

The visible-invisible tension of slum tourism influencers

Adalberto Fernandes

Adalberto Fernandes is based at Research Centre for Tourism, Sustainability and Well-Being (CinTurs), Universidade do Algarve, Faro, Portugal.

Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to investigate the tension between the visible and invisible aspects in slum tourism influencers' content, addressing a gap in the literature regarding this kind of influencers and enhancing visual methodologies by including the analysis of invisible phenomena.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper is a qualitative analysis of the most-watched slum tourism influencers' content in Brazilian 'favelas' (totaling 24,000,000 views) using Rancière's (2004) visual research framework and interpretation of the most frequent words in 27,000 comments on these videos.

Findings – Slum tourism influencers often attempt to depict what cannot be shown due to risks to the hosts and influencers. The inability to show certain aspects is compensated by the proliferation of alternative images hinting at the unseen. Comments reveal that while the desire to perceive the unseen may drive viewership, the influencers and locals emerge as the primary visual focal points. Consequently, the marginalized setting of the slum fades into the background, with individuals taking precedence in viewers' discussions.

Originality/value – To the best of the author's knowledge, this study is the first to explore the role of the invisible in slum tourism influencer content and followers' reactions. It illustrates that rather than imposing restrictions on the visible, the invisible serves as a catalyst for the proliferation of images through alternative means.

Keywords Visual methods, Slum tourism, Favela, Tourism influencer

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Given the prominent visual aspect of tourism influencers, who extensively use cameras to present themselves across various platforms, it is surprising that there are few studies using visual methods to analyze their content. Existing research primarily focuses on the impacts of neoliberalism on the standardization of influencer aesthetic norms (Smith, 2021; Arzbaecher *et al.*, 2022), resistance to the digital monetization of place images (Ray Chaudhury *et al.*, 2021), combating prejudices regarding certain places and their inhabitants (Motahar *et al.*, 2024), influencers' ability to innovate aesthetic norms (Gretzel, 2023), and the impact of influencer culture on how different cultures are portrayed (Bakri *et al.*, 2023). Existing studies on the visual in tourism influencer research are scarce and tend to take a literal approach, focusing on what is visible and what creates an image. However, this overlooks the importance of the invisible and the underlying nonvisual conditions that allow the visible to emerge, which are key concepts in visual studies (Bratchford, 2018; Joanou, 2017; Roberts, 2011). Slum tourism is a key phenomenon for understanding the relationship between the visible and invisible, as it reflects the tension between the desire to see marginalized areas and the fact that these areas are marginalized by being pushed out of sight. This form of tourism, often associated with poverty and conflict zones, raises ethical concerns due to the stark socioeconomic disparities between guests and the hosts (Altamirano, 2023), being this asymmetry the very product sold in the tourism experience. While the literature on slum tourism has recently expanded (Freire-Medeiros and dos Santos Moraes, 2022), visual

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methods approaches to slum tourism remain scarce (Lavrenova, 2021; Povia *et al.*, 2019; de Araujo *et al.*, 2018), with no visual analyses focusing on slum tourism influencers. This article aims to achieve two objectives: use visual methods to address the phenomenon of slum tourism influencers; and broaden the notion of visual analysis to include what is not visible or seeks to become visible.

