Edelweiss Applied Science and Technology
ISSN: 2576-8484
Vol. 10, No. 11, 19-31
2026
Publisher: Learning Gate
DOI: 10.55214/2576-8484.v10i11.13755
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Invisible by design? Algorithmic gatekeeping, platform power and the digital visibility of South African township tourism

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Abstract: Township tourism is promoted through social media, search engines, online travel agencies and review platforms, yet digital participation does not guarantee that enterprises will be discovered, trusted or selected. This conceptual article examines how algorithmic gatekeeping and platform power shape the visibility, credibility and market accessibility of township tourism enterprises in South Africa. An integrative review synthesises scholarship on township tourism, digital inequality, platform ecosystems, network gatekeeping, resource dependence and social justice. The analysis identifies a progression from unequal digital access and capabilities to an algorithmic visibility divide produced by rankings, review architectures, recommendation logics, paid promotion and data extraction. These mechanisms can generate cumulative advantage, as established enterprises attract the attention, reviews and transactions that reinforce subsequent rankings, whilst marginal enterprises remain difficult to discover. The resulting platform-justice framework connects structural conditions, platform participation, algorithmic gatekeeping, visibility and credibility, visitor attention and local value capture. It identifies access, visibility, recognition, procedural, data and economic justice as conditions for digital inclusion. The study concludes that inclusion should be evaluated through discoverability and distributive outcomes rather than platform presence alone. It offers destination organisations, policymakers and platforms a basis for designing fairer discovery, review, data and support systems for township tourism.

Keywords: *Algorithmic gatekeeping, Digital inequality, Platform justice, South Africa, Township tourism.*

1. Introduction

Township tourism occupies an uncomfortable space within South Africa's visitor economy. This type of tourism often creates routes into histories and cultural worlds that were excluded from apartheid-era urban imaginaries, whilst supporting guides, restaurants, accommodation providers, artists and other small enterprises [1-3]. Soweto, Langa and Khayelitsha are consequently marketed as sites of political memory, creativity and everyday urban life rather than merely as spaces of deprivation [3]. However, the township tourism sector remains marked by uneven infrastructure, persistent safety narratives, fragmented coordination and limited integration into mainstream destination marketing [1, 4]. The challenge is not simply to attract more visitors. It is to secure forms of visibility that represent township destinations with dignity and allow locally owned enterprises to capture a fair share of tourism value [2, 3, 5].

Digital platforms appear to offer a practical response. Google Search and Maps organise discovery, TripAdvisor converts visitor evaluations into reputational signals, online travel agencies mediate comparison and booking, whilst Instagram, TikTok and YouTube circulate visual narratives at extraordinary speed [6]. For a small township operator, a mobile phone can therefore provide access to audiences that conventional advertising could rarely reach. This promise has encouraged policy and scholarly accounts to treat digital participation, entrepreneurial capability and storytelling as routes

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History: Received: 20 August 2026; Revised: 2 October 2026; Accepted: 9 October 2026; Published: 10 November 2026
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towards more inclusive tourism markets [7-10]. The promise is attractive. However, reduced connectivity and limited skills present challenges to enterprises that seek to establish their profiles, thereby limiting their accessibility [3, 5].

The premise is, however, incomplete. Being present on a platform is not equivalent to being found. Platforms order immense quantities of content through search rankings, recommender systems, popularity metrics, review scores, location signals, and paid placement arrangements [11]. Those ordering devices are not passive technical tools. They decide which destinations and businesses enter a tourist's field of attention, which are presented as credible, and which remain below the threshold of practical discovery [12]. Recent tourism research shows that algorithms increasingly co-author travel choices and that destination visibility is produced through interactions among platform infrastructures, institutions, users, and local actors [13, 14]. Digital participation can thus coexist with digital obscurity.

The value of inclusive digital tourism is that it gives a capable township enterprise a reasonable opportunity to be discovered and evaluated according to relevant qualities, irrespective of its location, accumulated review volume, or advertising budget [7, 15]. Actual platform markets frequently depart from that principle. New or small enterprises often begin with fewer transactions and reviews, limited content-production capacity, and weak bargaining power [16]. Ranking systems often use these traces precisely as evidence of relevance and trust. Visibility then becomes self-reinforcing when prominence brings clicks, visits, and reviews, which generate the data needed for further prominence [17]. Conversely, low initial visibility restricts the very interactions required to improve ranking. The result resembles cumulative advantage rather than an open digital marketplace [7, 17, 18].

