

# Tourist perception on slum tourism in Rio de Janeiro

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**Abstract:** This study analyses tourists' comments provided by visitors who participated in guided tours to the pacified favelas of Rio de Janeiro, specifically Rocinha, Santa Marta, Vidigal, Cantagalo, Pavão-Pavãozinho, and Babilônia-Chapéu Mangueira, as documented on the TripAdvisor platform. The primary objective is to examine the motivations underlying tourists' visits, including the appeal of exploring areas perceived as risky, the curiosity to observe the living conditions of socioeconomically disadvantaged communities, social motivations, and the pursuit of photographic viewpoints overlooking the city's hills. In addition, the study explores visitors' emotional and psychological responses when confronted with the realities of life in Rio de Janeiro, widely known as the "Cidade Maravilhosa" (Wonderful City). The analysis investigates tourists' perceptions and experiences during these guided tours, aiming to identify the main experiential dimensions and the emotional impact associated with engagement in the socio-cultural dynamics of favela communities.

**Keywords:** slum tourism; favela tours; social tourism; tourist gaze; urban exploration

## Introduction

Slum tourism is a controversial form of tourism that involves visiting economically disadvantaged neighborhoods worldwide and has grown significantly in recent years (Sarrica et al. 2021, Altamirano 2023). Historically rooted in the fascination with poverty, motivations for this kind of tourism have evolved (Nisbett 2017). It simultaneously emerged in places like Cape Town, Johannesburg, and Rio de Janeiro, where it presented specific characteristics, becoming known as the Favela Tour. In South Africa, slum tourism is linked to neighborhoods' historical roles in the anti-apartheid struggle (Frenzel 2013). Meanwhile, in Rio de Janeiro, tourism in pacified favelas began with a government program that led to the creation of the Providencia favela museum,

guided tours, and hostels. This development has been supported by guide training, promotional efforts, and dedicated websites (Menezes 2010).

Scholars from various fields (e.g., sociology, anthropology, economics, tourism) have analyzed the phenomenon, especially the organized tours in favelas (Mano et al. 2017). Recently, the discussion around slum tourism has shifted towards a social tourism framework, with visitors seeking not only unconventional experiences but also deeper understanding of the effects of urban poverty on the daily lives of residents and in their interaction with those who visit the favela (Ma 2010, Apchain 2023). This shift highlights the desire to grasp the socioeconomic challenges in these urban areas. So far, to the best of our knowledge, no study has delved into the perspective of visiting favelas as a form of social awareness and engagement in community spirit. Furthermore, the study presents for the first time a comparison between visitors' comments regarding the five most touristic favelas in the south of Rio de Janeiro, with different characteristics in terms of community spirit, resilience and organized tours. Thus, the study aims to answer four research questions:

- How do visitors perceive life in each of the favelas under study?
- What kind of emotions are shared by visitors after the tour?
- What experiential factors are most memorable to visitors?
- Are there substantial differences in the emotions expressed by visitors from favela to favela?

This study examines how visitors perceive and describe their experiences during tours, with particular attention to the narratives that emerge around place, community, and transformation. Although participants' comments inevitably include references to emotions and perceptions, the focus of this research is not behavioral psychology. Instead, the study is situated within tourism and geographical research, where the analysis of visitors' perceptions and experiences is a relevant and legitimate methodological approach (Urry 2002, Lew and McKercher 2006). By adopting this perspective, the article contributes to the understanding of how tourism shapes the representation and interpretation of urban spaces, particularly in contexts of social change.

Although this research is based on the qualitative dimension of visitors' narratives, it is important to acknowledge that this approach does not allow for a direct quantification of the socio-economic transformations associated with favela tourism after pacification. To address this limitation, we complement our discussion with references to secondary studies that provide quantitative evidence, such as the increase in tourist flows and employment opportunities documented in previous works (Dos Santos 2011, Barbosa and Menezes 2016). This integration of qualitative and quantitative perspectives helps situate our contribution within a broader understanding of tourism-related changes in these urban contexts.