2. Literature review

Despite a recent increase in literature on slum tourism, there remains a gap in research connecting slum tourism with visual methods and invisible phenomena, as well as linking influencers to slum tourism, even though influencers frequently visit slums and document their experiences. This presents an opportunity for exploration, as both slum tourism and influencers are seen as exemplars of authenticity, in contrast to more artificially constructed tourist experiences. For instance, when slum images are used for tourism promotion on platforms like TripAdvisor, it can create a perception of unethical exploitation (Crapolicchio *et al.*, 2022). Focusing on slum tourism aligns with the broader concerns in tourism influencer literature, which extend beyond the vulnerability of influencer audiences, such as young people, to also include the vulnerabilities of the communities they visit (Fedeli and Cheng, 2023). This article aims to bridge the gap between slum tourism and influencer research by exploring the intersections of authenticity and ethical considerations in the portrayal of marginalized communities. It seeks to provide a more nuanced understanding of the impacts and implications of influencers' engagement with slum tourism, both for the influencers and the communities they interact with. Given the lack of studies specifically addressing influencers in slum tourism – though research on bloggers in this context exists (Muldoon and Mair, 2016) – it is essential to fill this gap. While blogs offer valuable insights, influencers differ by emphasizing the individual as an online celebrity and relying heavily on visual content rather than text. This article introduces the concept of the “slum tourism influencer” to explore this uncharted area, contributing to a deeper understanding of the intersection between influencer culture and slum tourism.

3. Materials and methods

The study investigates YouTube influencers who visit Brazilian slums, using terms like “favela,” “influencer,” “tourism” and “vlog” to select case studies. It focuses on influencers who present these slums as attractive tourist destinations, analyzing the most-viewed videos given their impact. The research uses visual qualitative analysis and discursive analysis of YouTube comments, drawing on Rancière's (2004) work on aesthetics to explore the dynamics of perception and visibility in tourism. This approach highlights how visibility is shaped and contested, examining the tension between what is shown and what remains unseen. Also, an analysis of the most frequent words used in the comments on influencers' videos is proposed, due to the importance of studying not only the content but also its effects on audiences and their perspectives (Sanchez-Amboage *et al.*, 2024; Carvalho, 2024). An analysis of comments serves as privileged material, constituting natural-occurring data (Wang and Alasuutari, 2017) and reducing researcher bias on data collection. To accomplish this, a quantitative exploratory thematic corpus analysis of the most frequent words in comments was conducted using the linguistic analysis software AntConc (Anthony, 2024). Once the most frequent words are identified, the analysis will conclude with an exploratory interpretative analysis (Buissink-Smith and McIntosh, 1999) of the uses of those words in sentence context. For research ethics considerations, the identities of the commenters will be anonymized and their comments paraphrased because they are searchable online.

Table 1 ranks the videos by view count, listing each influencer's name, video date, duration and number of comments. Given the qualitative approach of the study, which involves detailed analysis, focusing on three videos is sufficient. These videos collectively have around 24,000,000 views and 27,000 comments, demonstrating their significant impact.

Table 1 Brazilian slum tourism influencer videos

Video	Title	Influencer	Publishing date	Length	Views	Comments
1	I spent a day with Rio Brazil's most dangerous gang	Arab	July 3, 2023	34:26	12,230,747	13,560
2	Caught in shootout in Rio De Janeiro favela views	Kurt Katz	April 17, 2022	35:47	5,952,406	9332
3	iShowSpeed spends a day In Brazil's most dangerous favela views	IshowSpeed	January 8, 2024	19:23	5,877,965	4970

Source: Author's own elaboration

References to the videos will use the numbers assigned in [Table 1](#), listed in descending order of views: Video 1, Video 2 and Video 3. Video 1 features “Arab,” a Lebanese-American influencer with 1.54 million followers, over 1,100 videos, and around 590 million views. Known for exploring dangerous places, Arab, whose real name is Addison Pierre Maalouf, presents himself as someone who “travel vlogs the unknown.” Video 2 is from “Kurt Katz,” a South African influencer with 2.93 million followers, 737 videos, and roughly 950 million views. Kurt visits dangerous places like Arab but also produces content on safer destinations. Video 3 features “iShowSpeed,” a US influencer (Darren Jason Watkins Jr.) with 9.63 million subscribers, 907 videos and approximately 2.5 billion views. Unlike the others, iShowSpeed focuses on sports rather than travel or slum tourism. These influencers challenge traditional definitions of tourism by exploring extreme and often undesirable locations, making them intriguing subjects for examining the boundaries of tourism influence and the nature of slum tourism.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Visual analysis

