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# Advancing methodological diversity in critical tourism, leisure and hospitality research: a thorough analysis in the African context

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ABSTRACT: While the African context provides a unique environment for critical tourism, leisure and hospitality research, it is still understudied by academia, mostly due to the small academic community and the high difficulty in obtaining data. This article explores and showcases the methodological diversity in critical tourism, leisure and hospitality studies in "understudied" contexts such as Africa. The results reveal the issue of lack of methodological diversity and innovations to promote critical and interpretive approaches to tourism and hospitality research. This would inspire local researchers to conduct more critical studies on local issues in tourism and hospitality and their complexities in relation to global ramifications.

KEYWORDS: critical hospitality research, critical studies, interpretive approaches, qualitative research

## Introduction

A paradoxical question that has been the focus of relentless debate both in the international development literature and in the aid community is why Africa is so poor in the midst of plenty (Fielding, 2001; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2010; Mills, 2011). It is argued that African tourism development is impeded by persistent economic, social, political and governance-related challenges (Dieke, 2013; Adu-Ampong, 2017; Gowreesunkar, 2019; Siakwah et al., 2020). On the other hand, most hospitality and tourism research has followed a Eurocentric canon, thereby constraining a thorough understanding of issues in settings across the Global South such as Africa (Yankholmes, 2014; Booyens & Rogerson, 2016). Most production of knowledge and epistemological landscapes has been led by Western and developed country contexts, and there has been limited tourism scholarship and scientific performance in Africa (Rogerson & Visser, 2011; Visser & Hoogendoorn, 2011). Tourism and hospitality research in highly ranked tourism and hospitality journals has contained a small proportion of articles on Africa, instead predominately having articles on larger, richer countries with developed capital markets. Albeit from a relatively low base, there has been a gradual increase in African tourism and hospitality research and articles published in major tourism and hospitality journals, thereby representative of a growing voice in African scholarship. However, until recently, a large number of empirical studies have drawn on the positivist perspective, adopting quantitative methodologies and market-based theories. Of the small number of studies to date, some have examined tourism geography in Africa (Rogerson & Visser, 2011), tourism research issues in South Africa (Visser & Hoogendoorn, 2011) and research paradigms and approaches in African tourism (Van Beek, 2007). Ateljevic et al. (2012), Chang (2019), Swain (2009) and Wijesinghe and Mura (2018) underscore the need

for more systematic examinations of how both the practice of tourism and our analyses of it are embedded in asymmetrical power relations and hegemonic discourses. The importance of an African perspective to contrast and complement traditional management theories based on Western perspectives is a relatively new approach to identify and provide solutions to the specific problems associated with the creation and operation of hospitality and tourism organisations and the societal impacts.

Studies have noted that tourism and hospitality articles published in the context of African tourism and hospitality are concentrated in non-mainstream and lower tier publications (Rogerson, 2007; Yankholmes, 2014). Many of the tourism and hospitality research contributions on African tourism and hospitality can be also attributed to diaspora academics based in international universities. Although this positivist tradition of tourism and hospitality research can, in general, report on the nexus of tourism, poverty alleviation and economic empowerment, this approach inherently comes up short in explaining, exploring, or examining the complex and challenging political, economic and cultural issues in African countries, and their implications for the role of tourism and hospitality. Scholars subsequently have been increasing attention on several emerging issues, i.e. sustainability, destination management, tourist behaviour, tourism marketing and economics. While no single perspective can provide a complete picture of the reality of tourism and hospitality practices in Africa, these publication patterns indicate the importance of identifying fertile areas for future research, presenting a case for a variety of alternative theoretical and methodological perspectives to enhance our understanding of critical issues in African tourism and hospitality. This article offers the opportunity to create a debate, forum and reflection on this topic, particularly on what has been done and what can be done in African tourism and hospitality studies in terms of methods and theoretical paradigms.

