Modern slum tourism, rooted in the social justice movements of South Africa and Brazil in the early 1990s, has become an increasingly popular practice among tourists looking for experiences off the beaten path. Unsurprisingly, a form of tourism that allows wealthy travelers to experience the “reality” of how poor people live has elicited criticism and controversy. Slum tourism has been lauded as an innovative economic opportunity for poor urban neighborhoods and has been condemned for promoting poverty voyeurism. The first author undertook a critical discourse analysis in the winter of 2013–2014, analyzing slum tourism discourse in travel blogs. Eighteen travel blogs and 36 blogs postings were analyzed using a Foucauldian critical discourse perspective. The study found that travel bloggers use a number of structures of authority and structures of responsibility to convince their readers of the value of this touristic practice and the integrity of the travelers who would choose to participate in slum tourism.

Key words: Slum tourism; Critical discourse analysis (CDA); Travel blogs; Michel Foucault; Responsible tourism

Introduction

Increasing scholarly attention has been devoted to slum tourism (varyingly characterized as poverty, township, favela, reality, or cultural tourism). Founded at approximately the same time in South Africa and Brazil and set within movements for social justice, slum tourism is now established in the formal tourism economy (Freire-Medeiros, 2013; Steinbrink, Frenzel, & Koens, 2012). It is commonly represented as paid, guided tours through impoverished neighborhoods of many major cities throughout the developing world (Frenzel, Koens, & Steinbrink, 2012; Steinbrink et al., 2012). The tours are “packaged” as opportunities for tourists to engage with people in low-income communities, promote cross-cultural understandings, give residents a chance to share their stories and take pride in their communities, and generate some much needed income for local initiatives (Basu, 2012; Freire-Medeiros, 2013; Frenzel, 2012; Scheyvens, 2011). Despite these altruistic foundations, witnessing and gazing upon poverty is a central component of
the experience and raises moral and ethical concerns (Frenzel et al., 2012; Meschkank, 2012; Rolfes, 2010). Slum tourism is polarizing, in part because of what it says about power and privilege within tourism.

Scholars have examined tourists’ attitudes and perspectives about slum tourism (Diekmann & Hannam, 2012; Meschkank, 2012; Rolfes, 2010), assessed hosts’ feelings and attitudes (Mekawy, 2012), and considered how slum tourism has been conceptualized (Frenzel et al., 2012). The research presented here, a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of slum tourism travel blogs, adds to the discussion by highlighting the power structures underlying this touristic practice. CDA involves understanding the meanings beyond or “underneath” the text and assessing what an author is doing through the text (Graham, 2011). However, it is not enough to simply “uncover” and identify instances of power imbalance and manifestations of hegemonic oppression that exist within discourse: One is obligated to investigate how discourse ought to be changed, “to prescribe and validate corrections to discourses” (Too1an, 1997, p. 86). As Too1an (1997) noted, because “social inequity is discoursally constituted, reproduced and legitimated,” CDA can be a powerful tool in exposing and undermining its structures (p. 87).

Related Literature

Modern slum tourism began under the auspices of the social justice movements in South Africa and Brazil in the early 1990s (Freire-Medeiros, 2013; Frenzel, 2012). Presented as an amalgamation of “misery and leisure, suffering and fun” (Freire-Medeiros, 2013, p. 1), slum tours cater to international tourists, promising a glimpse of the “reality” of local life and culture (Meschkank, 2012; Rolfes, 2010). Established in contrast to mass tourism initiatives, slum tours also aim to offer financial benefits for the poor (Freire-Medeiros, 2013; Frenzel et al., 2012; Rolfes, 2010).

