
Developing a Sustainable Model to Enhance the Packaging and Promotion of Township Tourism

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Abstract: South African townships, shaped by a legacy of segregation and exclusion, are rich in cultural heritage and historical value. These areas hold significant potential for tourism development. However, they remain largely underutilized due to limited visibility, poor community engagement, and fragmented marketing strategies. Existing tourism models often overlook marginalised communities, resulting in unequal benefit distribution and unsustainable practices. This study proposes a sustainable model aimed at enhancing the packaging and promotion of township tourism, grounded in Community-Based Tourism, Stakeholder Theory and participatory tourism development principles. The model emphasizes community participation, cultural authenticity, stakeholder collaboration and digital marketing to improve destination appeal and inclusivity. A quantitative research approach was adopted, with data collected from 150 respondents, including tourism operators, community leaders and policymakers. Statistical analyses using SPSS (Version 28.0) revealed significant relationships between community involvement and tourism success, as well as between digital marketing usage and destination visibility. Findings reveal that tourism initiatives grounded in cultural heritage, community participation and local ownership are more sustainable and appealing to visitors. The study contributes a practical, theoretically informed framework to guide collaborative planning and effective promotion in township tourism. Ultimately, the model offers a pathway for fostering inclusive economic growth; preserving cultural identity; and promoting sustainable tourism in historically marginalized communities

Keywords: community participation; cultural heritage; digital marketing; sustainability; township tourism

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism has long been recognised as a vehicle for economic development, social transformation and cultural exchange (Roger-son & Visser, 2020). In South Africa, township tourism presents a unique opportunity to revitalise historically marginalised communities by showcasing their rich heritage, cultural vibrancy and resilience. Townships such as Soweto, Khayelitsha and Umlazi embody historical narratives as well as contemporary socio-economic dynamics, thus offering tourists immersive and authentic experiences (George, 2021). Despite this potential, township tourism remains

largely underdeveloped and inconsistently promoted. Mthembu and Tichaawa 2021 assert that the packaging and promotion of township tourism products suffer from fragmentation; a lack of strategic direction; limited community involvement; and the inadequate use of modern marketing channels such as digital platforms. These challenges hinder the growth of a sustainable Tourism sector that could generate equitable economic benefits for both local communities and the broader economy. Addressing these gaps is therefore critical to ensuring inclusive, sustainable and socially responsible tourism development in townships. The persistent legacy of apartheid spatial planning has created a dichotomy between the urban cores and township peripheries. Townships were initially established as labour reservoirs, disconnected from the formal economy and social infrastructure (Dube, 2020). This structural marginalisation continues to influence development efforts in the Tourism sector, resulting in township tourism initiatives that often lack coherence, visibility and market readiness. Mainstream tourism models and frameworks have largely failed to include township stakeholders in strategic planning and marketing processes, thereby reinforcing unequal benefit distribution (Ndlovu & Rogerson, 2020).

According to Butler and Rogerson (2023), tourism in townships is frequently framed through poverty tourism or slum tourism narratives that commodify poverty rather than celebrate resilience, innovation and heritage. Such narratives perpetuate stereotypes and diminish the appeal of township experiences for both local and international tourists seeking genuine cultural engagement. Whilst these risks are acknowledged in current discourse, they are often not critically unpacked. For instance, the commodification of culture can lead to staged or superficial experiences that undermine the authenticity and long-term sustainability of township tourism. A more sustainable approach requires a shift towards community-led storytelling, collaborative governance and equitable participation, embedded in how township tourism is packaged and promoted. The concept of sustainable tourism has evolved to emphasise not only environmental protection but also social equity and economic inclusivity (UNWTO, 2022). In the context of township tourism, sustainability involves empowering local communities to take ownership of tourism development, ensuring that benefits are equitably shared, as well as preserving cultural identity. Therefore, a sustainable model for township tourism must integrate key elements such as community participation, stakeholder collaboration, cultural authenticity and innovative marketing strategies. This study responds to the growing demand for inclusive and context-sensitive tourism strategies by proposing a sustainable model aimed at enhancing the packaging and promotion of township tourism. The model explicitly addresses the curating, bundling, pricing and communication of tourism products to reflect local context and visitor preferences. It also focuses on promotion, leveraging digital marketing, community storytelling and participatory content creation to enhance destination visibility and appeal. Community involvement is central to the model, as research has shown that community-based tourism initiatives are more likely to succeed when residents are active participants rather than passive beneficiaries (Mbatha & Grobler, 2023). Community members possess intrinsic knowledge of local culture, history and values that can be harnessed to create compelling and authentic tourist experiences.