## The phenomenon of slum tourism

From early visits to impoverished neighborhoods in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to modern practices, slum tourism has attracted the affluent and mainstream tourists (Dürr 2012, Iranmanesh and Kamalipur 2024). Historical examples include tours of immigrant neighborhoods like New York’s Five Points and London’s East End (Frenzel 2013). The term “slum” originally described clandestine visits by wealthy Londoners to observe illegal activities (Steinbrink 2012). Today, slum tourism typically occurs through guided tours using various transportation modes. Favela tours are increasingly organized by private firms, non-governmental organizations (NGO), and charities (Nisbett 2017). In some locations, small local operators manage tours, while in more established destinations, larger companies provide additional services such as accommodation and entertainment (Frenzel and Blakeman 2015). While critics argue that slum tourism is voyeuristic (Dos Santos 2011, Gui and Zhong 2024), proponents claim it supports community development through economic benefits and other advantages (Frenzel 2013, Fagerlande and Mees 2021).

### Favela tours

Rio de Janeiro, widely known as the “Cidade Maravilhosa” (Wonderful City), holds a distinct allure in the collective imagination of global tourists, who are attracted by its musical heritage, coastal landscapes, and cultural festivities such as carnival and New Year’s Eve celebrations (Fagerland and Mees 2021). The term “favela” denotes densely populated, precarious housing clusters in Rio de Janeiro, typically erected on land not legally owned by the residents (Freire-Medeiros 2011). The controversy surrounding tourism in favelas is mainly related to moral and ethical issues between hosts and guests (Altamirano 2023). The emergence of guided tours in favelas stirred controversy in Rio de Janeiro and Brazilian society, often criticized as voyeuristic and exploitative of the impoverished residents (Dos Santos 2011, Gui and Zhong 2024). In response to these allegations, tour operators initiated social initiatives aimed at enhancing the living conditions of favela inhabitants. Concurrently, there has been a perceptible shift in Brazilian societal attitudes toward tourism activities within favelas, emphasizing the social dimension of such endeavors, despite lingering skepticism among the elite (Fagerlande 2023). Presently, favela tourism is officially recognized by political authorities as an urban tourism product, prompting investments in infrastructure and the professional development of tourist guides (Angelini 2020).

### The tourist gaze on favelas

The mode of visitation, whether through a jeep window or a cable car, affects the depth of immersion in favela life, with direct contact fostering intimate interactions with

locals (Muldoon and Mair 2016). Visitors' expectations shape their behavior, with their anticipation of an "authentic" experience influencing how they perceive the destination (Freire-Medeiros 2007, Apchain 2025). Tourists often arrive with preconceived notions, seeking to witness "what they want to see," influenced by their imagination and representations of the favela (Sarrica et al. 2021). Favela visits are "reality tours," distinguishing between social tours, which emphasize authenticity and respect, and dark tours, driven by voyeuristic curiosity about poverty and violence (Gómez et al. 2019). Today, tourist perspectives are widely shared on social media, influencing trends, and promoting destinations (Sarrica et al. 2021).

### **The role of tour guides**

Tour guides assume a pivotal role in favela tourism through their meticulous preparation and introduction of narratives to visitors. These narratives exhibit variations, ranging from abstract to formal or personal accounts, all underscored by an emphasis on the social benefits of the tours (Frenzel and Blakeman 2015). Tour routes undergo subtle modifications based on each guide's perspective and corresponding narrative, strategically employed to prompt discussions on social, political, economic, or religious issues (Angelini 2020). Conversely, many favela tourists grapple with the moral implications of their curiosity about "the other side," fearing their interest may be perceived as voyeuristic (Burgold and Rolfes 2013). Thus, tour guides influence tourists' perception of considering their visit as morally acceptable, but also as beneficial for the inhabitants of the favela (Frenzel and Blakeman 2015). In this sense, guides function as curators of the tourist experience in favelas, particularly concerning the comprehension of poverty and the ramifications of tours on the residents' way of life (Butler 2012).

