

User-generated insight of Rio's Rocinha favela tour: Authentic attraction or vulnerable living environment?

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Abstract

Urban transformations help shape new opportunities and create/re-create awareness in everyday living environments. It is not transformation in the infrastructural sense, but transformation in the form of a service industry producing socio-economic change that can result in inclusion and exclusion of people in the community, thus affecting the everyday living environment. Within this, we need to consider the tourist gaze and how users who visit/tour vulnerable living environments report perceptions of their experiences on forums such as TripAdvisor, which helps researchers frame understandings of commodification, opportunities/awareness and even authenticity (each addressed in this paper). This paper evaluates TripAdvisor posts of 'Rio's Rocinha Favela Tour'. In many respects, the notion of commodification, and even authenticity, runs through each theme, but the analysis and data posted to TripAdvisor challenges us to consider how a favela becomes a consumer product or a tourist attraction. The Rocinha Favela tour is widely publicised to prospective visitors as a chance to experience a living and working favela, the focus of the first theme presented in this paper. Given Rocinha has become a popular attraction in Rio, this leads to the second theme: opportunity or awareness. Opportunities do exist for people in the community

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to get involved in tourism, and turning the favela into a product helps shape and maintain awareness. The third theme builds on and relates to the previous two, but focuses more on the semblances of authenticity that emerges. To link the points highlighted in this paper, a discussion of soft power concerns relationships bonded through economic and cultural influence. Because favelas have become distinct attractions, it is cultural appeal and a different (residential) side of the city that persuades travellers to visit. Online and social media platforms for more than a decade now have played an important role today in projecting images and promoting authentic experiences based on user-perceptions, and this paper looks at how the users communicate their experiences.

Keywords

authenticity, living environment, slum tourism, soft power, urban leisure, user-generated content

Introduction

Favelas have been referred to as urban slums, viewed as undesirable, dangerous and crime-ridden areas of high risk to visitors. Beyond these negative imaginations (Betim, 2017), they are thriving communities amid a dense urban living environment. From a tourism, policy and urban transformation perspective, there has been appeal and the desire among tourists to stay and consume everyday living environments that differ from what people are used to visiting. Transforming spaces to cater to tourist interests is resulting in new forms of inclusion and exclusion (Shoval, 2018). These appeals are primarily driven by authentic experiences that tourists today demand. In Rio de Janeiro (Rio from here on), an authentic experience is increasingly seen through life in the favela, away from the hotels and areas of mass consumerism that line Copacabana and Ipanema beaches. Rio is well-known for its landscape of favelas, and these residential areas have widely been publicised and romanticised through popular culture aiding a new consumer culture. Frenzel (2016) and Freire-Medeiros (2013) highlight how new semblances of power are established by allowing tourists to regularly visit favelas on scheduled and private tours (and also

stay in favelas using sharing economy platforms such as Airbnb). People entering, or touring, can arguably alter daily activities by causing disruptions or distractions in these everyday living environments. Impacts can be positive and negative, from one standpoint it allows people to earn an income from tourism. Nevertheless, we also need to question if they are commodifying their surroundings so that tourists can experience life in these notorious areas (at least for a few hours).

Soft power can play a role in commodifying culture because a particular image is exported to tourists (Saber et al., 2018). Thus, soft power relates to this work and is explored to assess appeal and attraction (Nye, 1990, 2004; Ooi, 2015), and is an important conceptual consideration when critically exploring the impact of tourism in urban areas (or urban leisure). From an urban policy standpoint, it is also important to consider the urban transformation literature to explore alterations to the living environment (Clark and Wise, 2018; Freytag and Bauder, 2018), to get a sense and perception of what is unfolding in Rio. Specifically, promotional activities and the desire to gain a particular (authentic) experience can create symbolic value (Wang, 1999). The communication of value here is important where we consider

soft power, as this will influence local residents, the tourists and planners/policy makers differently as each can shape impacts on how some may be included and others may be excluded (Postma and Schmuecker, 2017; Wise, 2017). Urban transformation in this case is about how tourism is shaping memories and awareness. It is not transformation in the infrastructural sense, but transformation in the form of a service industry leading to socio-economic change that can result in inclusion and exclusion and impacts on an everyday living environment.

We can learn a lot from and interpret user-generated content (UGC), with critical meanings embedded in reviews posted by tourists who visit a particular destination in this paper. The impact on policy and the living environment is aligned with ongoing spatial transformations occurring in cities such as Rio where vulnerable populations are interacting with tourists with differing social and socio-economic consequences. Tours offered/led by local residents is an opportunity for individuals to earn some regular or supplemental income. However, a critical argument is (slum) tourism can disrupt everyday living environments, as these are vulnerable communities. Tourism also can result in consequences that lead to disruptive power-dynamics among residents, based on those who are involved or based along the tourist path, or able to afford to offer a tourism product. While these people come from the favela, a successful business could see them improving their economic situation and moving to a more affluent area, and only coming back to the favela to use its presence as a commodity. This can cause a domino effect whereby other families begin doing the same resulting in increased tourism and even unwelcomed behaviour among tourists and locals (e.g. drugs, prostitution or abusive alcohol consumption), disrupting the living environment of the favela and thus reducing the

authentic appeal that tourists seek. This dynamic may also create mechanisms of competition and gender-based power hierarchies in vulnerable communities that make the very meaning of the term 'community' lose its importance. Again, from an urban geography standpoint, this is a form of tourism-led urban change whereby transformation is driven by the desire to consume how people reside in a certain living environment, thus leading to locals commodifying spaces and places to make money off the desires of tourists wanting to gaze upon and experience favela life.