Unsurprisingly, slum tourism has elicited criticism. The most common charge is voyeurism—that poverty is being exhibited for the entertainment of wealthy tourists (Basu, 2012; Meschkank, 2012; Rolfes, 2010; Steinbrink et al., 2012). Opponents argue that it robs poor people of their humanity, treating them like animals in a zoo (Freire-Medeiros, 2013; Steinbrink et al., 2012). Even in communities where poverty tours have had some financial benefits, local people have little or no involvement in the way the tours are delivered (Freire-Medeiros, 2013). Furthermore, as the attraction lies in a community’s impoverished and “chaotic” state, the tours may serve as a disincentive to development, even after profits have made community improvements possible (Scheyvens, 2011, p. 84). Given these debates, an assessment of the discourse used by those who partake in, and write about, slum tourism is warranted.

Travel blogs allow tourists to share photos and stories and remain connected with family and friends. Importantly, and as is contested by this research, bloggers are generally viewed as “less impacted by biases,” thus providing “a more ‘authentic’ insight into people’s experiences” (Jeuring & Peters, 2013, p. 212). Travel blogs allow others to share the travelers’ adventures and to learn about their encounters with the Other. Indeed, bloggers shape how readers understand, and even their decisions to engage in, slum tourism. As Enoch and Grossman (2009) made clear, bloggers “deconstruct and reconstruct” the places and people they encounter, effectively creating a new “touristic space” in an easily accessible online venue (p. 521).

Postcolonial Theory and CDA

The research utilized a Foucauldian approach to critical discourse analysis, which was embedded within a postcolonial theoretical framework. Postcolonial theory, beginning with Fanon (1963) and Said (1978), and carried forward by scholars including Bhabha (1994) and Spivak (1988), examines the false binaries of us/them, rich/poor, strong/weak, North/South, which characterize the colonial encounter and the subjugation of the Other in discourse (Khan et al., 2007). Postcolonial theorists explore how issues of race, ethnicity, gender, class, and locality perpetuate and reinforce social injustices and examine ways to undo these injustices (Aitchison, 2001; Palmer, 1994).

The commonalities between tourism and colonial ways of knowing and being are well-established (Ateljevic, Pritchard, & Morgan, 2007; Butler & Hinch, 1996; Nash, 1996). Both essentialize and fragment notions of indigenous identity as well as...
perpetuate conscious and unconscious practices, which foster “sedimented historical explanations of indigenous culture” (Hollinshead, 1992, p. 43; see also Grimwood, Yudina, Muldoon, & Qiu, 2015). As this project was concerned with travel bloggers’ efforts to construct their slum tourism experiences, postcolonial theory provided a valuable framework for exploring how tourists’ understandings of the Other are power-laden, have been informed and legitimated historically, and continue to be enacted (Tucker, 2009).

Discourse allows for shared understanding of what is “true” about ourselves, one another, and our surroundings (Foucault, 1972; Rose, 2001; van Dijk, 1985). Discourses are continuously reinforced and reconstituted through speech, media, novels, photographs, and every other means of communication (Jaworski & Pritchard, 2005; Waitt, 2005). Although discourse operates to create common understandings of what can be “true” or “known” about a particular subject, it concurrently suppresses understandings that cannot be true. Meanings counter to the prevailing discourse are silenced, making it difficult to think beyond the discourse, let alone speak out against it (Hook, 2001; Rose, 2001; Waitt, 2005). Thus, discourses have power—the power to privilege and the power to conceal. Foucault (1977) argued that power is imbued in all social interactions, and although not always a negative force, it privileges which (and whose) versions of reality are accepted as truth (Hook, 2001; Jones, 2012).

For Foucault (1972, 1977), knowledge and power are inseparable: “there are no power relations without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time, power relations” (Foucault, 1977, p. 27). Power is often used to maintain and reconstruct existing discourses, and yet may also be used to upset and overthrow prevailing discourses in the interests of social justice (Hollinshead, 1999; Jones, 2012).

Travelers’ Blogs

Purposive sampling methods were used to delineate a manageable study sample from among the thousands of travel blogs. The search term “best travel blogs” was entered into the Google search engine, and the top 25 travel blogs from each list were recorded until all lists were exhausted. The lists were published primarily on websites devoted to travel, online news sources, and personal travel blogs. Any travel blog appearing on two or more lists was included. These blogs’ top status arguably made them popular and therefore influential in the travel blogosphere. To confirm the sampling approach, a simplified Google search including only the key words “travel blogs sites” produced the same list and therefore provided no additional data.