### **The spirit of the community**

Community tourism in favelas serves as a tool for poverty alleviation, impacting residents directly or indirectly (Silva et al. 2014, Fangelande 2020, Aquino and Andereck 2024). Unlike mass tourism, it emphasizes cultural awareness and the preservation of local customs (Gómez et al. 2019). Residents of tourist-friendly favelas have developed itineraries that reflect their realities and cultural values (Freire-Medeiros 2011, Aquino and Andereck 2024). Community-based tourism requires minimal infrastructure, focusing on authentic experiences in natural and cultural settings (Fagerland and Mees 2021). These tours challenge negative stereotypes and reveal the communal spirit of favela life, showing that most residents are welcoming and not involved in crime (Frenzel 2013). Interactions between tourists and locals are significant, as culture and identity become the central elements of the exchange (Dürr 2012, Clift et al. 2025).

## Curiosity between “us-them”

Favela tours are driven by both curiosity and social motivations. These tours romanticize poverty, offering an “authentic” experience of Rio’s disadvantaged areas, which fuels intrigue (Dos Santos 2011, Gui and Zhong 2024). While tourists may not openly express interest in poverty, their participation reflects a curiosity about it (Rolfes 2010). Media portrayals further encourage tourists to see favelas as exotic, depicting residents as content and living simple, authentic lives (Frenzel 2013). This portrayal emphasizes the “us-them” divide, heightening curiosity about the perceived disparities (Dürr 2012). Initially, stereotypes around violence and drugs drive interest, but direct interactions with the people and place often challenge or reduce these misconceptions (Rolfes 2010).

## The adventure of visiting favelas

Favela tourism epitomizes an experiential quest for authenticity, the exotic, and risk, all consolidated within a singular setting. These tourism adventures, labelled by Freire-Medeiros (2009) as “urban safari”, are anticipated and embraced by participants. Despite traveling through the economically disadvantaged areas of the favela, tourists feel a sense of relative security, since the violence prevalent in these areas is not directed at visitors. According to Steinbrink (2012), the concept of experiencing “safe danger” or an “isolated adventure” only partially elucidates the motivation behind tourists visiting impoverished urban areas. In essence, the tour provides a means for tourists to understand the extent of the risk of visiting favelas, despite the guides’ protection (Rolfes 2010). Tourists feel the need to be cautious and respect a certain ethical code of the community, in a context in which they perceive themselves as potential prey (Apchain 2025).

## Urban exploration as motivation

The term urban exploration serves as a comprehensive framework delineating urban practices wherein participants engage in the visitation of locales offering nontraditional experiences (Fraser 2012). These unconventional or informal urban encounters manifest as spectacles that the tourist, adopting the role of an explorer, captures through the lens of their camera or mobile device (Freire-Medeiros 2011). Prospective visitors, having consumed exotic photographs by other photographers prior to their arrival, actively seek to document these places firsthand, thereby imbuing their experience with a sense of completeness (Menezes 2010). These images traverse the globe rapidly through social networks, constituting the individual contribution of each tourist to the propagation of the phenomenon and the revelation of the reality of life in favelas (Dürr 2012).

## The authenticity of favela tours

The concept of authenticity in tourism was initially addressed by Boorstin (1961), positing that mass tourism constitutes a spectacle founded on the repetition of staged actions designed to attract and gratify tourists, thus rendering it an inauthentic product. In this context, favela tourism, being an alternative product characterized by direct interaction and limited dissemination, holds the potential for greater authenticity (Freire-Medeiros 2007). In the case of Rio de Janeiro's favela tours, visitors can experience emotions through on-site visits to constructed spaces, strolling through the streets, and interacting with residents, whether partaking in socially oriented tours or more voyeuristic endeavours, colloquially known as dark tours (Freire-Medeiros 2011, Fargeland 2022).

## Methodology

The investigation was operationalized through a mixed-methods approach, as the combination of both methodologies allowed for the precision of quantitative methods (frequency analysis) and the depth provided by qualitative methods (content analysis). This data triangulation enhanced the credibility and robustness of the study.