Another critical component of the model is stakeholder collaboration. Successful township tourism requires co-ordination amongst multiple actors, including municipal governments, private tour operators, civil society organisations and community leaders. However, in many cases, these actors operate in silos, with little alignment of goals or communication. A sustainable model must therefore include mechanisms for inclusive governance, transparent decision-making and joint marketing efforts (Rogerson, 2023). Such collaboration enhances efficiency, builds trust and fosters a shared vision amongst stakeholders. Marketing remains a significant challenge for township tourism. Whilst the global tourism industry has embraced digital transformation, township tourism enterprises often lack access to the digital tools, technical skills or financial resources required for online marketing (Ngcobo & Mhlongo, 2022). This digital divide limits reach and competitiveness. To address this, the model incorporates strategies for digital capacity building, social media engagement and content co-creation with local storytellers and artists. Enhancing digital marketing capabilities will help township destinations tap into broader domestic and international markets, particularly amongst experience-seeking travellers who value authenticity and cultural immersion. There is also growing recognition of the potential role that local youth and entrepreneurs can play in revitalising township tourism. With appropriate training and mentorship, young people can serve as guides, storytellers, content creators and tourism ambassadors. Youth engagement adds innovation and energy to the sector whilst contributing to social inclusion and employment creation. As such, the proposed model focuses on youth empowerment through tourism enterprise development and training programmes. The fluctuating nature of global tourism trends further highlights the importance of adaptable and resilient models. The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the vulnerability of traditional tourism value-chains and accelerated the shift towards digital and localised tourism (UNWTO, 2022). Townships, with their open spaces, cultural depth

and community-oriented offerings, are well-positioned to benefit from these shifts if properly supported. The proposed model thus incorporates lessons from post-pandemic recovery to build a resilient Township Tourism sector.

Therefore, township tourism in South Africa holds transformative potential for inclusive development but remains constrained by structural, strategic and marketing limitations. This study addresses these challenges by developing a sustainable model that clearly defines how township tourism should be packaged and promoted. The model integrates key elements, including community participation, stakeholder collaboration, cultural authenticity and digital marketing. It draws on quantitative data from 150 respondents, including tourism operators, community leaders and policymakers, to ensure that recommendations are grounded in local realities. By offering a structured and practical approach, this study contributes to academic literature and provides actionable insights for policymakers and tourism practitioners aiming to unlock the full potential of township tourism. The research objectives guiding this study are to (1), identify critical factors influencing township tourism success; (2) develop a model for effectively packaging and promoting township tourism products; and (3) assess the model's applicability for enhancing inclusivity, sustainability and cultural authenticity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Township tourism in South Africa presents a promising avenue for inclusive socio-economic development, cultural preservation and community empowerment. Historically marginalized urban settlements, shaped by apartheid-era spatial segregation, possess distinctive cultural landscapes, vibrant artistic expressions and dynamic entrepreneurial activities that remain largely untapped by mainstream tourism markets (George, 2021; Ndlovu & Rogerson, 2020; Rogerson, 2021). Township tourism offers an opportunity to diversify the national tourism industry beyond conventional attractions by providing authentic experiences that showcase local customs, heritage and creativity. This diversification can stimulate economic growth at the grassroots level through employment creation, nurturing small businesses and circulating revenue within communities (Mbatha & Grobler, 2023; Rogerson, 2023). Despite this potential, township tourism faces persistent challenges that hinder growth and sustainability. Structural constraints, namely inadequate infrastructure, limited financial and technical resources and the lack of formalized planning, restrict the capacity of township operators to scale their offerings or attract substantial tourist flows (Ndlovu & Rogerson, 2020). Fragmented governance, inconsistent policy support and systemic socio-economic inequalities, including poverty, unemployment and social exclusion, further limit community participation and equitable benefit distribution (Rogerson, 2021; George, 2021). Together, these factors create a fragmented tourism system that is weakly positioned in domestic and international markets. To address these challenges, sustainable and context-sensitive approaches are required, guided by principles that harmonize community aspirations with market realities. The concept of sustainable tourism emphasizes economic viability; cultural and environmental preservation; social equity; and the empowerment of host communities (UNWTO, 2022; Saarinen, 2017; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2018). In the context of township tourism, sustainability extends beyond environmental concerns to rectify historical marginalization, ensure equitable participation, and build community resilience.

Community engagement is widely recognized as central to sustainable tourism development. The Community-Based Tourism (CBT) paradigm advocates for participatory planning, local ownership, skill development and equitable benefit distribution, thereby ensuring that communities retain agency over tourism resources and decision-making (Goodwin, 2020; Hlatshwayo & Rogerson, 2022). Townships possess rich cultural capital, including oral histories, traditional practices and storytelling abilities, which are essential for creating authentic and immersive tourism experiences (Mbatha & Grobler, 2023). Empirical studies indicate that co-created tourism initiatives enhance visitor satisfaction, encourage repeat visitation and generate positive word-of-mouth, strengthening the economic viability of township enterprises (Ndlovu et al., 2021; Mbatha & Grobler, 2023). Importantly, community participation also empowers residents to control tourism assets; participate in governance; and contribute to poverty alleviation, social inclusion and local economic development (Rogerson, 2023). However, without structured platforms for engagement, communities risk exclusion, marginalization and limited control over revenue flows, a critical aspect of power relations that affects sustainability and equity in township tourism (George, 2021; Mbatha & Grobler, 2023). Tourism is a complex system involving multiple actors, including municipal authorities, private operators, NGOs, community groups and tourists. Effective co-ordination amongst these stakeholders is vital to ensure sustainable and cohesive tourism growth. Stakeholder Theory emphasizes balancing the interests, rights and contributions of all actors to co-create value and enhance project legitimacy (Freeman, 2010; Jamal & Getz, 1995).