A total of 53 travel blogs were included in the sample pool. Of these, 13 were excluded because they no longer existed or the pages were not user-created blogs. A total of 40 travel blog sites were searched using search terms gleaned from a review of the slum tourism literature: poverty, slum, poorism, responsible tourism, reality tour, cultural tour, ethical tourism, hopeful tourism, favela, and township. Particular place names—Dharavi, Kibera, and Soweto, the largest slum communities in Mumbai, Nairobi, and Johannesburg, respectively, and known to offer slum tours—were also searched. Of the 40 travel blog sites searched, 22 yielded no relevant results and thus were excluded. Analysis focused on postings that described a deliberate effort to seek out and experience poverty, primarily in the form of organized tours of urban slum areas, as opposed to incidental encounters with poverty while traveling. The remaining 18 travel blog sites yielded a total of 36 relevant blog postings.

Data Analysis

Analysis was guided by three questions:

- What values and ways of interacting are promoted by the bloggers?
- What values and ways of interacting are subverted by the bloggers?
- How are relationships of power described and enacted within the discourse?

These questions helped identify what Rose (2001) termed “effects of truth” (p. 149), or structures of authority contained within the texts, which establish what can and cannot be known about the practice of slum tourism. Blog postings were read, and codes were created regarding first impressions, questions
that arose, feelings evoked by the postings, and thoughts for further consideration. Blogs were then re-read to look critically and “underneath” their surface meanings. Themes began to emerge inductively, stemming from the development of the codes, questions, and observations, which were documented throughout the process.

As Tonkiss (1998) stated,

the discourse analyst seeks to open up statements to challenge, interrogate taken-for-granted meanings, and disturb easy claims to objectivity in the texts they are reading. It would therefore be inconsistent to contend that the analyst’s own discourse was itself wholly objective, factual, or generally true. (p. 259)

The researchers are always implicated within an analysis of discourse (Waitt, 2005). We approached this study as (critical) students of tourism, seasoned travelers, and, for the first author in particular, as someone who has spent many hours in the slums of East Africa during contract development work. We also acknowledge our situated positions as White, Western-educated academics, and we have wrestled with the ethical conundrum of working for social justice in tourism with communities that are not our own (Grimwood et al., 2015).

Findings

Blogs and Bloggers

The 18 travel blog sites were as follows: Four Jandals, Travel Dudes, Y Travel Blog, Adventurous Kate, The Everywhereist, The Wandering Earl, Uncornered Market, Go Backpacking, Wild Junket, Twenty-Something Travel, FoXnoMad, LandLopers, Globotreks, Breakaway Backpacker, Solo Traveler, Beers & Beans, Locationless Living, and Flora the Explorer. Of the 36 blog posts analyzed, 18 were about South Africa, nine were about other areas—including Asia, Brazil and other regions in Africa—and nine did not specify a location. The search term “poorism” did not yield any results, suggesting that this may be a term used in the media and by some academics but not broadly by travelers themselves. The terms “Dharavi” and “Kibera” did not yield any search results either, which was surprising given the well-established slum tours in Mumbai and Nairobi. The majority of the bloggers who shared demographic information were North American (10 out of 15), and 14 of the bloggers were female, whereas 13 were male.

The tours described in the blogs were generally half- or full-day excursions organized through a locally operated travel organization where a small group of tourists were taken through a slum. The tours were either on foot, by bicycle, or in a van, and they almost always included a visit to a local pub for lunch, a traditional healer, and either a school or daycare center that was being funded through profits generated by the tours. A few notable exceptions to this pattern were Flora from Flora the Explorer, who toured a favela with a local friend, as did Karen from Travel Dudes in Uganda. Jaime from Breakaway Backpacker and Norbert from Globotreks met up in Cairo and decided that they would explore that city’s “Garbage City” neighborhood on their own. Apart from these exceptions, all other postings referred to organized tour excursions.