Previous township tourism research has examined negative destination images, authenticity, resident participation, safety, infrastructure, and fragmented marketing [19-21]. More recent work encourages digital storytelling and platform adoption to broaden market reach [2, 3, 5, 22]. These contributions explain why township enterprises struggle to participate online, but rarely examine what happens after participation. Tourism platform research, by contrast, demonstrates the power of algorithms, online reviews and intermediaries, yet typically studies established accommodation markets, popular urban destinations or platform users without attending to historically marginalised township economies [7, 11, 12, 14]. The two bodies of literature have not been adequately connected.

This separation leaves an important knowledge gap. Established digital divide accounts distinguish inequalities in access, skills, and outcomes, but they do not fully explain how platform selection mechanisms intervene between capable use and market outcomes. Platform scholarship identifies such mediation, although it offers limited guidance on what fair visibility would require in a township setting [23, 24]. Without an integrated account, interventions may train entrepreneurs to produce content and establish listings whilst leaving the architectures that distribute attention untouched. Direct consequences include weak discoverability, fewer bookings and lower revenue. Indirect consequences are equally serious; for example, dominant operators and external intermediaries may become the authoritative narrators of township places, skew tourism flows towards a narrow set of attractions and capture the data and commissions generated by community-based experiences [24-26].

The article addresses this gap through the concept of the algorithmic visibility divide, defined as systematic inequality in the capacity of actors who are already digitally present to be discovered, recommended, recognised as credible, and converted into transactions within platform-mediated markets [27-29]. The study aims to conceptualise how algorithmic gatekeeping and platform power shape the visibility, credibility and market accessibility of township tourism enterprises in South Africa. To do this, it pursues four objectives: to examine the transition from digital to algorithmic exclusion; to identify how algorithms, rankings, reviews and data practices influence visibility and credibility; to explain how platform-mediated inequalities affect attention, tourism flows and local value capture; and to develop a platform-justice framework for inclusive township tourism marketing. The guiding questions ask how algorithmic exclusion differs from conventional digital exclusion, through which

Edelweiss Applied Science and Technology
ISSN: 2576-8484
Vol. 10, No. 11: 19-31, 2026
DOI: 10.55214/2576-8484.v10i11.13755
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mechanisms township enterprises become visible or invisible, how visibility inequality shapes market outcomes, and which justice principles should govern platform-mediated township tourism.

The contribution is theoretical, diagnostic, and practical. Theoretically, the article extends digital inequality from access, skills, and use towards mediated visibility and distributive outcomes. Diagnostically, it connects algorithmic gatekeeping with resource dependence to explain why platform participation may intensify rather than eliminate peripheral disadvantage. Practically, it identifies six dimensions of platform justice through which destination organisations, government and platform firms can evaluate interventions. The article proceeds from a critical review of township tourism and platformisation to an integrated theoretical framework and conceptual methodology. It then presents the analytical themes, develops the platform-justice model and discusses implications, limitations and directions for empirical inquiry.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Township Tourism Between Inclusion and Marginality

Township tourism emerged from South Africa's particular history of racialised urban planning and subsequent efforts to open previously segregated spaces to mobility, exchange and enterprise [2, 3]. Its products combine political heritage, food, music, art, domestic spaces and guided encounters with contemporary community life [1, 5]. Supporters view these experiences as vehicles for entrepreneurship, cultural recognition and cross-cultural learning [20]. Critics caution that commercial tours may aestheticise hardship, reproduce a voyeuristic gaze or direct benefits towards intermediaries rather than to residents [2, 30]. The sector therefore cannot be assessed only through visitor numbers. Questions of control, representation and distribution are intrinsic to its developmental legitimacy.

These tensions are sharpened by the uneven market position of township enterprises. Negative safety perceptions, inaccessible transport, limited signage and fragmented promotion constrain demand, whilst micro-enterprises often lack finance, formal networks and specialised marketing labour [22, 31, 32]. Community participation is frequently endorsed but remains variable in practice, and residents may have less influence than government agencies or tour intermediaries over product packaging and destination narratives [5]. Such constraints create resource dependencies that extend beyond the individual firm and reflect relations between historically peripheral places and metropolitan tourism cores [22, 25, 31].