4.1.1. Video 1. In Video 1, the influencer discusses his interactions with gangs in the slums of Rio de Janeiro, emphasizing that his goal is not to expose or follow their lives but to experience and document the situation without denouncing it. He explains that accessing these areas requires multiple contacts and accepting risks, portraying a form of radical slum tourism. He notes that he is entirely at the mercy of the gangs guiding him, facing the possibility of being kidnapped if he does not follow their rules. This mix of hospitality and threat defines the uniqueness of slum tourism influencers. The influencer promotes tourism in dangerous slums, enabled by his non-journalistic, non-critical approach, which perpetuates existing inequalities by presenting the situation without attempting to improve or challenge it ([Dürr et al., 2020](#)). The influencer refers to the gang as an abstract entity, whose name is not disclosed, and it is this protection of identity that ensures a place for the influencer to speak. Despite the potential lack of appeal of experiencing this tourist product firsthand, it not only exists but also thrives on YouTube. This underscores the significance of remote visual mediation for slum tourism, suggesting that its most preferable mode of consumption is through mediated visual experiences. The slum tourism influencer not only highlights the existence of elements that remain hidden (such as the identities of gangs) but also portrays the perilous slum as enticing primarily as an online visual encounter. Thus, paradoxically, the act of perceiving that not everything is observable becomes an act of observation through absence: a lack of imagery coupled with an absence of physical presence, facilitated by the influencer’s descriptions and the millions of views garnered by their videos.

4.1.2. Video 2. In Video 2, the title suggests that the danger, violence, and weapons associated with visiting a favela attract viewers to slum tourism influencers. The influencer is shown casually drinking beer with his translator-guide in Rio de Janeiro's “Zona Norte” favela, announcing in English that he is in the “worst part” of the city. The influencer can make this claim because, at that moment, he is not in immediate danger. This tension – being able to announce imminent danger while remaining safe – is a key aspect of the slum

tourism influencer's discourse. The video also features a segment in a barbershop run by an "ex-convict," where the barber discusses his past involvement in drug trafficking and links it to mistreatment and neglect by his parents. This interaction illustrates how recounting the hard histories of slum residents becomes a crucial element of slum tourism (Dürr *et al.*, 2021). The fact that the discourse is being uttered by a local aims to create its veracity. The barber becomes a tourist attraction in the slum due to his story of life change and past deviance. By asserting something that is recorded and made public, the former drug trafficker exposes his statements to the test of local and online truth. The video thus becomes an important site of authentication inside and outside the slum. Believing in this world of deviation is part of that deviation, of being deceived. The fact that the influencer cannot film the gangsters also forces the audience to believe his words. Being in a place that cannot be shown but only verbally testified to makes the slum tourism influencer a witness and not just a revelator of images. What cannot be seen in person or remotely must be testified, which is a second-hand tourism experience that links image and belief in a strong sense.

4.1.3. *Video 3.* In Video 3, which purports to feature a day in Brazil's most dangerous favela, the influencer is initially reassured by guides and translators about his safety, yet he frequently displays visible fear and constantly scans his surroundings. This sense of insecurity, whether genuine or not, is a crucial aspect of the video's appeal, as it conveys a heightened sense of danger and adventure. The influencer's discourse compensates for the lack of direct imagery, suggesting that what is not shown is still a part of the slum experience. The influencer from Video 1 appears in Video 3, offering advice to relax but also joking about the potential dangers, adding to the tension between experiencing the slum and ensuring personal safety. This dynamic creates a unique aspect of slum tourism, where the experience is mediated not just through images but through spoken word that addresses what cannot be shown. Guides and influencers navigate this tension by instructing on where and when to film, thus controlling both visibility and the narrative around the favela. The interplay between visible and restricted content, along with verbal descriptions, underscores the complex role of the influencer and the guide in shaping and framing the slum experience. At some point, the influencer falls victim to a simulated ambush by individuals with covered faces, guns and sticks, which turns out to be a prank. This portrayal of slum danger as staged demonstrates how the aesthetic imagination of danger without consequences is what the slum tourism influencer brings. This means that the staged ambush is not an exceptional moment in slum tourism influencer content; it shows that the locals already actively participate in a staging that is expected of them, indicating that even slum tourism has its moments of inauthenticity. The difference in the theme of authenticity in tourism in the case of the slums is that it is desired for the staging to be real as a staging because its potential reality constitutes the real danger.