This paper contributes new insight to the notion of soft power by looking at the impacts of slum tourism on authenticity, opportunity and urban change, using standpoints from users to assess and critique practice and policy. This paper begins by exploring the range of literature concerning these areas to merge these different areas of research, starting with the link between slum tourism and authenticity and then considers the literature on how tourism is creating power dilemmas aligned with urban transformations. We then explain the approach and method of evaluating content from TripAdvisor to frame critical insight that challenges the practice of offering tours of a favela. A review of the findings leads into a discussion of policy and planning implications where we speak back to findings from recent related studies that explore the impact of tourism on local communities.

Slum tourism and authenticity

The concept of slum tourism (or also traditionally referred to as pro-poor tourism) is a sub-field of reality tourism offering social tours that sell an authentic and participatory experience when visiting infamous poverty stricken destinations (see Holst, 2018), such as Delhi in India, Soweto in South Africa or the Rocinha Favela in Rio

discussed in this paper. These tours originally gained traction as a legitimate strategy to develop areas of poverty in the 1990s where the financial benefits of tourism were to be redistributed back to support those living in identified areas of poverty. Over the 25-year period of research regarding slum tourism, also known as 'pity tourism', the link between the benefits of such tourism and the reduction of poverty remains divisive and inconclusive (Njoya and Seetaram, 2018). Tourism, for example, can improve short- and medium-term outcomes for the poor, through the generation of income and tax on services offered (Blake et al., 2008). However, tourism expansion and an over reliance on tourism for income have also been linked to further poverty in the poorest of households who remain excluded from the benefits of tourism (see Sahli and Nowak, 2007).

Brazil in particular has been one location used as a focus point for the development and consequences of slum tourism. For example, Freire-Medeiros (2009) examined how the favelas, and in particular Rocinha, offer tourists the opportunity to contribute to local economic development by paying to visit to the community. This is also seen as a sense of adventure, an outcome of popular images and media constructing an anticipated experience that becomes the tourist product (reflected in the reviews analysed in this paper). Freire-Medeiros (2009) concludes that Rocinha is just one of hundreds of tourist destinations that do not benefit from tourists, primarily as they actually do not spend money while in the favela, and any capital generated by tour operators is minimally reinvested in the favela, and often by way of a token charitable gesture. Now with the 'gig' or 'sharing' economy the opportunity to reverse the way tourists can experience authentic favela life through the renting of rooms through platforms, such as Airbnb could offer a way to return capital into the citizen's pocket. This, however,

requires access to the Internet, written/digital literacy and online baking capabilities, all of which remain poor in the favelas across Brazil (but is improving), as connectivity and communication are essential to push a soft power agenda and involve people in service industries such as tourism (Ooi, 2015). Even before the gig economy existed, Freire-Medeiros noted that one ironic consequence to those able to offer tourists (more) 'authentic' opportunities by running their own citizen-led tours is that tours might end up being more staged than had they travelled with external agencies. Still, in some respects, tours through Brazil's favelas offer a staging of lived experiences, and this emerges in reviews on TripAdvisor. However, this communication is for future visitors and tourists and isolate those (favela residents) who do not have Internet and digital literacy skills. Despite all the ethical debates around slum tourism in Brazil's favelas, such tours and tourism opportunities can perhaps be seen as a way to improve the visibility of the favelas in Rio.

Authenticity is an essential debate in tourism that is not often discussed alongside the notion of soft power. While soft power concerns relationships bonded through economic and cultural influence, favelas have become distinct attractions because of cultural appeal, which can persuade travellers to visit a place (Waller et al., 1998). Online and social media platforms for more than a decade now have played an important role today in projecting images and promoting authentic experiences based on user-perceptions (see Munar and Jacobsen, 2014; Wise and Farzin, 2018; Xiang and Gretzel, 2009). While favelas are active living environments, tourism researchers argue that such places can also be sanitised, to manifest places/attractions. In this way, places as attractions can become re-created or staged because some tourists seek altered

realities (McKercher and du Cros, 2002). Others argue we are moving beyond staged manifestations as the focus on reality is part of contemporary consumer demands where tourists seek everyday (or local, or real) experiences (Rickly and Vidon, 2018). By focusing on TripAdvisor posts, as a form of UGC, this paper argues that perceptions of a place/attraction as consumed expressions, as user experiences are based solely on their encounters and then align with their desired outcomes. The link back to soft power is then the ability of platforms such as TripAdvisor to persuade future travellers based on the influence of the user and how they communicate their experience. Those who live in the favela are in many respects excluded from sharing their story as the power of persuasion lies with the one who has visited as a tourist (who has the ability to post/share their experience). Wang (1999) argued feelings of authenticity are not guided by the fact that tourists see the object as authentic, because they are engaging in activities free from the constraints of their everyday life. However, and what remains contested, is there can be no regard to the fact that the attraction gazed upon is an active living environment. However, there can be a certain ignorance as people visit popularised and romanticised attractions and more contested challenges arise when a place or attraction is transformed into a tourism product.