The recent conceptual emphasis on authenticity, collaboration and innovation offers a useful response, but each pillar contains a digital question [5, 10]. Authentic narratives require discoverability before they can influence destination image. Collaboration increasingly occurs through privately governed infrastructures. Innovation creates opportunity only when platforms recognise and distribute local content [8]. A township enterprise may therefore satisfy familiar prescriptions for quality, storytelling and community ownership yet receive little tourist attention because it lacks the platform signals that make those qualities visible. The analytical problem shifts from whether township actors adopt digital tools to how platforms classify, rank and monetise their participation [3].

2.2. From Digital Divide to Algorithmic Visibility Divide

Digital inequality has developed beyond a binary distinction between connected and unconnected populations. First-level inequality concerns material access to devices and networks [33]. Second-level inequality addresses variation in skills, autonomy and forms of use [34]. Third-level inequality asks whether comparable use produces comparable economic, social or cultural outcomes [35]. This progression is especially relevant to township tourism because connectivity and social media uptake can improve whilst differences in professional content, transaction systems, data analytics and commercial outcomes remain substantial [10].

Outcome-based approaches nevertheless tend to treat benefits as consequences of individual resources and practices. Platform environments complicate that causal chain. Between use and outcome sits an infrastructure that observes behaviour, assigns relevance, predicts preferences, and ranks

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alternatives [23]. The tourism enterprise does not independently convert skill into market reach; its efforts are processed through criteria that are partly opaque and continuously adjusted [17]. A high-quality listing may remain unseen because it lacks reviews, transactions, or engagement, whilst a familiar business can retain prominence because prior visibility supplies abundant behavioural data [16, 18]. The platform is thus an active distributor of opportunity, not merely a venue in which pre-existing inequalities appear.

The algorithmic visibility divide captures this mediating layer. It does not imply that algorithms deliberately target township enterprises or that every ranking difference is unjust. Relevance, proximity, availability, and verified customer experience can legitimately assist tourists [12, 14]. The concern is that apparently neutral proxies may encode historical advantage. Review volume privileges businesses with past transactions, paid promotion favours those with capital, frequent content production rewards specialised labour, and location data can discount areas framed as risky or peripheral [36, 37]. Algorithmic exclusion is therefore relational and cumulative because it arises when the rules governing attention interact with unequal starting positions [7, 11, 12, 14].

2.3. Platform Infrastructures, Reviews and Credibility

Tourism platforms perform several functions simultaneously. They aggregate supply, reduce search costs, process transactions, host evaluations, personalise recommendations and generate market intelligence [38, 39]. This combination creates ecosystem value but also concentrates infrastructural power. Platforms define participation categories, decide which data fields matter, set commission structures, and control access to audiences [24, 40]. Tourism suppliers depend on these systems because tourists increasingly treat platform visibility as evidence that an enterprise exists and review-based popularity as evidence that it can be trusted [13, 14].

Online reviews are central to this credibility architecture. Reviews can reduce uncertainty and give small enterprises reputational assets that conventional branding could not provide [41]. However, review systems also generate entry barriers. A new operator must obtain customers before it can accumulate the evaluations that help attract customers [11]. Differences in platform user bases, verification rules, and ranking formulas mean that the same enterprise may project different identities across services [42]. Moreover, tourists do not evaluate scores independently of popularity; instead, review volume, recency, response practices, and badges can become shorthand for legitimacy [43, 44]. The architecture may consequently translate historical demand into present authority [17, 41].

Platform data practices extend this asymmetry. Each search, click, route request, review, and booking enriches the platform's predictive capacity, whilst small suppliers receive only partial dashboards and limited insight into ranking decisions [12]. Enterprises become dependent on an intermediary whose changing rules can alter reach without negotiation [23]. This is not dependence in the sense of complete powerlessness. Operators can diversify channels, cultivate direct relationships, and collaborate through destination networks. Their alternatives are nevertheless constrained when a few platforms mediate a large proportion of tourist attention [23, 25, 45].

3. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

No single theory explains why an enterprise with digital access and capable content production may remain commercially invisible. The framework therefore uses theory synthesis, assigning a distinct explanatory task to each perspective rather than presenting five parallel lenses. Digital inequality theory establishes unequal resources and outcomes [33, 35, 46]; network gatekeeping explains selection and visibility [18]; platform ecosystem theory locates interdependence among actors and infrastructures [12]; resource dependence theory explains constrained agency; and social justice theory supplies criteria for evaluating institutional arrangements [47]. Their integration connects conditions, mechanisms, power relations, and normative remedies [12, 18, 35, 47].

Digital inequality theory provides the starting conditions. Material access, skills, and use remain indispensable because an enterprise without reliable connectivity or transactional capability cannot

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participate effectively. The third-level divide then directs attention to unequal returns. The present framework extends this sequence by placing visibility between use and outcome. Platform participation is meaningful only when an enterprise crosses practical thresholds of discoverability and credibility. This extension avoids an individual-deficit explanation that attributes limited results primarily to insufficient entrepreneurial skill [7, 33-35].

Network gatekeeping theory explains the intervening mechanism. Gatekeeping concerns control over information as it passes through gates, whilst networked accounts recognise that platforms, algorithms, users and suppliers jointly influence selection. In tourism, algorithmic gates determine which listings enter search results, which posts reach feeds and which attractions are recommended to particular travellers. User reviews and engagement feed into these decisions, but the platform defines the categories, metrics and rules through which user action becomes consequential. Township enterprises are therefore both content producers and gated actors whose salience depends on political power, production capacity, relationships with gatekeepers and viable alternatives [11, 16-18].

Platform ecosystem theory shifts analysis from a dyad between enterprise and algorithm to a field of interdependent actors. Platforms coordinate tourists, suppliers, advertisers, content creators, payment providers, and destination organisations, producing network effects as participation increases. The platform's generative capacity can lower market-entry barriers, but its rules also establish asymmetric conditions of participation. Resource dependence theory clarifies the power implications: township enterprises depend on platforms for attention, reputation, and transactions, while any individual micro-enterprise contributes little to the platform's overall resource base. Dependence becomes greatest when tourist attention is concentrated, and alternative routes to market are weak [12, 23, 24, 45].

Social justice theory supplies the evaluative standard. Distribution concerns who receives visibility and economic value; recognition concerns whether local identities and qualities are interpreted on their own terms; procedure concerns who can understand and contest decisions. Data justice adds control over the digital traces from which platforms create value. These dimensions transform inclusion from a narrow capacity-building exercise into a question about institutional design. Fairness does not require equal ranking irrespective of relevance. It requires that relevant differences are transparent, that inherited disadvantage is not automatically compounded, and that affected enterprises possess meaningful routes to representation and redress [13, 14, 26, 48].

Figure 1 integrates the argument. Structural conditions shape whether and how enterprises participate. Participation is filtered through algorithmic gatekeeping, which produces visibility and credibility. These then condition visitors' attention, visits, bookings, and locally retained value. Feedback loops connect market outcomes to future gatekeeping because transactions create reviews and behavioural data. Platform-justice mechanisms can interrupt cumulative disadvantage at several points rather than relying on training alone.

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ISSN: 2576-8484
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DOI: 10.55214/2576-8484.v10i11.13755
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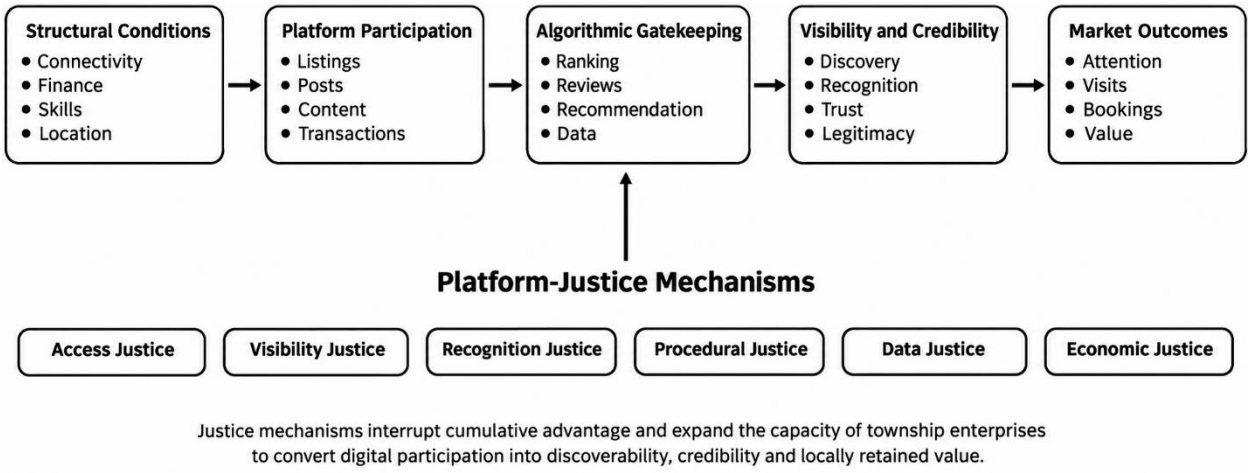