Integrated development models combining CBT and collaborative governance principles have demonstrated that joint decision-making, transparent processes and the equitable distribution of benefits promote social cohesion, economic sustainability and trust amongst stakeholders (Hossain & Uddin, 2018; Rogerson & Visser, 2020; Rogerson, 2023). These approaches address the fragmentation often seen in township tourism, where actors operate in silos and fail to share knowledge, resources or marketing networks. Importantly, these models also allow for digital marketing integration, amplifying visibility and aligning promotional strategies across stakeholders (Ngcobo, 2022). Township tourism is frequently framed through slum or poverty tourism narratives, which commodify poverty rather than celebrate resilience, heritage and innovation (Butler & Rogerson, 2023). Such representations reinforce stereotypes, alienate local communities, and diminish the authenticity and appeal of experiences for tourists seeking meaningful cultural engagement.

Sustainable township tourism requires ethical mediation to preserve cultural identity and promote authentic storytelling. Community participation and the co-creation of experiences are essential to ensure that tourism products genuinely reflect local heritage and values (Mbatha, 2021; Smith et al., 2022). A critical analysis of existing literature shows that top-down initiatives often fail to account for power imbalances, resulting in unequal revenue control; the marginalization of local actors; and the creation of tourism enclaves that extract value without community benefit (George, 2021; Ndlovu & Rogerson, 2020). By embedding cultural authenticity at the core of tourism planning, townships can counter these risks whilst fostering empowerment, inclusion and sustainable development.

Effectively packaging and promoting township tourism requires leveraging digital tools to reach broader markets. Traditional methods, flyers, print media and informal networks are insufficient for digitally connected, experience-seeking travellers (Ngcobo, 2022). Technologies such as social media marketing, online booking systems, virtual reality tours and influencer collaborations enable personalized engagement, destination branding and visitor loyalty (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Xiang et al., 2017; Mabaso & Mhlanga, 2022). However, a persistent digital divide within townships, limited connectivity, lack of devices and low digital literacy restrict access to these opportunities (Dlamini & Makhanya, 2021; Mabaso & Mhlanga, 2022). Addressing these barriers requires capacity-building initiatives, infrastructure development and inclusive policies that democratize access to digital technologies and support digital entrepreneurship in township tourism. Integrating digital strategies with community participation and stakeholder collaboration amplifies visibility, promotes equitable representation, and enhances the market competitiveness of township destinations.

THEORETICAL INTEGRATION

Guided by the literature, this study adopts a dual theoretical framework combining Community-Based Tourism (CBT) and Stakeholder Theory. CBT emphasizes cultural authenticity, local ownership, empowerment and participatory decision-making, whilst Stakeholder Theory provides a structural basis for co-ordinated planning, governance and marketing (Freeman, 2010; Goodwin, 2020; Jamal & Getz, 1995). The integration of these frameworks addresses the critical gaps identified in township tourism, namely low community involvement, fragmented governance, unequal benefit-sharing and limited digital marketing capacity (Ndlovu & Rogerson, 2020; Mabaso & Mhlanga, 2022; Rogerson, 2023). By drawing on these theories, the proposed model aims to enhance township tourism through:

- Leveraging community cultural capital for authentic experiences;
- Strengthening multi-stakeholder collaboration for inclusive governance;
- Incorporating digital marketing tools to improve visibility and competitiveness; and
- Ensuring the equitable distribution of socio-economic benefits.

The reviewed literature demonstrates that sustainable township tourism requires integrated approaches combining community participation, stakeholder collaboration, cultural authenticity and digital promotion. Critical gaps in current models, fragmented planning, the exclusion of local actors and insufficient market visibility underscore the need for a model that addresses structural, strategic and ethical dimensions. Grounded in CBT and Stakeholder Theory, the proposed framework synthesizes empirical insights and best-practices to guide inclusive, authentic and digitally-enabled township tourism development.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a quantitative research approach, appropriate for measuring the relationships between the key variables influencing the packaging and promotion of township tourism. A quantitative design enabled the systematic collection, analysis and interpretation of numerical data related to community participation, stakeholder collaboration, digital marketing usage and tourism success. This approach allowed the research to identify statistically significant relationships between these variables, providing a solid empirical foundation for the development of a Sustainable Township Tourism Model. The study was conducted in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), South Africa, a province known for its rich socio-cultural heritage and diverse township tourism potential. Four townships were purposively selected based on the presence of existing tourism activities and the potential for future tourism development. This selection ensured that the research captured both operational realities and emerging opportunities within township tourism.