4.1.4. *Comparative discussion of the videos.* In the case of slum tourism influencers in the favelas, there is a clear romanticization of poverty and danger that contributes to their perpetuation. This is the ever-present danger of slum tourism, commodifying poverty without ending that poverty (Altamirano, 2023). More than just a simple moment of humanity that brings the guide, inhabitants and influencer together, the fact that this is an encounter with an economic transaction shows that this emotional work of showing people's difficulties is also a way of participating in an economy of experience where the product is their life (Holst, 2019). The guide and the tourist, with their unequal power differentials, participate in a "cultural commodification" of "rendering into an attraction and valuable what is considered by some as shameful or difficult" (Yagi and Frenzel, 2022). Considering that none of these visits to the favelas are free of charge, this slum tourism influencer is part of a niche economy, paying to visit something dangerous. The numerous tourist visits to favelas precisely demonstrate this (Angelini, 2020). Although the slum tourism experience may not be appealing in person, it thrives on YouTube, revealing a form of violence of the gaze. This process transforms what tourism capitalism aimed to marginalize into a monetizable

product. The fact that it remains profitable precisely because it is marginalized underscores how capitalism exploits what was once outside its scope, such as slums. Consequently, influencers and followers of slum tourism influencers are engaging in this capitalist logic, benefiting from the very elements that capitalism sought to exclude. A critical stance of a resistant “aversion” to such practices could offer an alternative that does not stimulate tourism based on the voyeurism of injustices (Henry, 2020). However, the importance of studying the new mediations of the tourist experience through slum tourism influencers demonstrates that the political dichotomies between seeing/not seeing become fragile in addressing forms of mediation that aim to show what cannot be shown. More precisely, these forms of mediation make the visually forbidden the very thing that gives value to the visible. This means that even aversion becomes a monetizable product. Finally, the necessity of trusting guides and locals, including the belief in the simulated assaults to influencers as pranks, blurs the line between truth and fiction in slum tourism (Látková *et al.*, 2018). The “truth” of slum tourism influencers appears to perpetuate itself through both true and false narratives, with the *impossibility* of verifying online these narratives becoming an integral part of the slum experience as an experience of uncertainty.

4.2. Most frequent topics in commentaries

Despite the large number of comments, their diversity results in a few common terms that reflect dominant opinions about the videos (as shown in Table 2). The presence of common terms among different commentators indicates converging viewpoints, which is notable given the typically dispersed nature of user interests, especially when these comments arise spontaneously without the researcher’s involvement through surveys, interviews or focus groups. After identifying the most frequent words, we qualitatively analyzed, using the interpretation technique (Buissink-Smith and McIntosh, 1999), the sentences in which they appeared to account for their contextualized meaning. It is important to acknowledge the discrepancy in the number of the most frequent words of each video. This can be justified by the varying sizes of the comment corpora for each video, as illustrated in Table 1. Consequently, videos with a higher number of comments will exhibit a greater diversity in their most frequent words.