Urban change

Hénaff (2016) challenges us to better understand the act of building and changing the urban environment, especially as sectors such as tourism are having a major impact on local living environments (Nofre et al., 2018). Moreover, it is important to consider the changing influences of tourism on local living environments, as this is a decisive factor when we consider social and

economic change amid inclusion and exclusion based on where and how opportunities are directed and how locals perceive visitors entering their everyday living domain. Despite increasingly innovative approaches to place-making as a pathway to economic development and social sustainability (Munzner and Shaw, 2015; Wise and Harris, 2019), issues of inclusion and exclusion persist in destinations/attractions, alongside the question of who the beneficiaries of neighbourhood and wider urban change will be. Existing pressures from urban change fall disproportionately on already struggling urban areas, particularly those where the social and economic fabric of an area is already underpinned (Wise and Clark, 2017). While investments and new touristic activity can increase consumption, in many cases it has also resulted in greater economic disparities and increased levels of social exclusion (Mitchell, 2003). Recent research on urban transformation has an essential role to play, developing our conceptual understanding of how people, place and policy interact, offering a critical perspective on social and economic change locally (see Clark and Wise, 2018; Wise, 2016; Wise and Harris, 2017).

This is also where insight from critical scholars including Lefebvre (1991) or Harvey (2012) challenges us to expose the social construction of space, to articulate and address inequitable power relations. Leary-Owhin's (2016: 328) recent examination of the contribution of community actors and collective political action in the creation of public space offers a counter-strike against 'neoliberal provoked fatalistic pessimism' when it comes to future consumption. Likewise, the potential, as well as the challenge, of urban transformation has been illuminated by recent critical examinations of the trend of leveraging culture, heritage and increasing tourism consumption as part of urban change (see Cowan, 2016; Markusen, 2014;

Munzner and Shaw, 2015; Vivant, 2013; Waitt and Gibson, 2009). Against this backdrop of neoliberalism consumption/tourism-led urban renewal (Wise and Clark, 2017), more recent development strategies have extended to more creative or innovative investments, in areas such as tourism, leisure, culture or heritage (see Clark, 2011; Cowan, 2016; Paddison and Miles, 2006; Richards and Palmer, 2010; Spirou, 2011; Wise, 2016). For instance, Clark's (2011) edited collection examines how the leisure industries are driving change in urban areas. Location and experience concerning the case of Rio here are what is driving favela tourism and is resulting in homeowners transforming their spaces into places for tourism consumption.

However, whether for traditional investment projects or those aligned with tourism are specific to the budgets and ability of the private individual to commodify their local living environment. Attracting people to what are deemed/perceived as troubled places creates new power divisions, especially in Brazil where nation-wide projects include some, while excluding many (Wise, 2019; Wise and Hall, 2017). This transformation, speaking back to points made above, is altering consumption patterns for both inhabitants and newcomers alike – likewise observed in recent studies (e.g. Freytag and Bauder, 2018; Hall and Wise, 2019; Nofre et al., 2018; Shoval, 2018; Wise and Whittam, 2015). Urban and community change leads to questions over territory. Territory is how we determine and recognise spaces, boundaries, belongings and associations. Scholars have taken this notion further to conceptualise territoriality or territorialisation to refer to organisation or social, cultural or political agents at play to distinguish places based on power or representation, often referring to various degrees and scales of community and identity (see Dansero et al., 2015; Storey, 2012). Nofre et al. (2018) are very critical

of this concept as tourism is resulting in social change and is disrupting local everyday life among residents. As more tourists enter an area and extends beyond its sustainable carrying capacity, then we enter discussion and debates concerning overtourism, which is grounded in debates over local territory and territorialisation.

Approach to identifying and reviewing content

Increasingly, UGC informs our understandings and perceptions of the world (Balabantaray, 2013), but must be challenged due to the communicated disparities that emerge (Easton and Wise, 2015). Despite the widespread acceptance of online content, its ubiquity can lead to concerns and subjectivity can result in falsehoods. TripAdvisor is aware of this and clearly notes that reviews are subjective opinions made by the user. Qualitative content analyses challenge researchers to seek meanings and determine themes extracted from texts and/or relate content to new conceptual understandings (Lehtonen, 2000; Wise and Kirby, 2018). Qualitative content analyses are thus about highlighting issues and narratives embedded in the texts (Lehtonen, 2000). Interpretations of user experiences and practices are present through interactive online and media discourses. Moreover, expressions presented through various outlets create, ground and shape our perceptions (Cloke et al., 2004; Easton and Wise, 2015). As such, this study utilises content analysis to evaluate meanings presented through TripAdvisor to understand the dominant narrative of how users' perceive, interact and share their experiences of visiting favelas in Rio, specifically the Rocinha favela in this paper.

TripAdvisor posts were interpreted and organised into three themes emerged and

interpreted from UGC. To analyse discussions and representations concerning favela tourism in Rio's Rocinha Favela, this work starts by assessing content from the TripAdvisor page titled 'Rocinha Favela Tour' to assess tourist experiences through UGC. This page includes 91 reviews (as of 1 August 2019) in 10 languages: English (41), Spanish (22), Portuguese (12), French (4), German (3), Italian (3), Russian (3), traditional Chinese (1), Dutch (1) and Hebrew (1). Of the 91 posts, 15 posts were deemed irrelevant for this analysis because they did not speak to the destination or were interpreted as just advertising for a business. While many of the posts are repetitive, the authors identified specific quotes from the content to include in each section. Extracts from the posts (as the data for this paper) are presented (verbatim as posted) to support the development and interpretation of each theme, posts not in English were translated to English using Google Translation linked to each post. This paper is not concerned with the score that participants post on TripAdvisor, but the qualitative comments they leave as this can help researchers identify themes that emerge to critically interpret narratives. This approach was used for translations because this is what consumers and future travellers will view as it is embedded in TripAdvisor with each post (that is not posted in English). For posts included in this paper, we only include the translated version, as translated from Google Translate, which is an option in each non-English post in TripAdvisor.