Correspondingly, I respond to the research gaps by examining the methodological structures of tourism and hospitality scholarship in Africa. As indicated, in response and to provide a "state-of-the-art" explanation of theoretical and practical gaps, ongoing debates and controversies, the contributions of this essay are to advance the knowledge and discussion around potentially useful methodologies to improve and grow African tourism and hospitality research. That is, these ideas serve to define alternative methodological strands in theorising the African problem through plurality of differing implications. In this short essay, there is a reflection on this issue in view of motivating the readers to take this approach to tourism and hospitality research and to connect them to the global network of academia. The essay first shows the research environments prevailing in developing country contexts and then proceeds to reflect on the critical tourism and hospitality research trajectory. It extends the reflection to the state of such research in developing countries which then finds a way forward to ask three relevant research questions.

The rest of this article is structured as follows: First, a literature review on critical tourism, leisure and hospitality will be conducted. Then, the methodology used to derive an answer to this article's research questions will be outlined, followed by a presentation of the analysed results. Lastly, I relate the results to the previous literature, and propose conclusions, practical implications and ways forward.

## Literature review

This section reviews the literature on the current state of critical tourism, leisure and hospitality research in Africa, highlighting the key themes and issues. Research methods are the foundation of quality scholarly work. Qualitative research, rooted in the interpretive and critical movements and also referred to as the "soft sciences" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) has generated richness for tourism research, embodying the researcher, humanising the research process and inviting more critical "playfulness" (Botterill, 2001), and exposed the all-knowing and universalising truths of "orthodox" tourism research and researchers in the construction of tourism "knowledge" (Ateljevic et al., 2005; Tribe, 2007). Whether to apply quantitative or qualitative methods in tourism research has been the subject of intense discussion, with a bifurcated view of it as either a business-driven (quantitative) or a socially oriented (qualitative) fraction. Until the late 1990s, qualitative research occupied a marginal position in tourism journal publications and doctoral thesis writings (Riley & Love, 2000). Though scholars displayed low expectations about the future development of qualitative research in tourism, by the turn of the millennium, qualitative research was increasingly gaining ground and is today accepted as a valid and essential research strategy by a broad audience of tourism scholars and students. In the last decades, a vast, and ironically, quantitative survey of tourism publications was made to argue how a majority of "tourism scholars seem anchored to traditional (post)positivist stances" (Wilson et al., 2020, p. 805). It is argued that qualitative tourism research not only refers to (qualitative) methods, but also denotes a larger movement, which challenges the previously dominating role of quantitative methods in tourism research. Methodologically as well as analytically, critical tourism research is interested in themes such as power, identity, performativity and embodiment, as well as gender, race, sexual orientation and other

inequality-related issues. To develop new ways to distinguish and evaluate good qualitative research, transparency, reflexivity and dialogue are suggested as essential when engaging in qualitative research (Jamal & Hollinshead, 2001). In contrast to the general understanding of qualitative research as "soft" and less rigorous, critical tourism studies sought to work beyond functionalist, business-centred and quantitative approaches to studying and knowing tourism (Ateljevic et al., 2012).

Although critical theory has flourished in the social science of tourism, it has remained largely undeveloped in tourism management studies. Indeed, a literature search for critical tourism management reveals little attention other than in hospitality (Lugosi et al., 2009). Bianchi (2009, p. 487) critiqued the critical turn in tourism as more of a cultural turn which "appears largely confined to questions of culture, discourse and representation within the confines of a globalizing free market system, which remains largely external to critical scrutiny". Further, following Horkheimer (1972), critical strategy should also critique the functions of institutions and actions of individuals through analysis of their broader social and historical contexts. It should then explain what is wrong with current understandings, identify who can change them, and provide practical objectives for transformative change which satisfy the needs and aspirations of all those involved. A critical tourism strategy is unpacked under the themes of ideology, power, ideal speech communities and emancipation. Althusser (1984), among others, alerts us to the importance of ideology, loosely defined as the constellation of ideas that we share about how the world functions and how we function in it. Its consequences are explained by Tribe (2007), who says that ideology frames thought and guides action, and its presence may lead to the suppression and partial exclusion of other world views. But the operation of an ideology can remain hidden, because the deeply embedded nature and long tradition of a particular ideology can serve to camouflage its existence so that it becomes a taken-for-granted way of thinking and doing. It becomes the accepted or common-sense view of the world. Understandings about the sources and effects of power are central to a critical tourism strategy. According to Alvesson and Deetz (2020, p. 144), "critique explicitly relates to the conditions of power, constraint, social asymmetries, ideological domination, cultural inertia that give privilege to certain ways of understanding and ordering the world".