What Does Blogging Slum Tourism Do?

Five thematic areas were developed to reflect what travel blog discourse does in the case of slum tourism: creating permission(s), reimagining/re-presentation of self, essentializing and victimizing, privileging experience, and hierarchy of experience. Each theme is associated with one of two discursive structures (described next), which underlie and strengthen the themes, giving them power and “effects of truth” (Foucault, 1984; Rose, 2001).

Structures of Authority. The first discursive structure in slum tourism blog postings is the structure of authority. As shown below, the bloggers establish authority as having traveled extensively and therefore possessing the experience and expertise to distinguish between “good” and “bad” tourism experiences. The authors use strong language of conviction, including words such as “must,” “cannot,” “responsibility,” and “best” in order to convey the importance of engaging in this form of tourism. The authors tell the readers what they should expect to see, the state of the community, and the mannerisms of their “hosts.” Their authoritative language establishes the “truth” and the “reality” of urban
slum communities. The authority of the author is reestablished through each new blog posting, which serves to reinscribe them as travel experts.

Creating Permission(s). Slum travel bloggers are quick to acknowledge a discomfort, an inherent sense of wrong, that comes with touring a slum. Bloggers recount the initial unease and uncertainty they felt and questions of invasion of privacy and voyeurism are engaged:

It all seemed so wrong. (Burmeister, 2013—Four Jandals, emphasis in original)

We already felt intrusive (this was someone’s home!) and now we were going to walk into their bedroom with our cameras in tow. (Geraldine, 2013a—The Everywherest)

But I felt uncomfortable. There I was, a white 6’2” American with a gigantic camera taking photos of people washing their laundry. It didn’t feel right. (Long, 2013b—LandLopers)

Once this has been established, however, nearly every blogger assures that it is important to overcome this instinctive unease and to see their duty, as responsible travelers, to “witness” this community. To not tour a slum community is to ignore the “reality” of the place one is visiting and to contribute to the continued ostracism of the poor:

Soweto . . . is one of those communities that outsiders are often fearful of entering. However, it’s also one of those communities that hold so much life, so much character and such an important history that shouldn’t be forgotten about. (Williamson, 2013—Travel Dudes)

If you get a chance to see how so many people . . . live, it’s a chance you should take. (Melvin, 2012—Travel Dudes)

Touring the slums is nearly always ascribed altruistic motivations, and it is made clear that profits from the tours are reinvested in community initiatives, which would not exist without the tourists’ contributions. By highlighting the progress that has been made through funds raised by the tours, readers can see how the visit is not exploiting residents’ poverty:

The bicycle tour makes a stop [at a local preschool] not only to give travelers and opportunity to goof off with crazy little kids, but also to provide some funding to help the center. (Noll, 2013—Uncornered Market)

Since establishment, more than 3,000 tourists have participated on this tour, spreading considerable financial benefit to the community. Apart from the various donations from the visiting tourists, much needed income has been generated and put into circulation in local township [sic]. (Huang, 2012—Wild Junket)

Travel bloggers assure readers that the residents are happy to welcome visitors into their homes, they are just as eager and curious to meet people from a new culture as the tourists, and the children all ask to have their photos taken. Local residents are portrayed as happy to talk about their lives with tourists:

First it might seem strange to see how people live in a township, but no worries! The people like you to come and see, that you are interested to find out more! (Melvin, 2013—Travel Dudes)

Through roads paved and unpaved, we cycled. Some people shook our hands, gave us high fives. Many were just as curious about us as we were about them. (Noll, 2013—Uncornered Market)

Finally, the bloggers end by assuring readers they “should” visit a slum if given the opportunity, that it is an experience not to be missed and one that will broaden their understanding of the world:

So if you don’t treat the township as a tourist attraction, it simply won’t be one. Don’t feel uncomfortable. Just extend your hand and converse with the people around you. And then, you too will soon discover that such a visit just may be the most challenging, eye-opening and memorable experience of your trip to South Africa. (Wandering Earl, 2011—The Wandering Earl)

We can’t travel around the world and only see the pretty. We have to be open to see it all. (Davila, 2012—Breakaway Backpacker)

The prevailing discourse in travel blogs assures readers that it is permissible to participate in slum tourism. Bloggers acknowledge there may be some discomfort and apprehension at the idea, but they assure readers it is important to override those
feelings because the benefits to the local community, to the people they will encounter, and to themselves as world travelers far outweigh these concerns.