4.2.1. *Video 1 comments.* In the comments on Video 1, the most prominent word, after common linguistic connectives (e.g.: “and”, “from”) and platform-specific terms (e.g.: “like”, “share”), is “video” ($n = 106$). This indicates that the visual nature of the content is a central focus, and it is frequently associated with positive feedback praising the video’s content. Despite the negative portrayal of reality, the opportunity to view slum tourism through the influencer is valued. Another significant word, “people” ($n = 103$), highlights that the presence of the inhabitants contributes to the video’s appeal, suggesting that it is the individuals featured who enhance the attractiveness of the content. Slum tourism is then tourism of culture, of people, and not just of places (Chisholm, 2020). The contrast between the

Table 2 Most frequent words in comments

Video	Most frequent words
1	video ($n = 106$), people ($n = 103$), Brazil ($n = 101$), favela ($n = 85$), Brazilian ($n = 80$), kids ($n = 80$), life ($n = 75$), love ($n = 68$), good ($n = 65$), gang ($n = 64$), Rio ($n = 64$), content ($n = 55$), Arab ($n = 50$), respect ($n = 49$), crime ($n = 47$), real ($n = 47$)
2	Kurt ($n = 220$), people ($n = 193$), Brazil ($n = 120$), love ($n = 99$), good ($n = 98$), video ($n = 88$), out ($n = 81$), Rio ($n = 80$), see ($n = 79$), place ($n = 72$), safe ($n = 69$), dangerous ($n = 66$), great ($n = 58$), life ($n = 58$)
3	Speed ($n = 313$), Brasil ($n = 115$), Brazil ($n = 94$), Brasileiro ($n = 47$), Brazilian ($n = 33$), favela ($n = 45$), people ($n = 34$)

Source: Author’s own elaboration

precariousness of the slum and the hospitality of its people adds surprising tensions to the slum tourism influencer's role, making the experience both unexpected and compelling. The word "people" in the comments often carries negative connotations, yet it also acknowledges that the individuals featured in the video are portrayed positively despite their hardships, highlighting an intangible culture reflected in their bodies, words and affections. The word "Brazil" ($n = 101$) is prominent in the comments, with some discussing the country as a dangerous place to avoid, while others express a desire to visit Brazilian slums due to the positive image presented by the influencer – an image that contrasts with portrayals in traditional media. This positions the influencer as a key mediator of a place that many do not have direct access to, creating both an allure for potential visitors and a negative perception of Brazil.

The term "favela" ($n = 85$) illustrates how this Brazilian expression has become internationally recognized, signaling the type of place and experience viewers can expect. Comments highlight the favela as both dangerous and difficult to access, which enhances the perceived risk and exclusivity of the influencer's content. The term "Brazilian" ($n = 80$) reflects how some commentators, despite being from Brazil, have never seen such images of the favelas, suggesting that the video contributes to identity construction and potential domestic tourism. The word "kids" ($n = 80$) is used positively to describe moments when the influencer engages with children in the favela, such as playing soccer. This interaction emphasizes the impact of the "people" featured in the video. The term "life" ($n = 75$) reflects the relevance of lifestyle issues in these videos, highlighting the risks taken by the influencer and recognizing the lives of favela residents as significant, despite the social injustices that shape their experiences. Appreciation for the video is also expressed through words like "love" ($n = 68$) and "good" ($n = 65$), indicating positive viewer reactions to both the influencer and the content.

In Video 1, the focus on a "gang" ($n = 64$) leads to mixed reactions in the comments. Some view the gang as a problem, while others find them less threatening than expected or even express a desire to meet them. The mention of "Rio de Janeiro" ($n = 64$) helps differentiate commentators' views: some argue the video reveals a reality missing from typical tourist portrayals of the city, while others believe Rio should not be reduced to the negative aspects of the favelas. The audience engages in a dispute over the meanings of these places, using video platforms as a space for discussion. Comments praising the "content" ($n = 55$) indicate that the influencer has created something valuable within the digital content economy. The influencer's name, "Arab" ($n = 50$), is mentioned less frequently compared to Videos 2 and 3, suggesting he hasn't dominated the mediated slum tourism experience, though comments still express admiration for him and his work. Commentators show "respect" ($n = 49$) for the influencer's bravery in showcasing a dangerous area, acknowledging the risks involved. The life of "crime" ($n = 47$) is generally viewed negatively, while the portrayal of "real" ($n = 47$) people and places indicates that the influencer has succeeded in presenting an authentic depiction, with slum tourism being characterized by its portrayal of genuine, non-fabricated experiences.