## Research method

As Alvesson and Deetz (2020, p. 2) note, "little is present in critical theory that encourages a move from in-depth questioning orientations and somewhat distant theoretical debates to enter empirical work in 'the field'". This study addresses this lacuna and offers advice on how to conduct critical empirical research. I examined 35 university-based conferences and journals centred in Africa (local publications) that were published between 2000 and 2023, and I identified and collected journal articles from databases. The review included full-length papers and conference articles. After a comprehensive search and reading of the abstracts, 269 articles were taken as a sample. Consistent with the study objective, each retrieved article was then read carefully and the contents analysed to identify the methodological structure and research questions. A Microsoft Excel spreadsheet was used to code articles manually, based on the methodology used. ATLAS.ti 23 was used to refine

the data systematically. To inspect the existing literature in a systematic manner, I conducted thematic and manual content analyses. Thematic analysis was chosen as a primary method of inquiry since the findings of qualitative research give a rich, detailed picture, and it is sufficiently flexible to allow for the inductive, latent and interpretive qualities (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). In recent years, an increasing number of studies in the tourism field have used content analysis. According to Berg (2009), this method can be seen as a careful, detailed and systematic examination and interpretation of a particular body of material in an effort to identify patterns, themes, biases and meanings. In the manual content analysis, the texts were coded into manageable categories on a variety of levels, such as word, word sense, phrase, sentence, or theme, and then examined using conceptual analysis.

## Findings

### Research setting in developing countries
The results of this research highlight that vibrant research environments for doing critical tourism and hospitality studies (except some exceptional researchers) in developing countries are yet to be established, despite the mushrooming of faculty-based annual conferences and journals where most of their academics are presenting and publishing. This is not what characterises many other Western countries where university-based conferences and journals are not the norm. Instead, in the West, scholars present at internationally established conferences where authorities in respective fields of research attend and publish in internationally reputed, well-ranked journals. They spend years (on average, 2 to 4 years) to get a quality paper published in such a journal. Conference presentation is only a beginning in this journey and does not include conference proceedings as publications.

### Observed fundamental themes and methodological limitations
A random investigation of the papers published in faculty-based journals in developing countries, as the study shows, has several fundamental issues which qualify them not to be international and critical enough. First, the research questions they address are not academic enough as most think research questions arise from practical problems which require immediate solutions. Of course, as researchers, we need to guide practice and policy-making, but before doing this, we must do the research on that problem by asking an unexplored academic question which can enlighten our understanding of what is going on and why things are happening in a particular manner. For this, as social scientists, we may use a suitable social theory to make sense of the story around the question being posed. In local publications, one cannot find studies with the right academic questions. Instead, in a so-called "statement of the problem", researchers formulate some "practical" problems in a particular situation.

Second, while a considerable number of organisations have made quality publication commitments, it is found that most of the publications do not refer to a contemporary academic debate or to a vibrant research theme appearing in international, authoritative journals. Though research is inherently international, to make it interesting, it is important to link the local story to a broader research debate or theme. Unfortunately, this is not happening in the faculty-based journal publications. As a result, they are not genuinely international.

Third, for other critics, most of these local articles aim to test hypotheses using quantitative methods, which is predominantly a hypothetico-deductive, scientific methodology. The mainstream research methodology which favours only the use of statistical methods for the testing of hypotheses seems ill-suited to investigate the contextual ramifications of tourism and hospitality. Against this backdrop, in the West, researchers promote alternatives as well. They can be ethnographic studies or historical and archival studies with interdisciplinary approaches, as stated above. Accordingly, a camp of researchers in the world takes historical, sociological and anthropological approaches and conduct qualitative case studies (e.g. critical discourse analysis, ethnography, media literacy and standpoint epistemology, postcolonial critique and critical policy analysis) to understand what is going on and why things happen in the way we see them. In contrast, most universities in developing countries tend to (unfairly) urge undergraduate and postgraduate students to uncritically follow "the methodology", giving little academic freedom to think beyond orthodoxies. This is the case in many developing countries. This lack of methodological diversity in research is another feature of "under-development".