A purposive sampling technique was used to select 150 respondents, comprising tour operators, community leaders, local business owners and government tourism officials. Participants were chosen for their direct involvement in township tourism development and marketing. The sample was carefully balanced to include perspectives across key stakeholder groups, thus ensuring the representation of gender, youth entrepreneurs and experienced tourism practitioners. This approach ensured that insights reflected both strategic and operational realities of township tourism. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire consisting of closed-ended and Likert-scale items designed to capture information on respondents' roles, digital marketing usage, perceptions of tourism success and levels of community engagement. Tourism success, the dependent variable in the study, was operationalised as a composite measure capturing perceived increases in tourist numbers, revenue generation and visitor satisfaction. Community participation and digital marketing usage were measured through self-reported engagement and activity levels within the Tourism sector. To ensure content validity, the questionnaire underwent a pre-test with 10 stakeholders who were not part of the main sample. Feedback from the pre-test informed refinements to question wording, structure and format to improve clarity and reduce ambiguity. Additionally, the questionnaire was reviewed by subject-matter experts in tourism and quantitative research.

The reliability of the instrument was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with all scales exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70, thus confirming internal consistency: Community Participation $\alpha = 0.82$, Digital Marketing Usage $\alpha = 0.79$ and Tourism Success $\alpha = 0.85$. Collected data were analyzed using SPSS Statistics Version 28.0. Descriptive statistics summarized respondents' demographic profiles, experience levels and responses to key items. Inferential statistical analyses, including Pearson's correlation and multiple regression, examined the relationships between community participation, digital marketing usage and tourism outcomes. The limitations of these statistical tests are acknowledged, including the inability of correlation analysis to establish causality and the potential influence of unmeasured variables. Ethical standards were strictly observed throughout the study. The research received full ethical clearance from the Institutional Research Ethics Committee of the Durban University of Technology (DUT). Participants were fully informed about the study's purpose, their right to decline or withdraw at any time, and the manner in which their data would be used. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained, with no personally identifiable information collected or reported.

FINDINGS AND RESULTS

The quantitative data were analysed using SPSS Statistics (Version 28.0) to examine the relationships between community participation, stakeholder collaboration, and digital marketing in township tourism promotion. The results are presented in an integrated narrative that aligns with the study's research questions, ensuring that each figure and table is clearly explained, interpreted and linked to both the conceptual framework and the proposed model. The first step in the analysis focused on the composition of respondents to contextualize the findings. Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of the 150 participants by stakeholder group, with 40% being tour operators, 35% community leaders and 25% policymakers. This balanced representation captures perspectives across all key actors in township tourism, ensuring that both operational and governance dimensions are reflected in the results. The prominence of tour operators highlights their central role in shaping township tourism experiences, consistent with George (2019), who notes that local operators often anchor tourism value-chains in marginalised communities.

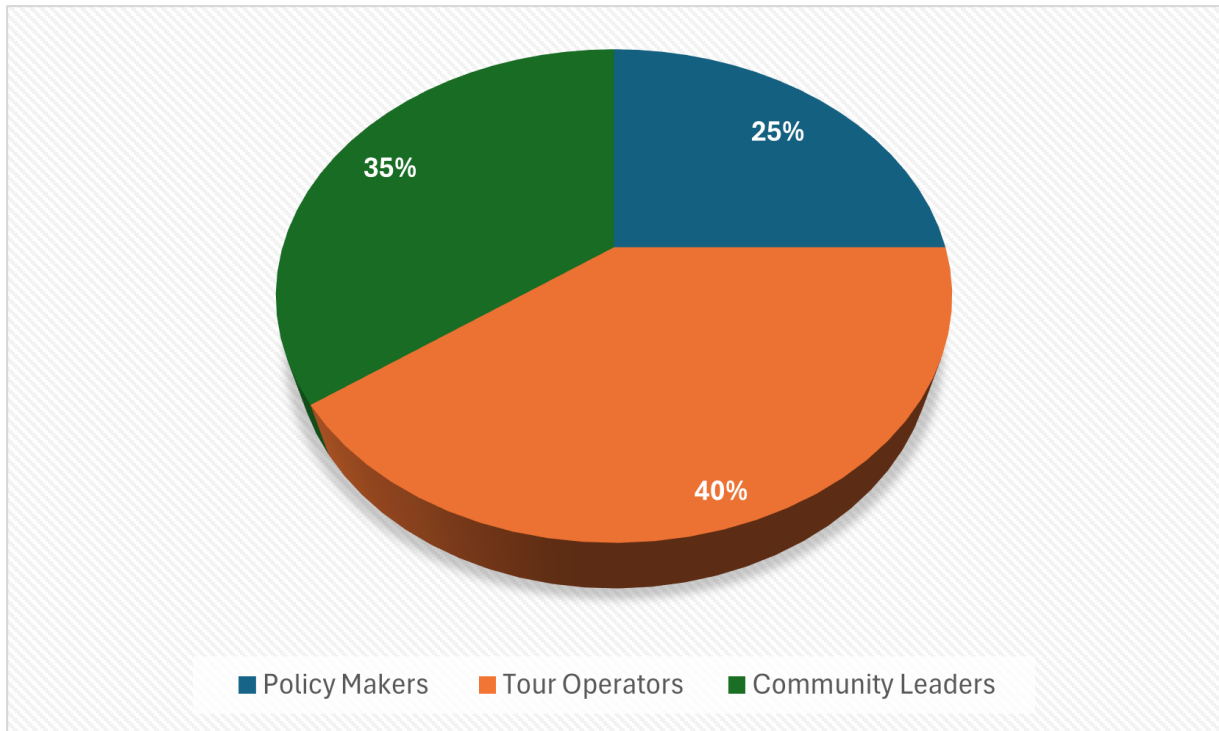


Figure 1. Distribution of respondents by stakeholder group (n=150)