Figure 1.
Platform-Justice Framework for Township Tourism.

4. Methodology

The study adopted an integrative conceptual review and theory-synthesis design. This approach is appropriate when relevant insights are distributed across fields and the intended contribution is a new explanatory framework rather than an exhaustive estimate of empirical effects. Conceptual rigour rests on a transparent problem definition, purposeful selection of theoretical ingredients, and explicit explanation of how synthesis produces new relationships [47, 49, 50]. The review was organised around the focal phenomenon, unequal platform-mediated visibility, rather than around a single disciplinary vocabulary.

Literature was identified through combinations of terms relating to township or slum tourism, digital tourism, platformisation, online travel agencies, algorithmic gatekeeping, recommender systems, destination visibility, online reviews, digital inequality, platform power, resource dependence and social justice. Priority was given to peer-reviewed work published between 2019 and August 2026 in tourism, hospitality, information, media and management journals. Earlier sources were retained where they established the core theories. South African policy and practitioner material was considered only for contextual interpretation. Citation chaining from highly relevant studies helped identify foundational and emerging work [2, 7, 11, 14].

Analysis proceeded through four iterative stages. First, the literature was coded for structural conditions, platform mechanisms, visibility effects, market outcomes, and governance responses. Second, concepts with overlapping meanings were reconciled, particularly digital access, capability, visibility, and outcome divides. Third, causal connections and feedback loops were compared across township tourism and platform scholarship. Fourth, the integrated propositions were assessed against the justice dimensions of distribution, recognition, procedure, and data control. The outcome is an interpretive framework, not an empirical test. References to "findings" denote patterns derived from conceptual synthesis and should be validated through platform audits, enterprise-level research, and visitor-behaviour studies [47, 49, 50].

5. Findings

5.1. Visibility Inequality Begins Before the Algorithm, But Does Not End There

The first analytical theme is continuity rather than replacement. Algorithmic exclusion does not supersede inadequate connectivity, finance, or skills. It layers a new selection problem onto those disadvantages. Township entrepreneurs with intermittent connectivity, limited time, and modest advertising budgets generate fewer and less frequent digital traces. Platforms can interpret this

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ISSN: 2576-8484
Vol. 10, No. 11: 19-31, 2026
DOI: 10.55214/2576-8484.v10i11.13755
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narrowness as weak relevance, low popularity, or uncertain quality. The algorithmic visibility divide is therefore partly produced upstream, but it becomes consequential when platform systems translate unequal resources into ranked differences in attention [7, 8, 10, 33].

This finding challenges interventions that use account creation or training completion as indicators of inclusion. Such measures capture entry, not effective presence. A more appropriate sequence distinguishes access, capability, participation, visibility, and value. Breaks can occur at every transition. An enterprise may access Instagram but lack capacity to produce frequent video; create content but fail to reach non-followers; appear on Google Maps but rank below established operators; or gain attention that is monetised by an intermediary rather than converted into direct local revenue [9, 12, 14]. Inclusion must therefore be evaluated across the full conversion chain [35].

5.2. Rankings and Reviews Create Cumulative Advantage

The second theme concerns feedback. Search position influences attention; attention generates interaction; interaction produces reviews and transactions; and those signals influence future position. Reviews provide valuable accountability [11, 41], but their volume and velocity can reward incumbency. The same dynamic applies to social media, where prior engagement expands subsequent distribution [42]. For township enterprises entering formal platforms late or operating at a small scale, low data volume can be interpreted as uncertainty. The platform then allocates less attention, ensuring that uncertainty persists [17].