Reimagining/Re-Presentation of Self. The travel bloggers construct and present themselves as a brave, bold travelers with the courage to undertake these trips. The bloggers imply that it takes someone willing to dig a little deeper, to expose themselves to a “not so shiny suburb,” and that this experience has made them better, more learned citizens of the world:

Go deeper, even in simple conversations, and you may find that they have stories, too, and life experiences strikingly similar to yours. (Noll, 2012—Uncornered Market)

Moreover, these are portrayed as transformative experiences, as thoughtful travelers choose to participate in a local “reality” tour and inevitably come away changed people.

Writing about slum tours also elevates the status of the bloggers due to the associated undertone of danger and risk. Although bloggers point out that the danger is often exaggerated, and should not deter other tourists from visiting, many hint that only the brave and bold traveler should embark upon such an adventure:

Alexandra—commonly referred to as Alex—is one of the roughest townships in South Africa . . . “Alex is where people from Soweto go when they want a township experience.” Robin [the tour guide] told us. (McCulley, 2012—Adventurous Kate)

A place where even native Brazilians are scared to enter. (Baker, 2013—Flora the Explorer)

Essentializing and Victimizing. Although the blogs provide opportunities for the writers to reframe and re-present their own identities, local people are typically essentialized and re-presented as uncomplicated and unagentic. This is particularly evident in the description of local people as endlessly welcoming, always happy to put down whatever they are doing to share their stories and invite tourists into their homes:

You really can’t get any more “in” the community—besides from walking into the locals’ houses (which

I’m sure many would welcome you into, they are very friendly). (Williamson, 2013—Travel Dudes)

And despite the poverty, not a single person we came across had anything but a smile on their face. (Wandering Earl, 2011—The Wandering Earl)

I knew this was akin to being welcomed into the Rocinha community; belonging, even for a few moments to a group of people happy to include anyone and everyone. (Baker, 2013—Flora the Explorer)

Although the bloggers describe how surprised they were to see smiling faces and community spirit when they had anticipated sadness and despair, slum residents are also portrayed as victims having little to no agency or ability to affect their circumstances:

Her eyes had a faraway look, and her expression wasn’t so much sad as it was resigned. This was her life. This is how things are. (Geraldine, 2013b—The Everywhereist)

It was only 10:30am, yet the local beer tasting was about to begin. Everyone took turns sipping the rather awful brew from a giant can . . . After us tourists had had our fill, the locals began to pass around the can taking noticeably bigger gulps. Unemployment is 52%. (Dave, 2008—Go Backpacking)

Related to this, blog posts often contain text describing a locale with little resemblance to the photo accompanying the post. For instance, this excerpt from Four Jandals provides a much more impoverished and unpleasant scene than the photo represents (http://www.fourjandals.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Bwaise-Slum-Tour-Local-School.jpg):

Visiting the local school where 40 kids cram into a shoebox of a room with dirt floors was eye opening. (Burmeister, 2013—Four Jandals)

Others describe scenes that, even without accompanying photos, can only be exaggerations of the actual conditions:

The second house was about the same size meaning the size of a nice walk-in closet . . . these two
small rooms usually hold 80–90 kids each night. (Graaf, 2009—Travel Dudes)

The structure of authority, the first discursive structure emanating from our analysis, relies on the bloggers’ unchallenged knowledge and authoritative voice. This authority allows the bloggers to suppress or evade concerns about the appropriateness of this kind of travel, as well as issues of ethics and agency.