Results and analysis

To link the focus on soft power to the interpretations in this paper, favelas are part of the urban cultural fabric of Rio, and tourism is an important economic influence. Favelas and this focus on slum (or pro-poor) tourism is also controversial as there are numerous insights suggesting people

simply seek to gaze upon everyday life in a 'real' community. Again, soft power as a form of appeal and persuasion, and is communicated to us through user-perceptions. TripAdvisor posts are based on the user's interactions and awareness, despite the semblances of power being one-sided and the experiences described are subjective. On the TripAdvisor page for the Rocinha Favela Tour, the about page mentions: "Don't Just Look, Come Experience" Rio's Most Unique Favela Tour. Come See and Experience Rocinha Through the Eyes of Real Locals' while also emphasising this is 'Not Just a Favela Tour, but Immersion into the Community. Not a "slumming tour" but a Personal, Sincere Experience. Real Sustainable Tourism' (TripAdvisor, 2019).

Three interconnected themes emerged when evaluating TripAdvisor posts of Rio's Rocinha Favela Tour. In many respects, the notion of commodification, and even authenticity, runs through each theme, but the analysis below begins with the consideration of how the living environment becomes a product, or a tourism attraction. The Rocinha Favela tour is widely publicised and is often highlighted as a chance to see a living and working favela, so the first theme presented in this paper focuses on commodification, challenging us to consider is this a living environment or a product. Given this has become a popular tourism attraction, this leads to the second theme of opportunity or awareness. Opportunities do exist for people in the community to now be involved in tourism, for the sake of local economic impact, but with having a tourism product in such a vulnerable living environment is ensuring awareness is maintained. The third theme builds on and relates to the previous two, but focuses more on the semblances of authenticity that emerge from the TripAdvisor content analysed in

this paper more specifically getting us to challenge and critique user-perceptions.

Living environment or a product – commodification

One concern about gazing at a poorer living environment was bluntly (but critically) expressed by one user: ‘you really need to look at the poor people like animals in the zoo’ (German Post 1). Another user captioned their post, a ‘shocking experience’ (Spanish Post 11), signifying that this was something different from what they were used to seeing on holiday; however, another user suggests that ‘doing a favela tour gives you the opportunity to explore a part of the city that otherwise would be unaccessible to the tourist’ (English Post 31). After reading the reviews, we begin to question: is this a community or a commodity, for the purpose of showcasing people living in a poorer living environment? Several users frame the stark reality of Rocinha as an attraction:

To really get a view of social oppression: Lack of resources. (English Post 1)

Life in the slums of Rio. Our Viator tour guide gave us a good insight into the history and challenges of life in a slum and how they’ve become a large part of the culture of Rio. (English Post 11)

This tour opened our eyes to a lot of Rio’s stark realities. (English Post 26)

This was a view into the real Brazil and how people in the favela are just leading their lives, working, shopping, kids playing out. It was busy, noisy, but we didn’t feel unsafe. We walked through the favela from the top to the bottom. We took pictures. Always remember when doing this tour it is a favela, some people don’t like photos being taken at all. (English Post 29)

I can’t call this wonderful, exciting, or any of these terms that makes you think that this is your average vacation tour. It’s not. But it is a view of how over 90% of people in Rio live. It’s a chance to see the REAL Rio. (English Post 37)

see the other side of Rio. (Russian Post 1)

The tour description itself reveals that the Rocinha experience is ‘Not a slumming tour but a Personal, Sincere Experience. Real Sustainable Tourism’. This can seem reassuring to any tourist who might feel guilty about spending time in a precarious/vulnerable space. It is not the residents of the favela but the individual’s experience *in a* favela. It is like an experience of redemption and gratitude to some who, as the comment below puts it, relativizes the existing privilege of certain tourists while at the same time softening the awareness of the favela tour, as the tour values would be used to improve the favela:

heartbreaking to see how the people here live and really grateful about what I have. Some of the money we paid for this tour would go to this community to help the people here. (English Post 30)

Another rio. It is clear that no one will show you the real life in Favelas, but what you see is also impressive. (Russian Post 3)

While we are introduced to what people frame as real life as they gaze upon it as an attraction, a commodity, an emphasis on Rocinha as a living environment is not completely forgotten:

It was an amazing experience that our guide showed us his neighborhood and discussed the daily lives of the community there. They are friendly and real. There is nothing to worry about the visit as long as

you use common sense and dress and behave appropriately. Rocinha is a nice lively and busy community where a lot of local working class lives and works there due to their circumstances. When we visit a country, we tend to enjoy the experience and local culture by feeling, understanding, listening and tasting the culture rather than visiting top tourist attractions and scenic points. (English Post 6)