The significance is not that popular enterprises necessarily provide poor experiences. It is that popularity functions simultaneously as outcome and input. Quality and accumulated visibility become difficult to disentangle. Paid placement, professional photography and continuous reputation management further influence the signals surrounding quality. A supposedly meritocratic ordering can consequently reward the resources required to display merit in platform-compatible form. This mechanism helps explain why improvements in tourism products may not translate proportionately into market reach [12, 14, 16, 24].

5.3. Platform Credibility Can Displace Local Recognition

The third theme is a shift in the authority to define tourism value. Township tourism includes relational qualities such as local knowledge, cultural interpretation, hospitality and community benefit. Platform categories are designed for comparison at scale and may privilege standardised attributes, transactional reliability and visual popularity. Locally meaningful qualities become visible only when they can be rendered as selectable fields, review language or engagement metrics. Recognition is thus conditional on compatibility with platform taxonomies [2, 12, 20, 23].

This translation has consequences for destination identity. Highly ranked attractions and visually dramatic content can come to stand for the township as a whole, whilst ordinary enterprises and less "platformable" cultural practices remain peripheral. Platform-mediated credibility can support safety reassurance and reduce uncertainty, but it can also narrow representation and empower external reviewers to define authenticity. The problem is not user voice itself. It is the imbalance between review-based authority and residents' capacity to shape categories, correct misrecognition and circulate alternative accounts [3, 20, 26, 30].

5.4. Visibility Does Not Guarantee Local Value Capture

The fourth theme separates exposure from benefit. Viral content may increase attention to a township without directing tourists towards locally owned enterprises. Online intermediaries may package experiences, collect commissions, and retain customer data. Influencers can appropriate community imagery while generating value elsewhere. Even where bookings increase, dependency on platform rules and fees can reduce the share retained locally. Visibility is therefore developmentally ambiguous: it can expand demand, concentrate flows, create reputational risk, or facilitate extraction [7, 23-25].

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This finding qualifies optimistic accounts of digital storytelling. The relevant outcome is not maximum exposure but governed visibility that connects recognition to local agency and benefit. Metrics should track referrals to local firms, conversion, commission leakage, repeat direct business, and the distribution of visits across enterprises. Without those measures, destination campaigns can report reach whilst remaining unable to show whether attention strengthened township livelihoods [3, 5, 9, 13].

5.5. Platform Justice Requires Multiple, Connected Interventions

The final theme is that no single remedy can address a layered problem. Access justice concerns affordable connectivity and transactional infrastructure. Visibility justice concerns equitable opportunities to enter discovery and recommendation systems. Recognition justice requires categories and quality signals that acknowledge locally defined value. Procedural justice demands intelligible rules, notice, and routes to contest harmful classifications or fraudulent reviews. Data justice concerns access to and control over locally generated data, whilst economic justice concerns commissions, procurement, and the distribution of platform-created value [12, 13, 26, 48].

These dimensions are mutually dependent. Training without visibility reform prepares enterprises to compete under unequal attention conditions. Visibility without recognition can amplify stereotypes. Data access without analytical capacity yields little bargaining power. Higher bookings without economic justice can increase activity whilst preserving leakage. The framework therefore treats justice as an interlocking governance system rather than an ethical add-on to digital marketing [7, 14, 23, 45].

6. Discussion

The synthesis reframes a familiar diagnosis. Township tourism scholarship has convincingly documented under-marketing, weak digital capability, negative imagery, and fragmented stakeholder action. It has reasonably proposed storytelling, platform adoption, and collaboration as remedies [3, 5, 8, 10]. The present findings agree that access and capability matter but contradict the implicit linearity of the remedy. Participation does not travel directly to visibility and revenue. Algorithmic gatekeeping intervenes, and the conversion rate depends partly on signals produced by earlier visibility. This extension moves the explanation from enterprise readiness alone towards the political economy of digital attention.

The proposed algorithmic visibility divide develops digital inequality theory in two ways. First, it specifies a mechanism linking competent use to unequal outcomes. Third-level divide research has correctly insisted that connectivity and skills are insufficient measures of inclusion, but outcome differences can remain descriptively broad [33, 35]. Gatekeeping identifies how outcomes are structured: rankings, recommendations, reviews, and advertising select which capable users receive market attention. Second, the framework makes place central. Township location carries historical and representational disadvantages that can interact with behavioural data and platform categories. Digital inequality is therefore not only a difference among users; it is also the datafied treatment of places [7, 12, 14].