Fourth, notably, most articles are found to be prescriptive. While the articles published in top-ranked international journals extend the current understanding of a particular research debate or theme, most social science researchers in developing countries think that research is to "quickly solve" a practical problem so that they have "recommendations" at the end of most articles. It is common to see that, at conferences in developing countries, presenters are asked a typical question: what are your recommendations? Recommendations can be offered by consultancy or policy reports. In a social science academic article (including tourism and hospitality), we offer a "conclusion", arguing how current understanding of a phenomenon (in a debate or theme) can be extended, and how future research should be carried out based on such conclusions and arguments. After conclusions, there may be a short paragraph for policy implications. Beyond such publications, and with a view to make their research more impactful, researchers may translate their research publications into accessible outcomes such as policy briefs, practitioner articles, newspaper coverage, exhibitions, films, etc. But one cannot do these if there is no real academic study to draw on. Consequently, it would seem that university teaching in the social sciences is not research informed because this kind of research has little impact on the development of research-informed teaching. Social science and management faculties "sustain" through such local publications and "researchless" teaching. It would seem, however, to ascend the academic ladder and to gain confirmation in their posts, young academics tend to publish in university-based journals, thinking it is the way things should happen.

Fifth, I also identified the limitations of the current research methods applied in the tourism, leisure and hospitality industry of Africa. The methodologies could include, but not be limited to, the use of mobile applications for data collection, the use of big data analytics, machine-learning algorithms, social media analysis, sensor technologies for tracking and monitoring tourist behaviours, the application of Q-methodology (to examine subjectivity), virtual reality simulations for studying decision-making process, eye tracking technology for understanding information search and retrieval patterns, and social network analysis.

Last, African scholars have focused on limited tourism and hospitality research issues, such as destination choice, tourist motivation, challenges and opportunities, potential assessment, technology adoption, tourist behaviours, tourist/customer satisfaction, sustainable tourism, community participation and community-based or ecotourism development, all prominent features of the knowledge domain. The approaches to study these issues have often relied on surveys, questionnaires and interviews to gather data. While these methods provided valuable insights, they have their own limitations. For example, self-reported survey methods may be subject to response bias and social desirability bias, leading to potentially inaccurate data.

In an attempt to integrate critical theory into the study of tourism and hospitality research, one of the issues is a lack of methodological diversity. On the one hand, researchers believe that research must be conducted only through quantitative methods. On the other hand, most believe that tourism and hospitality is a set of technical and institutional practices and the researchers' task is to offer suitable "recommendations" for the improvement of those practices. Even when researchers focus on a genuine intellectual puzzle, most believe that there are no alternatives to "the methodology" which aims to test hypotheses using statistical analysis. In the ever-changing landscape of research, bringing great academicians together to share their expertise is the best way to dive deep into contemporary research and methods in hospitality and tourism, and to become inspired by multi-methodological approaches and alternative models.

### Discussion, conclusion and way forward

This article aimed to systematically analyse the trends and issues about the methodological diversity in the study of tourism, leisure and hospitality field in Africa. Research output across the African continent is really low and the dominant paradigm is found to be positivism. Change, however, is now underway with more reflective and critical paths of inquiry. Dann and Phillips (2001) argue that a recent methodological shift is occurring in the field towards more qualitative approaches and away from pure quantification. Research output across the African continent is really low, and the agenda for research into tourism has been influenced by debates led by scholars in the Global North. Many institutions that produce research are severely underdeveloped and underfunded. The implications from these trends will mean further marginalisation of Africa. However, the past decades have witnessed major rises in the quantity of empirical studies in tourism and hospitality journals that use data exclusively from developing and emerging economies in Africa and that employ positive, especially quantitative research methods. While this growth is commendable, a considerable number of such studies have been criticised for "blindly" or "naively" applying theories and approaches ("naïve empiricism") that are often more appropriate to developed economies research contexts than emerging and developing economies research settings. Unfortunately, much research from authors based and trained in Africa is of poor quality in terms of presentation, theorisation and analysis, or are replications of studies on developed countries, hence their high rejection rates in submissions to highly ranked journals. However, there are papers on African tourism and hospitality sensitive to epistemological and ontological issues but, despite pockets of excellence in Africa, these tend to come