Walking around and seeing the organisation and architecture of the Favela illustrates how poverty has been able to concentrate its afflicted onto an inhospitable hillside whilst conveniently segregating them from the suburbs. Some of the 'free' (i.e. abstracted illegally) facilities available to residents are appealing such as electricity and Wi-Fi but I doubt would make up for living in what is essentially a modern-day concentration camp for the poor. (English Post 36)

I have to highly recommend this tour for anybody who wants to look around a real Rio favela and see the everyday peoples way of life. (English Post 41)

What people seek is an experience, and while those who post realise that they are walking through an active living environment, they put themselves at the centre to highlight how they feel about touring a favela, and offer insight on how to dress, how to act and what to expect when visiting, or what you can do to assist people:

we recommend not taking pictures of people. (Spanish Post 7)

it is advisable to go with clothes comfortable and slippers because you walk a lot to know every corner of the place. (Spanish Post 8)

leading us to discover the world of favela that none of us knew and was curious to discover. Lucy accurately told us the history of the places and the people who live in the favela, made us taste local products and another thing that filled our hearts in Rocinha was the after-school program for the Para Ti association dedicated to children of the favela. If you decide to go, offer colored pencils, crayons, like we did, the children will be very happy!! It is the best gift for them! (Italian Post 3)

In addition, tourism helps clarify images and remove myths and fears that are popularised and communicated in the media, as some users note:

I watched films in which favelas were shown, I wanted so much to find out what they were inside there?? (Russian Post 1)

Everywhere the police, gangsters, Gopnik and drug addicts were not noticed. the streets are dirty, but not polluted, each shack is equipped with air conditioning. As they say, not the poorest residents of the city live there. (Russian Post 2)

Under the guidance of a guide a walking tour through the favela Rocinha. A bit skeptical in advance, but never felt unsafe. Is one of the "better" favelas. (Dutch Post 1)

Fascinating tour in the Favelas [...] it allowed us to understand that the Favelas are not only synonymous with drug trafficking but also and above all honest people who try with all their strength to improve their condition with an enviable spirit of life. During this tour we also had the opportunity to walk inside the very narrow villages and to observe the daily life of these people. I strongly recommend this experience that with the modest

sum of €25 allows you to see an important phenomenon of this country and to understand how the Brazilian State does everything to not improve the situation of these people. (Italian Post 2)

To some this came at some discontent by locals they know in Rio as some put more emphasis on the element of consumption:

A Brazilian friend was not quite pleased with my joining the tour, thinking that I joined to gawk at the poverty and poor living conditions inside favelas. That was not at all my intention. The experience was rewarding and at the same time physically draining. It involved a lot of walking up and down narrow alleys that just got narrower as we went deeper inside this city within a city. (English Post 20)

The tour takes you to quiet areas of the favela, not that you see people with guns, listen to gunshots or that stuff. It is a safe tour, there is nothing to fear. The only bad thing is that it is very commercial, they take you to areas for consumption. (Spanish Post 12)

Go prepared for a good walk. It's the best way to get to know every detail of this amazing community. (Portuguese Post 2)

However, despite the fact that touring through a local living environment can present its challenges, something that UGC allows is for people to commend what is happening, and encourage more visitors. Some view tourism as helping local people: "I think these visits serve them as economic help and us to see life from another side" (Spanish Post 13). But recent research notes that this is disrupting everyday life as tourism is not always sustained (see Shoval, 2018) and therefore the impact on the local economy can have negative consequences. What we do not get is

the local voice and their satisfaction of visitors making their way through their streets and looking at how they live, but it is summed up visitor experiences that entice other or future travellers:

An experience to know the reality of Brazil. I recommend doing a tour with a local guide of the Favela because it will allow you to go into places and meet people that otherwise would be impossible and all in a safe way. Personally, I think it has been an enriching experience to see the other side of Rio and, on the other hand, the reality of the country. (Spanish Post 16)

it is very interesting to visit this place where you enter a house you have an impressive view from above to the whole Favela, to be able to walk the streets and people are very kind to everyone, you can take pictures and there is no risk. (Spanish Post 9)

Almost every house has a gorgeous view of Rio from the window. (Russian Post 2)

Consistent was how users discussed how safe the community was. There was much excitement about the chance to wonder around a vulnerable living environment and while much was reported about the safety, there are still concerns as tourists can create unwelcome attention, but the positivity is also a chance to create new local economic opportunities. This is also where we encounter challenges with authenticity because overtourism as we see recently is threatening communities, but at the same time people need to service, so it will be some time until tourism managers can strike that balance surrounding economic opportunity/potential and impacts on local communities. With this point, to conclude this section, a user mentioned 'there is great hope for this city, and we hope to see more development each time we return'

(English Post 26). But the challenge here then becomes, if the favela develops, does that take away from the element of attraction. On one side it will improve the living environment for residents, but it could take away the earning potential of Rocinha (as an attraction). Tourists visit here because they seek something different and gaze upon: favela life. But development brings a new awareness and opportunity for people, as improvements are made to the local living environment. The challenge then is what opportunities would exist for the local tourism economy if the favela develops in a manner similar to other parts of Rio main tourism areas. Not only that, but what impact would that have on the local residents, would opportunities exist or would be forced to leave their local area.