The findings also extend network gatekeeping. Barzilai-Nahon [18] account highlights the gated actor's political power, information-production ability, relationship with the gatekeeper, and available alternatives. Township enterprises often score weakly on all four dimensions: they have limited influence over global platforms, modest content capacity, transactional rather than negotiated relationships, and few substitutes for concentrated digital attention. Yet they are not passive. Collective destination profiles, direct booking channels and partnerships with destination organisations can alter their salience and alternatives. The framework thus supports Wallace [17] view that digital gatekeeping is distributed across platforms, algorithms and users, whilst adding local economic value capture as a crucial tourism outcome [12, 25].

Recent tourism research offers strong agreement with the claim that platforms produce rather than merely display destinations. Gazilas [11] describes algorithmic influence over travel choice, Zheng, et

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Vol. 10, No. 11: 19-31, 2026
DOI: 10.55214/2576-8484.v10i11.13755
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al. [14] show that visibility is co-produced through institutionalisation, platformisation, and negotiation, and Manoli [12] links platform infrastructures to local power. The township setting sharpens the distributive stakes of these arguments. Where enterprises begin from historically constrained positions, a feedback system based on past transactions can convert social inequality into apparently technical relevance. Conversely, locally coordinated intervention can make the platform environment more negotiable. The novelty lies less in claiming that algorithms influence tourists than in explaining why this influence may reproduce spatial inequality and how justice principles can evaluate it.

Platform ecosystem and resource dependence perspectives illuminate an apparent contradiction. Platforms lower the cost of reaching tourists and can offer micro-enterprises services that they could not build independently. The same efficiencies increase reliance on private infrastructures and create asymmetrical access to data, customers, and rule-making. Resource dependence theory predicts efforts to reduce uncertainty through diversification and collective action, but a single enterprise has limited leverage where network effects concentrate attention [23, 24, 45]. Destination organisations can act as countervailing intermediaries by aggregating local supply, developing shared data capability and negotiating platform partnerships, rather than merely encouraging every firm to optimise individually.

The platform-justice framework has several theoretical implications. Access justice preserves the material foundation of digital inclusion. Visibility justice introduces discoverability as a distributive good. Recognition justice connects tourism representation with the design of categories and credibility signals. Procedural justice addresses opacity and contestability; data justice addresses informational asymmetry; and economic justice tests whether attention produces locally retained value. Together, these dimensions prevent fairness from collapsing into equal exposure. An enterprise can be highly visible but misrepresented, visible but unable to contest abuse, or visible while value is extracted elsewhere. Justice concerns the quality, governance and consequences of visibility [13, 26, 48].

From a policy perspective, the findings suggest that digital-support programmes should measure discoverability and conversion, not only training attendance or account creation. South African tourism agencies and municipalities could establish baseline audits using neutral searches for township experiences across maps, review sites and booking platforms. Results could be disaggregated by enterprise ownership, location, review volume and paid status. Public support should then combine connectivity and skills with professional content services, verified local-business labels, shared review-management assistance and direct-booking infrastructure. Such measures would address unequal starting conditions without guaranteeing favourable reviews or insulating enterprises from legitimate quality assessment [3, 9, 10, 33].

Destination management practice also requires a shift. Township marketing should not be evaluated solely through impressions, followers, and campaign reach. A justice-oriented dashboard would examine the diversity of enterprises appearing in prominent results, click-throughs to locally owned businesses, conversion, commission leakage, spatial dispersion of visits, and access to customer data. Destination organisations could curate interoperable inventories and structured data that help search systems recognise small operators, whilst ensuring that community-defined attributes are not reduced to stereotypes. Collective action is particularly important because platform optimisation performed enterprise by enterprise may intensify competition for a fixed pool of attention [2, 5, 14, 32].

Platforms themselves face a legitimate governance challenge. Complete disclosure of recommendation algorithms is neither feasible nor necessarily desirable because it can invite manipulation and compromise intellectual property. Procedural justice can nevertheless be advanced through meaningful explanations of ranking factors, notification of material changes, transparent treatment of paid placement, accessible appeal processes, and diagnostics showing why a listing is not eligible for distribution. Visibility audits could test whether proxies systematically disadvantage peripheral or newly listed enterprises. Review architectures could distinguish absence of data from evidence of poor quality and provide safeguards against fraudulent or contextually discriminatory content [13, 16-18].

