents as the poor ‘gazed’ upon strips them of their agency and reinforces a static view of

their living conditions and lives. Therefore, incorporating local views, integral to both supply-side and place-based perspectives, is pertinent for future research.

Appreciating culture and heritage

We need a new view of the ‘slum’ beyond an emphasis on harsh living conditions to appreciate the agency of residents and their reactions to hardship which often drives creativity. The value of culture in contemporary urbanisation, although not new to tourism studies (Richards, 2011), provides a lens for investigating creativity in townships (Booyens & Rogerson, 2019). This said, creative tourism, creative placemaking, and the associated risk of gentrification require further research attention in areas like townships.

Equally, the significance of heritage has routinely been overlooked. Studies emphasise the ‘touristic consumption of heritage’, but few recognise the urban heritage of the so-called ‘slums’ (Yagi & Frenzel, 2022). While interpretations of urban heritage differ, our research shows that local culture and anti-apartheid struggle heritage are valued by township residents and visitors alike (Hoogendoorn et al., 2020).

Seeing informality

Informal entrepreneurship as a survivalist self-help venture, emerged in townships because of extraordinarily high levels of (especially youth) unemployment and a general lack of social security – typical in the global South. Critical urbanism allows for interrogating informality linked to tourism. Early township tourism research stressed that tour operators were predominantly White-owned businesses, operating from outside townships while residents derived limited benefits. The diversification of township tourism in recent decades has resulted in new opportunities and a greater involvement of Black African entrepreneurs (Booyens, 2021), including women (Hikido, 2018). Nonetheless, informal tourism-related entrepreneurship/livelihoods in townships remain underexamined.

In conclusion, we contend that townships, and similar areas in the global South, remain fruitful locations for tourism inquiries, but stress that research should honour local voices and move beyond narrow views of the ‘slum’ to stay relevant.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Irma Booyens: Writing – original draft, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Gijsbert Hoogendoorn:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

We have nothing to declare.

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