## Study area

The study area comprised the five most visited pacified favelas in Rio de Janeiro (Figure 1), selected based on their higher levels of tourist traffic; they were: Rocinha, Santa Marta, Vidigal, Cantagalo (Pavão-Pavãozinho), and Babilônia-Chapéu Mangueira.

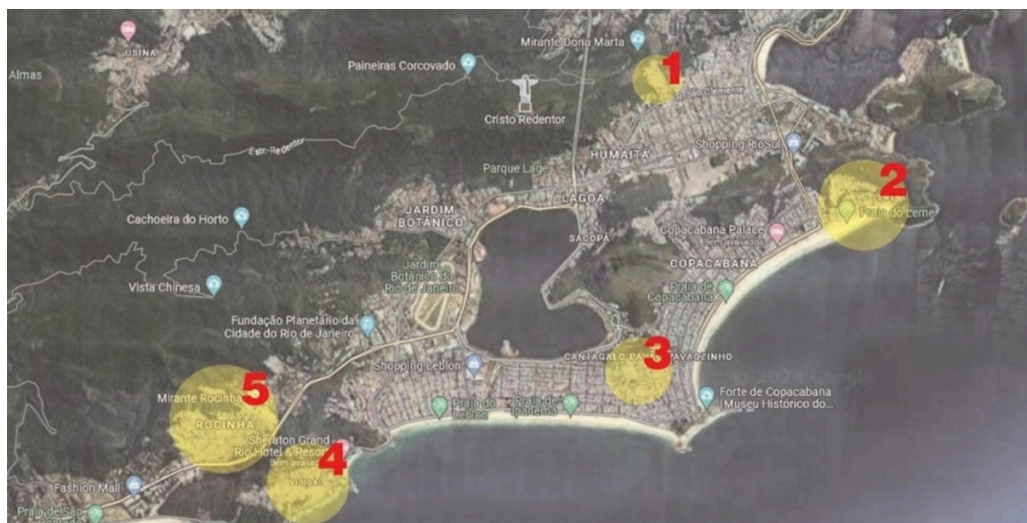


Figure 1. Location of the favelas under study 1). Santa Marta; 2). Babilônia-Chapéu; 3). Cantagalo, Pavão-Pavãozinho; 4). Vidigal; 5). Rocinha. Source: Google Maps (2025)

Rocinha, Rio de Janeiro's largest favela, houses about 70000 residents across 147 hectares with 25742 homes (Giannella and Catalá 2025). Its rapid growth from the 1950s was driven by the city's expansion into Barra da Tijuca (Frisch 2012). Located in the affluent southern zone, Rocinha benefited from federal investment through the Growth Acceleration Programs (PAC I and II), attracting fast-food chains, restaurants, and retail (Pereira et al. 2017). Rocinha was legally recognized as a formal neighborhood in 1993 and became an official tourist attraction in 2006 (Law 4405/2006). Under the protection of the Pacification Police Unit (UPP), Rocinha is regarded as a trendy or middle-class favela (Richmond 2019). Following the 2014 World Cup, the rise in hostels led to increased real estate prices, prompting Cummings (2015) to describe this shift as "favela gentrification".

The Santa Marta favela, located on Morro Dona Marta in Rio de Janeiro's Botafogo neighborhood, had 3908 residents and 1076 buildings across 54.305m<sup>2</sup> as of 2020 (Giannella and Catalá 2025). The land originally belonged to the neighboring Colégio Santo Inácio, which in the 1930s allowed employees to use part of Morro Dona Marta as housing. Unlike other favelas, Santa Marta has a rich history of community organization (Mano et al. 2017). This favela gained international recognition after Michael Jackson filmed his 1996 music video "They Don't Care About Us" there, despite initial disapproval from local authorities (Freire-Medeiros 2011). Recognizing its potential for tourism, the site was later turned into a themed space dedicated to the artist (Mano et al. 2017). In 2010, Santa Marta became the first favela involved in the "Rio Top Tour" initiative, transforming pacified favelas into tourist destinations (Freire-Medeiros 2011).