Structures of Responsibility. The second discursive structure is the structure of responsibility. The bloggers establish themselves as responsible tourists in two ways. First, they choose to take the “road less traveled,” the more difficult path that would not appeal to all tourists, but which is seen as being much more rewarding and challenging than typical touristic activities. Responsibility in tourism is thereby constructed as an obligation to know the place and people you are visiting. Second, the bloggers become responsible tourists because of how they give back to the place they are visiting, highlighting their decision to support local entrepreneurship and social initiatives. This discourse suggests that the alternative, ignoring local poverty and not sharing the wealth that allows them to travel, would be irresponsible.

Privileging Experience. Repeatedly emphasized in travel blogs is the penultimate importance of experience. Going beyond merely viewing host communities through the lens of a camera, talking to people, and taking an interest in their lives is privileged. These experiences are positioned as transformative and leaving lasting memories:

Wake up and be grateful. People don’t understand because they have not had the first hand sensory experience . . . It’s almost impossible to change people from the outside, which is why travel can bring about profound changes from within a person. The first-hand experience seeps within your soul changing everything about yourself. (Makepeace, 2012—Y Travel Blog, emphasis in original)

Furthermore, the difficulty of the experience is highlighted, and tourists have to be willing to leave their comfort zones, and yet that will make it all the more meaningful:

And even though this reality may be difficult for many travelers to see, that’s part of the learning experience. (Wandering Earl, 2011—The Wandering Earl)

Constructing a Hierarchy of Experience. Although experience is paramount in slum tourism discourse, not all experiences are created equal. Bloggers articulated a clear sense that travel experiences that include some form of engagement with, or effort to, “witness” local poverty/“reality” are superior to those that do not. Touristic experiences that allow visitors to interact slowly and intimately with residents supersede those that merely allow for a glimpse at the community through the windows of a tour van. Indeed, any effort to experience a local community is positioned as superior to those that involve never leaving the tourist hubs:

. . . biking alongside locals enabled me to actively engage instead of prancing around like a voyeur. (Long, 2013a—LandLopers)

We make one request of you if you are interested in taking a township tour in Cape Town (or anywhere else, for that matter): book a tour that is done on foot or bicycle. Please do not book a tour that has you going through the township in a car or tour van. First, this prevents you from interacting and engaging with the township and its people, which is the real reason to do a tour. Furthermore, it looks like you are going on safari, faces and cameras pressed against windows. (Noll & Scott, 2013—Uncornered Market)

Many bloggers make an effort to distance themselves from what the “average” tourist would do. Many write about being uncomfortable in situations where they are made to feel like “tourists,” and they suggest that their choices to engage in touring impoverished areas demonstrate that they are more thoughtful, worldly travelers:

We had entered Khula township and I could not help but feel like such a tourist, as if I were here to gawk as an outsider and take a few photos. (Wandering Earl, 2011—The Wandering Earl)

It would be very easy to live in a tourist bubble and completely overlook the towns (poor communities) and informal settlements (shanty towns) which contain the majority of Cape Town’s population. (Dave, 2008—Go Backpacking)
This ranking of experience privileges travel experiences that include deep immersion and intimate encounters with local people over those that do not. The structure of responsibility provides opportunities for bloggers to reinforce their position as experts in acceptable (read: responsible) travel and to construct an image of the communities they visit as uncomplicated “sources” of the experience, without engaging with the implications of these privileged deep encounters.

Silences

In addition to playing an active role in framing our understanding of slum tourism, discourse also suppresses and silences perspectives that do not conform to the prevailing discourse. To give voice to these contrary views would upset and conflict with the dominant understanding of slum tourism. Identifying silences, or what is not said, within any text is challenging. As Huckin (2002) stated, textual silences of any type . . . share the distinct feature of not having an overt linguistic form. This of course creates a general methodological challenge for the discourse analyst, namely, how to identify something that is absent, and how to do so in systematic fashion. (pp. 352–353)

Importantly, Huckin (2002) identified “contextuality” (p. 353) as being the key to identifying silences in discourse. Thus, the analysis was informed by our experiences working and traveling throughout the global South—as well as by our familiarity with the slum tourism literature, which provided context—while remaining cognizant that such understandings can only ever be partial.