Opportunity or awareness

Understanding a place's history helps change perceptions and overcome stereotypes. Common posts about Rocinha were 'its an eye opener!' (English Post 28), 'fantastic and informative Tour [...] we learnt a lot of things about Brazil's history and how the favela started' (English Post 27) and 'helps to give a greater understanding of Rio' (English Post 32). For those who reside in Rocinha, life is a struggle, and for those who can, tourism is an option where they can use their local knowledge to earn a living. By promoting tourism it is a way to shape or create awareness, and offering a tour that seeks to bring people into an area and educate them about it can also alter imaginations and popular/widespread stereotypes. As noted above, images and imagination of favelas are romanticised and popularised vis-à-vis movies and news media, and people are drawn to this as a way to shape their awareness by experiencing a favela first-hand (even if for only a few hours on a planned pathway led by a guide).

TripAdvisor is about creating awareness through UGC, and in this section users post on how tourism has opened up the favela and created a new local economy, and comments on the history of the Rocinha add narrative insight.

There is another side to Rio away from the beaches and bars, and it's well worth a look. We headed to the Favela da Rocinha with a local guide as part of a sustainable initiative that puts money back into the local community. We had a chance to meet local people in their own home, and they had a chance to tell us their story - which had very little connection with the media stereotypes you've probably heard about the favelas. This was really the highlight of my visit to Rio. (English Post 10)

This tour was very insightful with regards to how people live in the favela Rocinha. The tour guide lives there and so he was able to provide information about its history, family life and how the government have supported past projects within the favela. This tour was amazing and a must and is a huge part of Brazilian culture. There were beautiful views of the favela and sense of community within the favela. It is also safe with the tour. (English Post 18)

This tour is very informative, it gives you a great insight into what daily life in the favelas looks like. You get an opportunity to buy some artwork and some food on the way, and meet many friendly locals as well as amazing views over the city. The guide gives you heaps of information and seems to know a tonne of people there. (English Post 31)

These were comment posts, as there was much unanimity about how the tour is an education experience, offering more scope

beyond this as a tourist gaze (mentioned above). There is an emphasis on the guides, as they help shape an awareness:

We went on a tour with a very well respected local guide of the community. While feeling safe with the guide we would not recommend going into the favela without a guide! The guide was very informative and gave us a real feel of what living inside the favela is like. It was like a maze inside with all the ally ways and streets. A must do tour but get a good guide! (English Post 9)

Go with local guide. Of course it is a place, to see the other side of Rio, the tour is recommended with a local guide who has lived there. (Spanish Post 7)

It is an incredible walk where you see the reality of the favelas. Our guide was very clear in all the details explaining how they came to be built. (Spanish Post 14)

While many focused on the positives that tours through Rocinha offer, there were also some users that framed different pictures, highlighting the two sides of Rio:

My guide lives there and therefore he is well known in the community. They don't like the word favela anymore and prefer comunidade (community). Rocinha is a city within a city with a population of 150,000. It is only 15 minutes away from Ipanema but that is irrelevant as it is another world [...]. There are people everywhere and there is a strong sense of pride in their community. They like you taking an interest in their world. One man I met said –“welcome to Rocinha senhor, Rocinha is yours”. I highly recommend a tour with a guide, particularly one who lives there. (English Post 3)

Because of the political and criminal unrest in rio right now, you are very limited where you can go. I did not have concern for safety, but the tour was very limited. you do get some good info from the tour guide. (English Post 7)

Beyond Copacabana and Ipanema. The tour covered the world's largest favela - Rocinho in Rio de Janeiro. It was an eye-opening experience, seeing and walking deep inside Rocinho, and learning the rich history of how favelas started and how favelas add to the rich culture of Brazil. (English Post 20)

Eye Opener...The history about the favela was most interesting (gangs, drugs etc.) The walk to the bottom was lengthy and my feet got wet and dirty *hides* Nice seeing the locals. Would recommend it any day! never ever go alone! We saw a man with a machine gun, pretty sure he was ready to use it if we didn't have a guide. Lol. (English Post 23)

Visiting a favela was a different experience. Obviously we travel very quiet sectors during the hour and a half that lasted our visit, but one comes out with an idea of how millions of Brazilians live, who are far from what one lives daily as a tourist and the reality of many millions more of Brazilians. (Spanish Post 17)

Something different to understand the contrasts of Rio, which helps to understand in depth the contrasts of Rio, demystifying that in the favelas there are only criminals. (Spanish Post 15)

Tourism and touring is about communication and awareness, and this is where again we see people taking the opportunity to include themselves in the industry as a

way of overcoming socio-economic exclusion. A lot of comments focus on passing through the favela, but staying and spending locally brings new money into the community, as one user encourages: 'Having lunch in Rocinha would already make the community benefit from the effects of tourism there!:' (Portuguese Post 6). However, we still need to question who benefits from tourism opportunities, as guides can set specific routes and stop in places where they can get a commission, which then can limit the impact of tourism in the community. One user picked up on this critical point: 'the only ones who really have something to contribute are the guides, who enrich themselves with the poverty of the people!' (German Post 1). Socio-geographically, favelas are a part of the urban periphery, but as tourism increased in Brazil there was a need to diversify the offering and because favelas have been romanticised and widely popularised, as one user posted: 'having read the book the "Spectacular Favela" it really was special for me to visit Rocinha and bring the book to life' (English Post 22). Through these powerful mediums tourism opportunities can arise, taking people into what is deemed the real, or authentic, Rio.