Vidigal, is home to 4860 residents and covers 162.14 ha (Giannella and Catalá 2025), is named after Major Miguel Nunes Vidigal, a former commander of Rio de Janeiro's Military Police, who was granted the land in 1820 (Conde and Magalhães 2021). From 1940, bars started occupying the area, giving rise to the favela. Since its pacification in 2012, Vidigal offers stunning views of Leblon and Ipanema beaches (Fagerland and Mees 2021). Tourist interest grew after the reduction in violence (Freire-Medeiros 2011, Clif et al. 2025). The rise of tourism began with the opening of two hostels in 2010 and escalated after pacification, leading to an increase in tourist accommodations (Kalaoum and Santiago 2020).

Cantagalo, Pavão-Pavãozinho favela complex, located in southern Rio de Janeiro, is strategically positioned near Ipanema and Copacabana, close to the city's hotels and tourist attractions (Fagerland and Mees 2021). The Favela Museum, established in 2008 as a Non-Governmental Organization, has been instrumental in promoting community-based tourism (Portilho 2018). This prime location has attracted tourism promoters, leading to increased investments in hostels within the favela (Fagerland and Mees 2021). Infrastructure developments enhancing accessibility include the Cantagalo, Pavão-Pavãozinho lookout elevator, a new metro connection, and an inclined

plane to Rua Saint Romain, which improve connectivity with surrounding tourist areas and support the strategic positioning of hostels (Portilho 2018).

Babilônia-Chapéu Mangueira, located on Morro da Babilônia in Rio de Janeiro's Leme neighborhood, had an estimated population of 35466 as of 2021 (Giannella and Catalá 2025). Established in 1915, the favela has developed significantly over the years, especially since becoming part of the Pacifying Police Units in 2011. In the 1970s and 1980s, it became a model for other settlements due to proactive initiatives by community representatives (Silva et al. 2014). Attractions include a trail to Pedra do Urubu and a cable car with stunning views. CoopBabilônia leads community engagement projects, enhancing awareness of local social initiatives and tourism, while urban projects have created notable sites in the area, such as a viewpoint over Copacabana (Fagerland and Mees 2021).

## Sample

A total of 6830 coded references were identified across 2643 comments made by tourists who visited the five most frequented favelas in Rio de Janeiro, specifically: Rocinha, Santa Marta, Vidigal, Cantagalo, Pavão-Pavãozinho, and Babilônia-Chapéu Mangueira (Table 1).

Table 1. Sample characterisation

Name	Comments	Reviewers' nationality
Rocinha	998	Brazilian: n = 262 (26.3%); Other nationalities: n = 736 (73.7%)
Santa Marta	883	Brazilian: n = 220 (24.9%); Other nationalities: n = 663 (75.1%)
Vidigal	428	Brazilian: n = 250 (58.4%) Other; nationalities: n = 178 (41.6%)
Cantagalo, Pavão-Pavãozinho	286	Brazilian: n = 23 (8.0%); Other nationalities: n = 263 (92.0%)
Babilônia-Chapéu Mangueira	48	Brazilian: n = 39 (81.2%); Other nationalities: n = 9 (18.7%)

Source: Authors' work based on TripAdvisor

## Procedures

Data was collected from TripAdvisor.com between June and December 2023 and analysed according to Bardin's (2011) guidelines, which emphasised converting raw texts into organized data aligned with a defined corpus. The pre-analysis phase focused on identifying elements for analysis and classification into predefined categories from the theoretical framework. During the initial coding phase, content was segmented into units of analysis (words, sentences, paragraphs) and categorized accordingly. After quantifying the frequency of these units, intermediate coding grouped initial categories and refined the analysis. Final coding involved reclassifying categories based on literature findings and recounting their frequency in comments. This process utilized both inductive reasoning for data simplification and deductive reasoning for

theoretical alignment. The analysis was operationalized using MAXqda and SPSS software, culminating in a line-by-line examination to identify testimonials that validated the earlier results.