Government Support. One significant component of slum tourism discourse as represented in travel blogs is that the communities being toured are in need of the income generated through the tours, and that governments are not doing enough to support these communities financially. The blogs include discussions of tours showcasing dilapidated housing and infrastructure alongside community initiatives made possible through the revenues from tourism. However, in blog postings about South African township tours, mention is made of government-subsidized housing, albeit always with the caveat that not enough is being done, in particular that demand is not being met and waitlists are long (http://farm9.staticflickr.com/8107/8655904778_cf225636d3.jpg):

Children play in front of some of the newer housing in the townships, for which the waiting lists can be decades long. (Geraldine, 2013a—The Everywhereist)

One blogger acknowledged that significant changes have been made in the community; however, he doubted that local efforts had anything to do with them:

We rode through the established part of the township, past clinics, community centres and libraries. Impressive. Much a function of aid money no doubt. I just hope that those in the community would remain vested, regardless of funding. (Noll & Scott, 2013—Uncornered Market)

What none of these bloggers mention is that these changes in South Africa, including several new housing developments, represent government and local development agency accomplishments in terms of improving living conditions in the townships in a relatively short period of time (i.e., since just prior to the end of apartheid; Department of Human Settlements, Republic of South Africa: http://www.dhs.gov.za/home 2015). To acknowledge that local stakeholders may be making visible progress in improving living conditions would counter the discourse that the money generated through the tours (and the bloggers’ contributions) is needed to help those living in the townships.

Economic Incentives. The majority of the blog posts analyzed were written by full- or part-time bloggers, and many subsidize their travels through corporate advertisements and sponsorships. This contradicts the generally accepted assumption that blogs are an independent, consumer-to-consumer form of electronic word of mouth (Banyai & Glover, 2012; Rack, Blose, & Pan, 2008). Although corporate support is openly acknowledged in most blogs, and the sponsors’ advertisements are immediately apparent on the blogs’ home pages, there is
nothing in the blogs that would indicate that any of the information being shared is anything other than the bloggers’ personal, unbiased opinions. Seven of the 36 blog postings analyzed conclude with a disclaimer that the trip had been partially or fully subsidized by the tour operator or destination marketing organization but that all opinions expressed represent the true opinions of the blogger.

Although the number of postings referring to sponsored or subsidized trips represents a small number of the total postings considered in this research, it merits noting that each one of these postings describes an organized bicycle township tour in South Africa. Further analysis revealed that several bloggers, writing about their township tour experiences in Cape Town, South Africa, shared nearly identical photos (Figs. 1–8; see also: http://landlopers.com/2012/08/05/photo-school-kids-masiphumelele-township-south-africa/img_3700, http://farm8.staticflickr.com/7134/7882935970_7acb485c0a_b.jpg, http://farm8.staticflickr.com/7123/7882938884_4e79d67c2b_b.jpg, http://farm9.staticflickr.com/8307/7882943904_e35acd2dd9_b.jpg). (Note that the figures are presented not for their subject matter but to show that near identical photos where published across multiple blog sites, regardless of content.)

These photos from four different travel blog sites (The Happy Explorer, Wild Junket, LandLopers, and Travel Dudes) all describe a bicycle tour taken in the Masiphumelele township of Cape Town. Each travel blog has one posting related to this trip, and the photos presented above were taken directly from these specific postings. At no point do the bloggers mention that this is what appears to have been a tour organized specifically for professional travel bloggers. Furthermore, whereas two of the bloggers (Wild Junket and Travel Dudes) share that their trips were hosted by AWOL Tours and Cape Town Tourism, the other two make no mention of this trip having been sponsored. Looking at these postings collectively, it appears to have been an excursion organized through the local travel agency and regional tourism organization to showcase their tour to professional travel bloggers in the hopes that they would publish and recommend the tour on their respective blogs. Although there is no evidence that the opinions and recommendations published on the blogs are anything other than those of the
Bloggers themselves, the fact that they have not been overtly transparent about the tour, and that this fact would be difficult to ascertain short of taking a detailed analysis of multiple travel blogs, raises questions about their motivations.