4.2.2. Video 2 comments. In the comments of Video 2, the most prominent term is the influencer's name, "Kurt" ($n = 220$), which receives numerous praises for his bravery and content. This suggests that the influencer's persona is more central than the location itself, with the place primarily serving to enhance the influencer's image as someone who risks his life. The term "people" ($n = 193$) is frequently used to emphasize that even in challenging environments, there are good individuals, indicating that the focus is on the residents of the slum. The term "Brazil" ($n = 120$) is used to highlight that the country is perceived as less safe than expected, and that the video primarily portrays its unsafe aspects. This indicates an audience effort to co-construct the video's meaning, reflecting their engagement with and interpretation of the content. Previous studies show that tourism influencers also expose the inherent inequalities in tourism practices (Walpersberger and Gretzel, 2024; Benjamin *et al.*, 2024). These influencers

show a type of reality that is often forgotten, even if there is no explicit contestation of the obvious inequalities.

In the comments of Video 2, the word “love” ($n = 99$) reflects appreciation for the guide and the influencer rather than the place itself, showing that the influencer promotes both himself and the locals, but not necessarily the location. The danger of the place adds uniqueness and value to everyone involved. The term “good” ($n = 98$) describes the people of the slum and the guide positively, despite the challenging environment. The word “really” ($n = 87$) is used to emphasize authenticity, referring to the genuine nature of the guide, influencer, locals, and the slum itself. This highlights the “reality” that the slum tourism influencer presents, with audiences affirming that the video accurately portrays real aspects of the slum. Studies of comments on the TripAdvisor platform also assert that authenticity is the most prevalent value in visiting Brazilian favelas (Wise *et al.*, 2019). In the comments of Video 2, the word “video” ($n = 88$) is used to praise the transformation of an otherwise inaccessible reality into a visible experience. The term “out” ($n = 81$) indicates that the slum is perceived as a dangerous place, and viewers express concern for the influencer’s safety while requesting more content from this hazardous environment. The influencer enables audiences to experience this dangerous “outside” safely through the digital realm of the video, allowing them to engage with it without exposing themselves to real risk. Thus, the slum tourism influencer provides a way to explore and understand a place that would otherwise be inaccessible due to its danger, highlighting the appeal of experiencing the slum through a mediated online format rather than direct physical presence.

The word “Rio” ($n = 80$) is frequently used in the comments to refer to Rio de Janeiro, the city where the slum is located. Commentators use this term to emphasize that while the slum is indeed dangerous, there are also safer areas in the city. This suggests an attempt to argue that Rio is not as unsafe as portrayed in the video. Thus, slum tourism serves, as literature asserts, to contest the meanings of tourism (Vodopivec and Dür, 2019). In the comments of Video 2, the word “see” ($n = 79$) highlights the visual nature of the experience, with viewers expressing mixed emotions of happiness and sadness as they witness something perceived as real and authentic. The term “place” ($n = 72$) reflects varied perceptions of the slum, either as ugly or beautiful. The word “safe” ($n = 69$) is used to advise the guide and influencer to take care, recognizing the risks involved. “Dangerous” ($n = 66$) describes the events shown, indicating the audience’s negative view of the slum. The word “great” ($n = 58$) praises the guide, the content, and the influencer’s channel. Finally, “life” ($n = 58$) is used to express relief at not living in such a dangerous environment and to acknowledge the hardships faced by slum residents and the risks taken by the influencer. This reflects how slum tourism can lead to self-reflection and transformation for viewers (Muldoon, 2020; Mkono, 2016). The difference lies in the influencer allowing their followers the opportunity for remote self-transformation. However, this opportunity for self-transformation overlooks the need for a critique of the socioeconomic inequalities that generate the reality of slums in the first place (Nisbett, 2017), leading to an exploitation of the other’s vulnerable experience for selfish self-transformation.