## Results

The analysis of the content of the reviews enabled an understanding of tourists’ experiences during their visits to the favelas, providing a deeper and more detailed insight into their experiences. The comments were coded and subsequently categorized according to the themes extracted from the literature review (e.g. Frenzel and Blakeman 2015, Fagerland and Mees 2021). The categories extracted from the content analysis were described in Table 2.

*Table 2. Definition of the categories under study extracted from the literature review*

Categories	Definitions	References
Authenticity	An emotional feeling achieved through the realistic contact with the place, the inhabitants, and their way of life.	Boorstin (1961), Freire-Medeiros (2007), Gómez et al. (2019)
Guide Experience	The guide takes on the role of curator, leading the tour narrative and connecting visitors with the community. Guides are often members of the community and provide a sense of security for visitors.	Butler (2012), Burgold and Rolfes (2013), Frenzel and Blakeman (2015)
Urban Exploration	The activity of exploring parts of the city that offer non-traditional experiences. The urban explorer's trophies are the photos that portray each experience.	Menezes (2010), Dürr (2012), Fraser (2012)
Community Spirit	Community members are welcoming in their interaction with tourists. The sense of “community mutual help” is perceived by visitors.	Frisch (2012), Silva et al. (2014), Kalaoum and Santiago (2020)
Adventure	The adventure of visiting the favelas is characterized by an experience of romanticized and controlled risk, which serves as motivation for the visit.	Cejas (2006), Freire-Medeiros (2011), Steinbrink (2012)
Curiosity	Social differences and a certain romanticization of poverty pique the curiosity of visitors, who see favelas as exotic places.	Rolfes (2010), Dürr (2012), Frenzel (2013)

*Source: Authors' work based on TripAdvisor*

To better understand tourist perceptions, comments were separated into positive and negative categories, revealing patterns of satisfaction and dissatisfaction (Table 3). Analysing 6830 comments, results showed that positive perceptions (81.3%) outweighed negative ones (18.7%), especially in Authenticity and Community spirit, where all comments were favourable.

Tourists visiting Rocinha described their experience as an authentic glimpse into the ‘real’ Rio de Janeiro, contrasting it with traditional tourist areas. These tours provided deep insights into local culture, residents’ daily lives, and Brazil’s social dynamics,

Table 3. Distribution of positive and negative comments by category

Categories	Perception	n(%)
Authenticity (n = 988)	Positive	988 (100%)
	Negative	–
Guide Experience (n = 1743)	Positive	965 (55.3%)
	Negative	778 (44.7%)
Urban Exploration) (n = 1710)	Positive	1647 (96.1%)
	Negative	66 (3.9%)
Community Spirit (n = 781)	Positive	781 (100%)
	Negative	–
Adventure (n = 890)	Positive	560 (62.9%)
	Negative	330 (37.1%)
Curiosity (n = 715)	Positive	610 (85.3%)
	Negative	105 (14.7%)

Source: Authors' work based on TripAdvisor

enabling visitors to challenge media-driven stereotypes about violence in favelas. While acknowledging the existence of violence, tourists emphasized that Rocinha was not the war zone often depicted. A significant aspect of the tours was the interaction between guides and residents, which enriched the experience and grounded it in local realities. The expertise of guides was deemed essential for a successful tour, contributing to visitors recommending the experience as one of the most memorable of their lives. Tourists appreciated direct interactions with residents through conversations, storytelling, and sharing traditional food, creating profound connections that elevated the visit beyond mere tourism. About half of the comments highlighted the adventure aspect, prompting recommendations for anyone wanting to explore the authentic side of the city. However, the ethical implications of turning poverty into a tourist attraction remained contentious. Overall, the tours were seen as striking experiences that satisfied a desire for knowledge and understanding through direct engagement with the community.