**Discussion**

The application of a postcolonial lens was immensely valuable to this study. Postcolonial ways of knowing are evidenced in the ways the local residents are constructed as uncomplicated victims of...
forces beyond their control, as living more “authentic” lives, and of being helpless to overcome the structural poverty that is envisioned as defining their lives. Residents’ lives are perceived as being unscathed by the trappings of modernity, living in a space where people place value in relationships and human encounters rather than material possessions, unlike the so-called “modern” world of the tourist. As Santos and Caton (2008) argued, tourism in this sense is premised on the desire of the tourists to gaze upon the Other. Further, and building on Santos and Caton’s work, critical discourse analysis allowed for an exploration of “an
Power and privilege are evidenced throughout the bloggers’ narratives. Power is established through the ways local people are represented as endlessly welcoming or as victims, never as being agentic change-makers in their own lives. Nonetheless, to simply dismiss travelers who partake in slum tourism as voyeurs merely wishing to

Figure 6. Source: Wild Junket (reproduced with permission).

important contemporary social and economic activity through which ethnicity is transformed into an exotic and inviting commodity” (p. 1003). Yan and Santos (2009) recognized discourse as “a form of social action” (p. 300), and CDA is a useful tool to explore how discourse in tourism shapes how we engage with and interpret the places we visit.

Figure 7. Source: Wild Junket (reproduced with permission).
explore poverty risks ignoring the complexity of the tourist–host encounter and the myriad ways power ebbs and flows in social relations. Additionally, this dismissal would reinforce what we have identified as problematic in the slum tourism discourse—namely, ascribing victimhood and lack of agency to the residents of host communities. Yan and Santos (2009) identified the “power dynamics embedded in social and cultural practices” (p. 300) through their critical discourse analysis of tourism and self-Orientalism and look for relationships between what is being said in the texts and the larger structures of power in society. Relatedly, our work explores how understandings of tourism are socially constructed and as such are deeply embedded in social, political, historical, and cultural relationships. Additionally, these relationships are continually being reconstructed, circulated, consumed, and, all too rarely, questioned (Yan & Santos, 2009, p. 300).

Given the absence of perspectives from other stakeholders engaged in this mode of tourism, including, most significantly, local residents, it would be unhelpful to characterize slum tourism as “good” or “bad.” Our objective is to open up spaces for debate, to allow for new understandings to emerge, and to unsettle the uncritical discourses that shape travel writing in an effort to allow for increased social justice in tourism.

Conclusion

It is not the purpose of this research to criticize or rebuke the actions and writings of the bloggers included in this study but to use them to illustrate how scholars can continue to disrupt prevailing tourism discourses and to shake up the “truth” about slum tourism in order to make space for emergent and alternate understandings. By assessing the ways in which popular travel blogs serve to construct and reinforce widely held ideas about meaningful travel experiences as well as images of people who live in poverty, we can begin to create room for new narratives and even new constructions of tourism.

This study does little to address Grimwood et al.’s (2015) charge that most postcolonial scholarship in tourism studies recenters the Western tourist as producer of knowledge in the tourism encounter and reinforces the artificial colonizer/colonized binary (p. 24). Nonetheless, what we hope to accomplish with this article is to disrupt...
the assumed unproblematic and objective production of knowledge in tourism writing and to demonstrate that what can be “known” about tourism always operates within discourses that are imbued with power (Chambers & Buzinde, 2015). Furthermore, Chambers and Buzinde (2015) have been justifiably critical of postcolonial tourism research that treats residents of host communities as “objects” of research rather than as “producers of tourism knowledge” (p. 3). Indeed, future action-oriented research in this area must help to pave the way for exploring varied tourism narratives that center the voices of the people who live in the places tourists visit. As we continue to assess and challenge discursive mechanisms, such as travel blogs, that reinforce a dominant and disempowering view of slum tourism, it is clear there are many, many missing voices.

References