To further assess respondent credibility, Table 1 details the duration of experience in tourism roles. Most respondents (62%) reported more than three years of experience; 24.7% had between one and three years; and 13.3% less than one year. This demonstrates that most participants possess substantial operational knowledge, allowing them to provide informed insights into community participation, marketing practices and stakeholder collaboration. The combination of stakeholder diversity and experience provides a solid foundation for examining the study’s primary variables, ensuring that interpretations are grounded in practical knowledge (Moswete & Thapa, 2017).

Table 1. Respondents’ Experience in tourism roles

Experience Level	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Less than 1 year	20	13.3
1 to 3 years	37	24.7
More than 3 years	93	62.0
Total Responses	150	100%

The importance of community participation emerged as a critical theme. As shown in Figure 2, approximately 40% of respondents agreed and 38% strongly agreed that community engagement is essential for township tourism success. Only a small fraction disagreed or remained neutral, indicating a strong consensus. This finding supports the inclusion of community participation as a foundational pillar in the proposed model and aligns with Mahajan (2021) and Scheyvens (2011), who argue that inclusive participation fosters cultural authenticity, local ownership and sustainable tourism outcomes. Stakeholder narratives further reinforced these insights, with many respondents noting that tourism products without community involvement often lack authenticity and fail to resonate with visitors, echoing Smith et al. (2022) on the risks of cultural commodification.

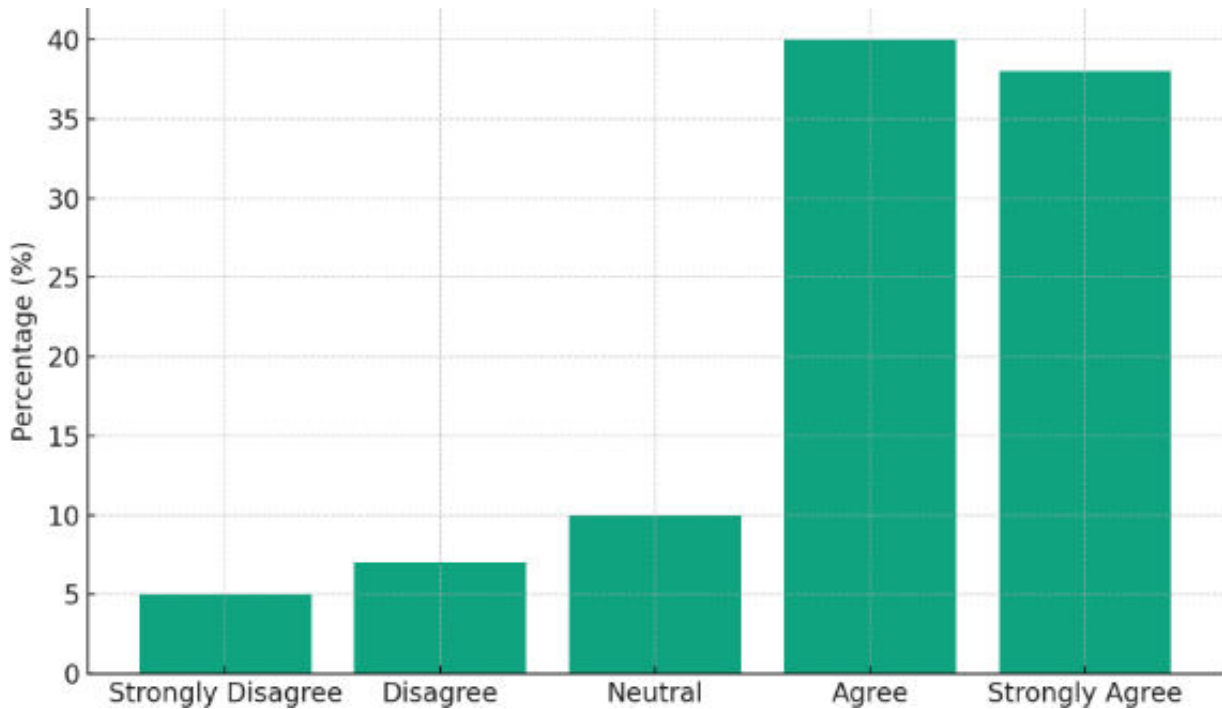


Figure 2. Agreement levels on the importance of community participation

The study also explored digital marketing adoption and challenges. Table 2 indicates that 68% of respondents use digital platforms to promote township tourism products, reflecting a growing recognition of the importance of online visibility through platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Google My Business and TripAdvisor. However, 32% reported not using digital tools, and 54% identified barriers including limited skills and poor connectivity. This highlights a digital divide that constrains township tourism’s reach and competitiveness, reinforcing the necessity of digital marketing as a core pillar in the model. The remaining 46% of respondents reported no significant challenges, suggesting that a portion of stakeholders either have digital literacy or access to sufficient tools and support. These insights provide practical guidance for interventions, emphasizing the need for capacity-building initiatives, improved internet access and targeted training to enhance digital engagement in township tourism (Mkhize & Dlamini, 2023; Tse & Tung, 2020).