Semblances of authenticity

'You can immerse yourself directly in the life of the people living there' (German Post 2). The challenge with connecting this theme to the above section is first we see a living environment transformed into a tourism product for which then residents seek an opportunity to shape consumer awareness, and when we analyse visitor reviews because those who generate the content speak about what the view as real based on their gaze, the path they walked and the people they encountered. We get a sense of how people feel about the

Rocinha, as people look to authenticate the experience by suggesting it is 'without any staged attractions' (German Post 3) and adding to this the element of experience another user suggests this tour is 'a full sensory experience, where you can fully use your senses and feel your emotions' (English Post 12).

Another user embedded the word 'authenticity' to explain how they felt, and they address the possibility of something happening, but that is what they enjoyed: 'no zero risk, also shootings possible... But what a precious experience... I loved it... I loved the people, the authenticity, the landscape, the street art' (English Post 4). Another user also noted the term in their post: 'Samba and sipping caprinha in Rocinha. Whats the best thing about the tour you may ask. Our tour guide gave us the best authentic experience of Rocinha. A trip never to be missed when in Rio' (English Post 5). Authenticity, as noted, is highly contentious in the tourism literature, but is nonetheless important to assess when reviewing UGC because this is a starting point where future travellers increasingly seek information (Lu and Stepchenkova, 2015). Building on this Wise and Farzin (2018) argue that people look to social media for advice, to help authenticate future experiences. One user posted that the Rocinha experience is 'sanitised', noting 'you visited a home of one of the residents but you could see that it was set up for tourists' (English Post 17), but others highlight that 'you haven't seen Rio without seeing the favela' (English Post 37) and a chance to 'explore the daily routine of residents in Rio's slums' (Chinese Post 1) as a way of authenticating the experience.

Several commented that being with a local helps make the tour feel authentic because you are gaining that first-hand experience, different from the comment in

the previous paragraph that the home visit is sanitised. But in some ways helping with explaining the experience and promoting the attraction is explaining how safe they felt:

Very interesting and safe. Went on this with my family of three to see the “other” side of Rio. Good tour, felt quite safe; friendly people. (English Post 13)

Great eye opening experience. Was somewhat wary about the safety of this but my husband was keen to do this guided tour. Booked via the hotel and this was an intimate well informed tour, by 3 guides, the lead one of which had 25 years experience. Turned out to be one of my best experiences in Rio! Felt very safe, amazing pics, fascinating eye opening opportunity to see how the locals live. Makes you very appreciative of what you have. Included dance by 3 locals who encouraged me and my husband to dance with them! Great for those who want a lot of culture on holiday and to broaden themselves. (English Post 21)

An interesting overview of one of the more popular Favelas in Rio. ALWAYS use a guide for this and our guide made us feel safe at all times. (English Post 25)

We visited the Rochina favela with our guide Patrick from Be A Local. We were collected from our hostel and driven less than 15 mins to the top of the favela. We then walked for a couple of hours through the passage ways, stopping on the way to view an art gallery, musicians, a bakery and a crèche. The tour was informative, we felt completely safe, and very interesting to see first-hand the cultural and economic differences in Rio. (English Post 33)

Our tour guide gave a great overview of how the tour would work and history of

the Favela in Rio. He showed us how luxurious the areas we drove through were, but made it clear that we would notice immediately when it ends...and it did. We were then given a break background of Rocinha...socially, economically and historically. Everyone was standing there kind-of looking around like “are we going to be robbed”, “is this safe” [the guide explained] that this is one of the many misconceptions of the Favela. (English Post 37)

Unique experience. Very cool this tour. I felt safe, despite all the risks that this tour might have. Mixed with sadness and joy. The Tour is walking through the alleys and alleys of the favela. We know locals who sell products that they make themselves, and they welcome us very well, including trying to communicate with foreigners. (Portuguese Post 8)

We get the sense from some of these posts that this is an opportunity because people might not go here unless there was a tour option. Favelas are sometimes regarded as places where locals police themselves, as negative publicity will deter visitors, but some people are attracted to favelas because they feel they are taking a risk because of how they are popularised in film as dangerous places. As one user posts the reality of the attraction was it was: ‘nothing like I expected’ going on to comment ‘the favelas are nothing like majority of people describe them to be. These days they’re all built from brick have electricity, plumbing, cable and shops. Rosinha favelas is definitely safe to visit on a tour’ (English Post 34), adding that additional insight on safety as well.

While safety here helps with altering more popularised perceptions of favelas, another key focus on the content interested in this section was confirming what users

posted as ‘real’ or how they viewed ‘reality’, for instance:

a visit to understand the real Brazil. (English Post 6)

A different and very real view of Rio. After the initial excitement subsided, it was clear that we were visiting a neighborhood that was in ways similar to any other. We passed houses, stores, bars, restaurants, and schools. We weren’t in Kansas anymore, but the microcosm was familiar. It was a fascinating experience. (English Post 40)

Brazil from the other side. If you want to know the other part of Brazil I think it’s worth it. (Spanish Post 1)

Good visit, another reality of Rio. It has very good bars at affordable prices and local food for very few places where you eat very well. It is very cheap clothes and things that sell there, so it is a good option if you want to buy summer clothes, purses or flip flops. The most advisable: go without anything of value, as simple as possible so they go unnoticed among the crowd. It is a good option that if you take the precautions it is advisable to go. (Spanish Post 3)

Reality to some was further detailed as an authentic learning experience, building on insight from the above section and we see how users try and comment on points that they felt were ‘authentic’ in this local living environment.