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The conceptual design imposes clear limitations. The framework draws relationships from heterogeneous literatures rather than observing the proprietary algorithms of specific platforms. Platform mechanisms change rapidly, differ across services, and are personalised by users, location, and time. Township tourism is also internally diverse, and the experiences of an established Soweto attraction may bear little resemblance to those of a new operator in another township. The analysis cannot determine the magnitude of visibility inequality, establish discriminatory intent, or show which justice intervention is most effective. Its value is to specify mechanisms and testable relationships, not to provide causal estimates [47, 49, 50].

Future research should therefore operationalise the algorithmic visibility divide. Repeated platform audits could use standardised tourist personas and neutral search protocols to track rank, recommendation frequency and paid placement across township and mainstream enterprises. Longitudinal designs could assess whether review accumulation produces cumulative advantage after controlling for quality, price and availability. Interviews with entrepreneurs could examine perceived dependence, rule changes and strategies for diversification, whilst visitor experiments could test how rank, review volume, locality labels and community-benefit information affect trust and choice. Comparative work across South African townships and other marginalised urban destinations would establish contextual boundaries. Participatory research should involve township actors in defining fair visibility and local value capture, ensuring that the framework's normative categories are not imposed without deliberation [7, 12, 14, 26].

7. Conclusion

This conceptual article set out to explain how algorithmic gatekeeping and platform power shape the visibility, credibility and market accessibility of South African township tourism enterprises. The study examined the transition from digital to algorithmic exclusion, identified the roles of rankings, reviews, recommendation systems and data practices, traced their implications for visitor attention and local value capture, and developed a platform-justice framework. The synthesis shows that conventional digital inclusion is necessary but incomplete. Connectivity, skills and platform participation do not by themselves ensure that an enterprise will be discovered, recognised as credible or converted into bookings.

The principal finding is the algorithmic visibility divide. Platform systems transform prior interactions, review volumes, engagement, location and paid promotion into signals of relevance and trust. Because visibility generates the data used to allocate subsequent visibility, these systems can produce cumulative advantage. Township enterprises with thin digital traces may remain difficult to discover even when their products are distinctive, and their platform use is competent. The finding does not establish deliberate discrimination by platforms, nor does it suggest that popularity and verified experience are irrelevant. It shows that technical selection criteria interact with unequal starting conditions and can therefore reproduce spatial and economic marginality.

The theoretical significance lies in connecting digital inequality, network gatekeeping, platform ecosystems, resource dependence and social justice within a single explanatory sequence. Digital-divide research is extended by placing mediated visibility between use and outcome. Gatekeeping theory is extended by connecting information selection to tourism flows and locally retained value. Resource dependence clarifies why individual township enterprises possess limited influence over the infrastructures on which they increasingly rely. The platform-justice framework then provides a normative vocabulary for evaluating access, visibility, recognition, procedure, data and economic distribution.

For tourism organisations and public policy, the analysis changes what counts as successful digital support. Training numbers, new profiles and campaign impressions should be supplemented with evidence about prominent search appearance, referral diversity, conversion, platform costs, access to customer data and the distribution of benefits among locally owned enterprises. Destination organisations can reduce dependence through collective inventories, shared reputation support, direct-

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booking options and negotiated platform partnerships. Platforms can strengthen procedural legitimacy through clearer ranking explanations, transparent paid placement, accessible appeals and audits of proxy effects on peripheral suppliers.

The conclusions remain bounded by the non-empirical design. The study synthesised public scholarship and could not inspect proprietary algorithms or estimate their effects across platforms and townships. The framework also abstracts from considerable variation among enterprises, tourists and destinations. Platform audits, longitudinal ranking studies, entrepreneur interviews, visitor experiments and participatory definitions of fair visibility are required to test and refine its propositions.

Township tourism will not become digitally inclusive merely because more enterprises are online. Inclusion depends on whether those enterprises can enter the tourist's field of attention, be evaluated through fair and contextually meaningful signals, and retain a defensible share of the value that visibility creates. By treating discoverability as a question of power and justice rather than a technical by-product of participation, this article provides a basis for designing platform-mediated tourism markets in which township enterprises are not simply present, but genuinely findable, credible, and economically consequential.

Transparency:

The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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