Table 2. Digital marketing usage and challenges

Digital Marketing Usage	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Uses digital marketing	102	68.0
Does not use	48	32.0
Challenges Faced	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Limited Skills/Connectivity	81	54.0
No significant challenge	69	46.0

To investigate the relationships between the variables, Figure 3 presents scatterplots illustrating correlations between community participation and tourism success, and between digital marketing usage and destination visibility. Both plots demonstrate positive trends, indicating that higher levels of community engagement and digital marketing adoption are associated with improved tourism outcomes. The scatterplots highlight the complementary nature of social and technological factors, reinforcing their centrality in the Sustainable Township Tourism Model.

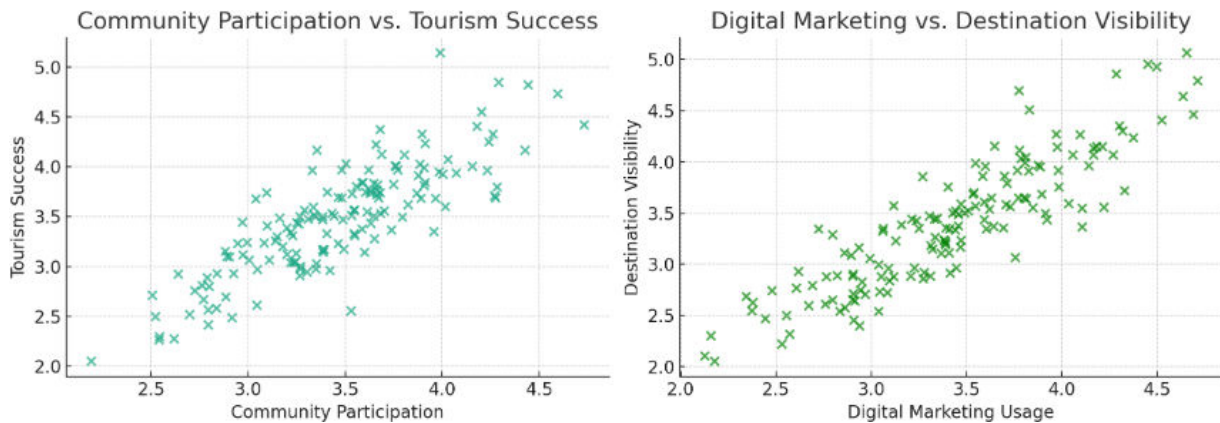


Figure 3. Scatterplots showing Correlations

Regression analysis further tested the predictive power of the independent variables. Table 3 includes the R^2 value and references the reliability of the measures. Community participation has a beta coefficient of 0.39 ($t = 6.42, p < 0.001$) and digital marketing usage has a beta coefficient of 0.35 ($t = 5.85, p < 0.001$). The R^2 value of 0.54 indicates that 54% of the variance in tourism success is explained by community participation and digital marketing usage combined. Reliability for the scales, measured by Cronbach’s alpha, confirms internal consistency with values of 0.82 for community participation, 0.79 for digital marketing usage, and 0.85 for tourism success.

Table 3. Multiple Regression Results Predicting Tourism Success

Predictor	Beta (β)	t-value	p-value
Community Participation	0.39	6.42	<0.001
Digital Marketing	0.35	5.85	<0.001
Model			$R^2=0.54$

The empirical results validate two of the four pillars of the proposed model, namely community participation and digital marketing, with strong statistical support. Although stakeholder collaboration and cultural authenticity were not directly tested in the regression, survey responses and qualitative insights from stakeholders indicate their foundational importance. Stakeholders highlighted co-ordination challenges and emphasized the need for joint marketing, inclusive governance and shared decision-making, hence justifying the inclusion of stakeholder collaboration as a pillar. Cultural authenticity, although not quantitatively measured, was consistently highlighted by respondents as essential, emphasizing the importance of preserving local heritage, storytelling and authentic experiences. This aligns with literature highlighting the ethical and social dimensions of township tourism.

Finally, the study synthesizes these findings into a proposed sustainable model for township tourism, as illustrated in Figure 4. Tour operators are positioned at the core, serving as connectors between communities, tourists and broader tourism networks. They facilitate tourism experiences, promote local culture and link products to marketing channels, thereby influencing both supply-side dynamics, such as community participation, and demand-side outcomes, including visitor engagement. Community engagement, digital marketing, stakeholder collaboration and cultural authenticity form the four foundational pillars, all empirically grounded in the survey data and statistical analysis. Whilst the model is conceptually robust and statistically supported, its practical implementation remains aspirational and would benefit from future empirical validation, such as pilot projects or stakeholder workshops in real township contexts. Environmental sustainability, although not directly measured in this study, remains an important consideration for future refinements. Its exclusion was intentional, focusing the model on social, cultural and economic dimensions where data were most robust, but future work should integrate environmental factors to fully realise a comprehensive sustainability framework.