Discussion and concluding remarks: Policy and planning implications

Tourism is a form of soft power in that governments use it to persuade people to

visit. But through the use of UGC and people sharing experiences goes beyond foreign policy and offers new insight into international relations using tourism as a medium. Social media is increasingly used as a powerful medium to display semblances of a destination. Soft power communicated via social media and online UGC platforms such as TripAdvisor, based on what was presented in this paper, is thus another way of connecting people and places and framing, creating or confirming popular imaginations. It influences people by using and disseminating culture and local values. These can be both positive and negative, and while there was a lot of overwhelmingly positive comments seen in the analysis above, there was one particularly negative post warning people not to go: ‘Do not go - too dangerous. Recent unrest in Rocinha has been serious and about six weeks ago tourist shot dead on guided tour. Unrest not yet resolved’ (English Post 8). We have seen this in past work as well where some negative connotation can cause panic and unease after times of tragedy or violence (see Wise, 2011). In contrast, this post seems to unite the three themes outlined from the content:

it is not a shame to expose the poverty of a country in a tour. There is no shame in being poor, but there are precarities, but this is a social aspect consistent with the reality that we should not avoid seeing. And so I think. I think the favela tour is a sort of “sample” tour because the route goes through places where the route is allowed and safe and could not be otherwise. (Portuguese Post 1)

Wise and Clark (2017: 1) argue ‘processes of urban change are defined and understood differently across and within different geographies’. While a lot of literature considers more widespread urban change initiatives, this paper is more concerned with

change that is targeted in favelas as this transforms everyday living environments. This is a response to shifting economic conditions, demographic composition and social pressures challenge how change is planned for and even understood by and among locals. The process of urbanisation is accompanied by multiple political, economic and social drivers, and in Brazil connecting stakeholders can be a challenge as local government officials, urban planners and private investors who can promote and implement change in our cities.

In the most exemplary cases of the Rocinha (and even Alemão) slums, among the 756 existing favelas in Rio which inhabit 22% of the city's population (IBGE, 2010), the local government strategies with the assistance of economic agents are seeking to induce modernization plans in these spaces. This is arguably leading to reductions of the feelings of insecurity and the contradictory recognition of the favela as a historical, cultural and spatial heritage of Brazil, seeing these spaces as increasingly suitable for tourist commercialization. The violence associated with widespread (racialised) actions of the police and the National Army that seek to impose this so-called modernity includes, among many aspects, what can be commodified and sold to tourists and corroborates with the historical attempt to disseminate a more positive image, both nationally and internationally. Although critical scholars note this leads to further inequalities, where even in poverty stricken areas it can now be possible to extract positive aspects.

Although tourists are not to be blamed for the potential predatory effects of the soft power produced by tourism agencies that tries to show 'the other side of Rio' (Russian Post 1), it is not possible to ignore the complex and violent social relations based on the discrimination of gender, race and social class operating in Brazil. This also must be considered when we

relate discussions to soft power, as this produces fertile ground for the intensification of inequalities, and, worse, the maintenance of poverty as a way of preserving slum tourism as a 'unique experience'. As indicated by Neri (2011) and Silva (2016), the modernization shock introduced by the state police force in the last decade has resulted in a transformation of the real estate markets in Rocinha and Alemão favelas. This includes an increase in rent values and imposed restrictions for community residents to circulate through the territory and has resulted in an increase in the sharing economy and people staying.

Planning in favelas, especially, has numerous challenges, and there are limits on what levels of controlling are possible as these communities often grow and are controlled organically. This calls for more grassroots movements and policies that enable people to voice a decision. While we cannot compare Rio to places such as Barcelona directly (e.g. Nofre et al., 2018), what we can learn is how local residents are responding to an influx of tourists into local areas that can have an impact on quality of life. In some respects, as seen in Paris (e.g. Freytag and Bauder, 2018), new interactions are creating new economic opportunities. However, this results in a staging of culture and thus threatens authenticity and the lived realities that portray an authentic experience of seeing (or gazing at) how the underprivileged live – which is what the slum tourists seeks. While we see comments about experiencing the real Rio or Brazil, we need to question: how does this threaten the local living environment? Shoval's (2018) edited collection addresses how overtourism is threatening liveability, and while tourism brings economic benefits, are these at the disposal, or commodification or local culture and those who reside there? These are the questions that are pressing among tourism scholars, but while we highlight these issues, planners

and policy makers struggle to control change and tourism expansions because there can be limitations on who gains and who does not.

Tourism is increasingly becoming part of urban change narratives, as communities struggle and individuals seek to earn new and supplemental incomes, concerning the leisure and service industries, there are two choices: change and attempt to keep up with the pace of global demand, or to resist change and stagnate (see again, Richards and Palmer, 2010; Wise and Clark, 2017). Wise and Clark (2017) address this as creative change, but as they argue “creative” does not necessarily imply a beneficial outcome for all concerned. Creative change can be perceived as tangible or conceptual’ (2). However, this can threaten the very authenticity of the community and the everyday living environment. Changing urban space and amenities can change perceptions of the area for local stakeholders, visitors and, most importantly, for the people who live there. In times of often-rapid change, sustaining community and social identities can be problematic.

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