from authors trained in the West, and who are often part of the African diaspora. This applies to the diffusion of Western discourses of tourism and hospitality propagated around the world, including in developing countries. The status quo needs to be understood in relation to complex historical colonialist and postcolonialist influences as well as global structures of power. This happens in three interrelated processes. Ways forward have been made to identify the challenges and how some of these challenges might be overcome.

First is acceptance. Being colonised by Western discourses, developing country practitioners, policy makers and politicians accept those discourses. Sometimes, this can be a condition being imposed by transnational lending organisations. At other times, this can be an institutional isomorphism which inspires the followers to embrace those discourses. As a result, there is a "pull" effect on the part of developing countries which popularises Western discourses of tourism and hospitality in developing countries. Growing numbers of scholars are now calling for a decolonisation of tourism studies (e.g. Hollinshead, 2016; Wijesinghe et al., 2019), or for approaches that embrace cultural plurality and difference (e.g. Coles et al., 2006; 2016; Hollinshead, 2010; Mura & Wijesinghe, 2019; Yamashita, 2019). This has a perspective on the international political economy which allows us to examine how and why some discourses are dominant while others are discounted (Garner, 1996). This is an interesting and important question that the developing country tourism and hospitality researchers may explore.

Second is imposition. Having embraced dominant discourses, developing countries then force local organisations and people to learn and implement them. There are numerous enforcing mechanisms including educational programmes, regulations, media coverage, consultancy activities, etc. Within these mechanisms, the power of "empire" is deployed, and the language being used in the respective discourses is loudly pronounced. As a result, the discourse becomes a regulation to follow, a procedure to routinise, from an institution that is not to be questioned. In developing countries, centralised and autocratic political powers are instrumental in the materialisation of these mechanisms of enforcement. For instance, Mura and Pahlevan Sharif (2015, pp. 828–844) note that while critiques of Western-centric tourism scholarship are increasingly rampant in "Western/Anglo" realms, sadly these voices have been less incisive within the "non-Western/colonized" tourism academic world, including Asia. Critical tourism and hospitality researchers may explore other related research questions to understand how and why such mechanisms prevail.

Lastly, the practice where institutions from the Global North determine the quality of good research marginalises African researchers and limits their opportunities on the global stage. When those dominant discourses are practised and enacted in organisations and society, the leaders and followers tend to legitimise what they have followed. Local proponents use a variety of strategies to this end. These include development of political and scientific arguments through media and various publications, reporting on the performance of the projects and organisations in which those discourses were practised, and popularising the practice in question in other projects and organisations. As a result, the discourse becomes a practice and the practice becomes an institution – an unquestionable ritual. In the longer run, such tourism and hospitality practices may be passive and unimportant, but it would be difficult to change due

to the power of embracement, enforcement and legitimation. Such a change can only be possible when and if another process is embarked upon with an alternative, competing discourse which could become dominant, for example, what Western tourism concepts obscure. Looking at intersections of migration and tourism in Indonesia, Adams (2020) addresses how Western concepts fail to account for the nuances of non-Western experiences of migration and tourism in Indonesia. Overall, I critique Anglo-Western centrism in tourism theory and call on tourism scholars to make radical shifts toward more inclusive epistemologies and praxis. In years to come, more consideration can be given to the development of co-creative, experiential and disruptive methods to counter digital, pandemic and climate-related challenges. Such approaches serve to disrupt "white, Western, post/colonial underpinnings of tourism knowledge production" (Ivanova et al., 2020, pp. 1–2). For example, more recently, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, digital methods witnessed unprecedented growth, opening up avenues while also generating new questions about access proximity and distance, digital divides, current global dimensions, patterns, trends and power. In the present study, results may be subject to an optimism bias due to self-selection and self-reporting.

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