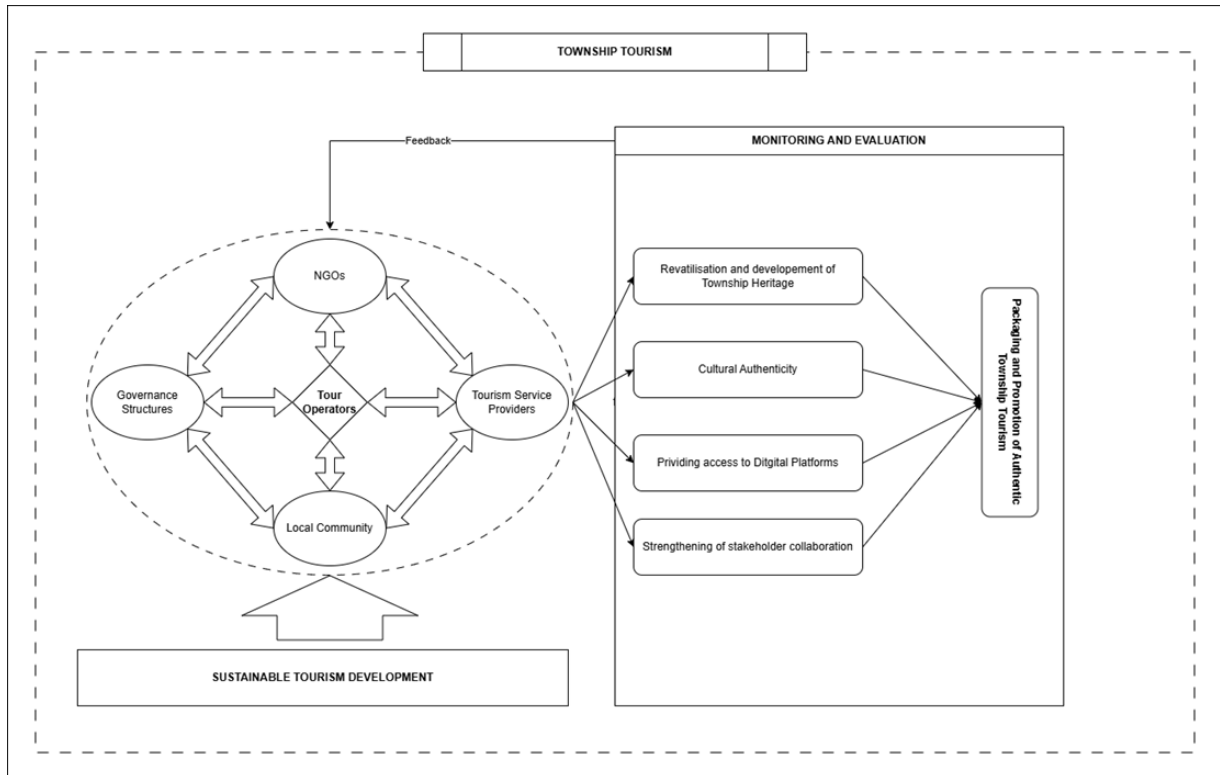


Figure 4. Proposed sustainable model for enhancing the packaging and promotion of township tourism

The presentation of Figures 1–4 and provides a cohesive and empirical foundation for understanding the relationships between community participation, digital marketing, stakeholder collaboration, and tourism outcomes. Each visual representation and table are directly linked to the research questions and interpreted in the context of the proposed Sustainable Township Tourism Model, highlighting the roles of tour operators, community engagement, digital marketing, stakeholder collaboration and cultural authenticity. These findings collectively inform the development of actionable strategies to enhance township tourism, bridging empirical evidence with practical implications for policy and practice.

DISCUSSION

Township tourism in South Africa remains an underutilised segment of the tourism economy despite its potential to foster inclusive growth, cultural preservation and community empowerment. This study highlights systemic challenges in township tourism, including fragmented stakeholder co-ordination; limited community participation; insufficient digital presence; and weak marketing strategies. These challenges underscore the need for a context-specific model that can unify stakeholders, promote local ownership, and leverage both social and technological resources. The proposed sustainable model directly addresses these gaps by integrating empirical findings with theoretical insights from sustainable and participatory tourism literature (Scheyvens, 2011; Rogerson, 2021; Mbatha, 2021). The analysis of the respondent composition reveals diverse stakeholder perspectives, including tour operators, community leaders and policymakers. Tour operators, who constitute 40% of respondents, are positioned centrally in the model due to their operational capacity and ability to connect communities with markets, facilitating both supply-side and demand-side outcomes. Table 1 confirms that 62% of respondents have over three years of experience, reflecting a reservoir of local knowledge often underutilised in planning. According to Moswete and Thapa (2017), leveraging this experience through structured community participation is essential to enhancing tourism outcomes.