4.2.3. Video 3 comments. In the comments of Video 3, the dominant word is “Speed” ($n = 313$), referring to the influencer’s name, which reflects a similar focus on the individual as seen in Video 2. This emphasis on the influencer over the location or its people suggests that the influencer’s personal brand overshadows the significance of the visited place. Given that this influencer is known for various activities beyond slum videos, the visit itself is secondary. This aligns with studies on tourism influencers, which show that the location often serves primarily to bolster the influencer’s image, leading to a devaluation of the place as it becomes a backdrop for promoting the influencer’s brand and economic value (Smith, 2021). While traditional views on slum tourism often criticize it as an immoral exploitation of impoverished spaces (Crapolicchio *et al.*, 2022), the emerging phenomenon of slum

tourism influencers highlights a different dynamic. By focusing on internet celebrities, who are themselves commodified, this approach monetizes the tourism experience while sidestepping direct comparisons between wealthy influencers and slum residents. The influencer occupies a liminal role, offering glimpses into otherwise hidden or forbidden spaces, thereby providing followers with partial access to these areas. They act as mediators of visual interdiction, reinforcing the boundaries they cross. As “free” online guides, influencers provide a form of access to these places without the overt commercial transaction of traditional slum tourism businesses.

The word “Brasil” ($n = 115$) reflects that the video is viewed by Brazilians and serves to showcase the country to its own people. Comments welcoming the influencer to Brazil indicate a sense of pride and acceptance, with viewers expressing that the influencer is now part of the Brazilian nation. This suggests that the influencer’s visit helps create a collective identity rather than just facilitating superficial tourism. The terms “Brasileiro” ($n = 47$) and “Brazilian” ($n = 33$) are used by commentators to assert their own Brazilian identity and to label the influencer as part of the Brazilian identity, showing that the influencer’s presence is seen as transcending mere visitation and contributing to a shared sense of national identity. This identification between influencer and followers is crucial for fostering a positive relationship with the place (Han and Zhang, 2023). In the comments of Video 3, the word “Brazil” ($n = 94$) is used by viewers to debate whether the influencer is in one of the country’s most dangerous slums, reflecting a contestation of the place’s perceived danger and the influencer’s message. Some commentators argue that the location shown is not as dangerous as suggested, while others affirm its peril. The term “favela” ($n = 45$) is used to praise the influencer’s bravery but also to challenge the narrative that he is in the most dangerous part of the favela. The word “people” ($n = 34$) continues to express admiration for the residents of the favelas, portraying them as deserving respect despite their challenging environment.

4.2.4. Comparative discussion of the comments. What could be seen as an undesirable lack of intervention by public policies to make this kind of tourism sustainable and as a possibility of ending the slums’ inequality (Altamirano, 2022) are capitalized by slum tourism influencers as what is valuable in their visual product: the insecurity, the stigma, and the uncertainty of the slum visit. The slum becomes not only an emergent product of interactions among people physically present in the same place but also a digital construct. This digital mediation creates an experience of the slum from afar, which means “it is possible to question whether slums exist at all beyond a bourgeois projection” (Frenzel, 2023). Online media amplifies the concept of slums, leading to the creation of “slum simulacra” through artificial intelligence and deep fakes. This trend is expected to drive the growth of “augmented reality” tourism experiences, including those involving slums. In the same way that tourism practices can commodify slums (Yagi and Frenzel, 2022), the followers of influencers extend this practice of valuation into the online realm. Through informal participatory evaluation, they assess not only the supposedly dangerous nature of the slums but also the hospitality of their inhabitants and the moral and aesthetic appeal of the slum environment. The audience validates that the visit depicted real aspects, thereby attesting to its authenticity. Studies of TripAdvisor comments similarly assert that authenticity is the most prominent value for visitors to Brazilian favelas (Wise et al., 2019). In the case of an online experience, the influencer provides their followers with the opportunity for remote self-transformation by acknowledging the injustices of the world that are present in the slums. However, this process of self-transformation tends to overlook that influencers participate in a form of exploitation in which the other’s vulnerable experience is digitally commodified. Not just commodified, but blocked from escaping such vulnerability, because it is the other’s vulnerability that serves as a profitable online moral wake-up that is at the same time a moral-snooze: “slum tours end with a flying endorsement for capital to keep dispossessing and segregating. A few images of welcoming smiles or children playing in the street often wash away all of capital’s violence” (Henry, 2020).