Community participation emerged as a foundational pillar. The results indicate that 78% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed on its importance, supporting prior research emphasizing that inclusive governance enhances cultural authenticity and sustainability (Mahajan, 2021; Scheyvens, 2011). Stakeholder narratives further indicate that products developed without community input risk cultural commodification, echoing the

work of Smith et al. (2022). Digital marketing also plays a central role. Whilst 68% of stakeholders actively use digital platforms, 32% do not; and 54% report barriers such as limited skills and connectivity, consistent with Mkhize and Dlamini (2023). These findings highlight both the opportunity and the digital divide, demonstrating that strategic capacity-building and digital inclusion are crucial for township tourism competitiveness (Tse & Tung, 2020). The correlation analysis shows strong positive relationships between community participation and tourism success ($r = 0.62, p < 0.001$), and between digital marketing usage and destination visibility ($r = 0.58, p < 0.001$). Regression analysis further confirms that community participation ($\beta = 0.39, t = 6.42, p < 0.001$) and digital marketing ($\beta = 0.35, t = 5.85, p < 0.001$) significantly predict tourism success, jointly explaining 54% of the variance. Reliability tests indicate Cronbach's alpha values above 0.79 for all scales, thus confirming internal consistency. These quantitative results empirically justify the inclusion of these pillars in the proposed model, demonstrating that social and technological interventions are mutually reinforcing.

Stakeholder collaboration and cultural authenticity, although not directly tested in the regression, are strongly supported by qualitative survey responses and literature. Respondents highlighted co-ordination challenges and emphasized the need for joint marketing, inclusive governance and shared decision-making. Cultural authenticity was consistently stressed as essential, emphasizing the importance of preserving local heritage, storytelling and authentic experiences. These insights align with literature highlighting ethical and social considerations in township tourism (Butler & Rogerson, 2021; Mbatha, 2021). The model positions tour operators at its core, facilitating connections between communities, tourists and broader tourism networks, which enable community-led participation; promote cultural integrity; and implement digital marketing strategies. Whilst this central positioning risks reinforcing top-down dynamics, it reflects the current structural reality where operators are best placed to co-ordinate fragmented actors (Ngcobo & Mhlongo, 2022). Practical testing through pilot programs and stakeholder workshops is recommended to empirically validate the model and ensure true community empowerment. Environmental sustainability was not directly measured in this study, focusing instead on social, cultural and economic dimensions where data were robust. Future refinements should integrate environmental considerations to align the model with comprehensive sustainability frameworks. The model's alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals demonstrates its practical significance. It contributes to SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) by promoting local entrepreneurship and employment; SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), particularly Target 11.4, by preserving cultural heritage in township communities; and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) by fostering multi-stakeholder collaboration and inclusive networks. These connections underscore the model's potential to guide policy, capacity-building and marketing initiatives in township tourism.

Overall, the discussion demonstrates that township tourism can be a transformative tool when grounded in local ownership, informed by sustainable practices and supported by digitally enabled, cohesive partnerships. Community participation and digital marketing emerge as central drivers of success, whilst stakeholder collaboration and cultural authenticity ensure ethical, socially inclusive and culturally relevant outcomes. By integrating empirical evidence with theoretical insights, the proposed model offers a practical and context-specific framework that addresses the current fragmentation and provides actionable strategies for enhancing township tourism. Future research should test the model across multiple township contexts, assess its long-term impact on community empowerment and economic outcomes, and integrate environmental sustainability to provide a comprehensive evaluation of its effectiveness.

CONCLUSION

Overall, this discussion demonstrates that township tourism in South Africa holds significant potential to drive inclusive economic development, preserve cultural heritage and promote social equity. Community participation and digital marketing are critical enablers of tourism success, whilst stakeholder collaboration and cultural authenticity ensure that tourism development remains ethical, culturally grounded and socially inclusive. Moreover, tour operators play a central co-ordinating role in bridging communities, markets and policy frameworks, which enhances the practical applicability of the proposed model. The study makes a key contribution by presenting a context-specific, empirically grounded and actionable framework for enhancing township tourism by linking theoretical insights with measurable, operational strategies. This model addresses current gaps in stakeholder co-ordination, digital engagement and community empowerment, proffering policymakers, tourism practitioners and local communities a roadmap for sustainable and inclusive tourism development. Future research should refine and test the model across other township contexts in South Africa and the broader Global South, examining its impact on local ownership, economic outcomes and cultural preservation.

Longitudinal studies could evaluate the model's effectiveness over time, whilst pilot implementations and stakeholder workshops could provide practical validation and identify areas for further improvement. Environmental sustainability should also be incorporated in future adaptations to ensure a fully comprehensive approach.

Declarations

Interdisciplinary Scope: This article draws from the disciplines of tourism development, community-based planning, digital marketing and economic development. It integrates perspectives from public policy, stakeholder engagement and sustainable tourism to develop a practical model for enhancing township tourism in South Africa. The study contributes to the interdisciplinary discourse by examining how inclusive collaboration amongst tour operators, local communities and policy-makers can promote equitable economic growth and cultural preservation. The model proposed is grounded in empirical evidence from selected township areas in KwaZulu-Natal and aims to inform future policy and strategic frameworks applicable in both local and broader Global South contexts.

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Availability of Data: All relevant data used in this study are included in the manuscript through figures, tables and summaries. Additional details may be made available upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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