5. Conclusion

The objectives of this study: (1) employ visual methods to address the phenomenon of slum tourism influencers; and (2) broaden the notion of visual analysis to include what is not visible or seeks to become visible – has yielded important results from an object that has not been address by the literature. The case of slum tourism influencers illustrates how what is shown encompasses what is sought to be shown through other non-visual means and even what cannot be directly shown. The inability of the camera to capture certain locations, coupled with the influencer's gaze beyond the frame, describes what cannot be seen directly, indicating that the image of the prohibited is constructed in various ways (e.g. through verbal descriptions of images, filming the ground, recording sounds that evoke images, etc.) rather than mere absence of imagery. More than a simple prohibition, through an image that fails to materialize, the slum tourism influencer makes images to proliferate through descriptions, shaky filming and moments where the camera is forced to divert. What remains invisible necessitates visualization through alternative means, namely, words, being a promising path for visual approaches to tourism research.

The tension between the visible and the invisible is evident in the comments section, where reactions to images shape verbal constructs. To grasp this tension effectively, textual and visual components must be approached as complementary modes of image production, acknowledging that visual representations extend beyond overt depictions. The analysis of comments emerged as a crucial aspect in comprehending the significance of the content for followers and their active engagement in negotiating video meanings, rather than passively consuming them. Comments highlight that the primary interest lies in the influencer's life and encounters with people, rather than the destinations *per se*. Nevertheless, the place plays a pivotal role in shaping individuals as resilient and brave. The scarcity of hospitality within the setting amplifies the significance of the locals' hospitality, as it surpasses expectations compared to more conventional tourist destinations. It is the inhabitants who overshadow the place, through the ways they survival in inhospitable conditions. Paradoxically, the portrayal of individuals transcends the depiction of place, although the latter sets the stage for the unexpected portrayal of human resilience.

A qualitative visual analysis, while rich in detail, is limited by the small number of videos it can cover, leaving out other popular influencers that might offer different viewpoints. A more comprehensive quantitative approach to comments could provide deeper insights. The slum tourism influencer phenomenon is at a critical juncture, balancing entertainment and humor with the serious inequalities of slum life. This raises a significant research question: how to promote these areas while addressing their problems without trivializing them through non-serious portrayals. This issue is an important area for future research. Regarding practical implications, the involvement of individuals, governments and businesses in slum tourism influencers must confront the moral ambiguity of (in)visibility in slum tourism. Investing in slum tourism influencers as a development policy risks participating in a digital economy that privileges those who can film and showcase these areas, while excluding those who live there. A backlash against influencers, on the other hand, might exclude these lives from visibility and could also reinforce the allure and stigma of these areas. As noted in existing literature, slum tourism often risks romanticizing or aestheticizing crime and poverty, and influencers can perpetuate this problematic image. Despite providing some visibility and monetary benefits to guides and local populations, influencers are the principal benefiter from monetizing online views, contributing to the exploitation of the intangible value of people's lives and cultures, showing the perversity of this digital economy of slum tourism.

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About the author

Adalberto Fernandes, (PhD in Philosophy, MA in Communication, BA in Communication) is a post-doc researcher at the Research Centre for Tourism, Sustainability and Well-Being (CinTurs), University of Algarve, Faro, Portugal. He has authored articles, chapters and delivered presentations on communication, media, participation, festivals, events, trust, risk, science and health communication. Adalberto Fernandes can be contacted at: aacfernandes@ualg.pt

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