Santa Marta emerged as a compelling tourist destination, allowing visitors to gain a profound understanding of local life and culture. Authenticity was a major draw, as tourists engaged directly with residents, experiencing the genuine essence of community life. The stark contrast between breathtaking views and the fragile local infrastructure highlighted Brazil's social inequalities. The tour guide's role was vital, as they provided an unfiltered perspective of the area, with many visitors praising their friendliness and extensive knowledge, which fostered a sense of belonging. Morro Santa Marta offered an alternative to conventional tourist spots, rich in culture and history yet marked by social and economic challenges. Accounts frequently mentioned the favela's precarious living conditions, such as inadequate sanitation, juxtaposed with stunning panoramas. Visitors were often captivated by the residents' simplicity

and the community's strong bonds, leading to emotional connections that encouraged repeat visits. Initial apprehensions about safety evolved into feelings of warmth and acceptance that surpassed adventure-seeking expectations. Cultural and historical elements, including the location of Michael Jackson's "They Don't Care About Us" music video, further stimulated visitors' curiosity and enhanced their experiences in this vibrant community.

The tours in Vidigal provided cultural immersions seen as authentic experiences, rich in sensory engagement. Visitors described their time in the favela as memorable, filled with unique smells, sounds, and interactions. Guidance from a resident enhanced the experience, fostering a sense of hospitality and safety from the community. This interaction helped visitors challenge stereotypes about favelas, allowing them to appreciate the area's beauty and culture. The educational aspect of the tour offered deeper insights into life within the favela and its historical evolution, promoting a respectful connection with the community. The hike to Morro Dois Irmãos combined adventure with discovery, although safety remained a priority throughout. Ultimately, visiting Vidigal sparked curiosity, serving as a symbol of Brazil's social inequalities while accentuating its cultural and touristic significance. This experience transcended conventional tourism, emphasizing direct engagement and insights into the community.

Cantogalo, Pavão-Pavãozinho offered vibrant views, graffiti, community projects, and interactions with residents highlighted cultural authenticity. Visitors shared sincere, detailed accounts of their experiences, heavily influenced by local guides who provided unique perspectives. Rather than merely depicting poverty and violence, the favelas were portrayed as dynamic communities, rich with life, where residents engaged in work, education, and mutual support. Many visitors, initially apprehensive, reported feeling warmly welcomed by locals despite the challenges they faced. The favelas were seen as adventure destinations, allowing tourists to explore unconventional urban environments that defied stereotypes. This curiosity to witness the "other side" of Rio de Janeiro drove many to visit, creating a stark contrast with more tourist-centric neighbourhoods like Ipanema and Copacabana. Visitors' comments reflected the significant and visible differences between these areas, emphasizing the unique experiences offered in the favelas compared to traditional tourist attractions. Overall, the narratives illuminated the complexity and vibrancy of favela life.

In Babilônia-Chapéu Mangueira, urban exploration was a prominent attraction. Despite its accessibility, tourists reported that trailhead signage was problematic. While the area was generally safe, visitors were advised to check for any ongoing clashes or police operations before their trip. The climb to Morro da Babilônia was challenging but offered rewarding panoramic views of Rio de Janeiro, making it a sought-after adventure destination. Security remained a major concern among tourists, with mixed reviews about the presence of UPP. While interaction with locals and hiring a guide – preferably one from the favela – was emphasized, half of the feedback on guides was

negative, often due to a lack of empathy and understanding of the community from those unfamiliar with its dynamics. Tourists appreciated the strong sense of community, noting the locals' openness and willingness to help, which contrasted sharply with the negative stereotypes often associated with favelas. Visitors reported a peaceful and authentic environment, challenging the media's portrayal of danger and hostility.

This direct interaction with the residents helped to transform preconceived notions, providing a more positive perspective of the favela experience. The testimonials were generally positive and strongly recommended the tours, highlighting the importance of experiencing Rio de Janeiro in a manner that transcended traditional tourist attractions (Table 4).

Table 4. Line-by-Line analysis of categories under study

Categories	Line-by-line
Authenticity	<i>This was the most authentic, informative, and fun tour I've ever been on. I felt like I was part of the community, and it helped me understand how people live.</i> <i>This tour was the most authentic because it allowed me to interact with locals and hear stories from the past and present.</i>
Guide experience	<i>The guide lives in the favela, so he doesn't just offer the typical tourist photo-opportunity tour. He makes us feel like part of the favela (...) he shared his knowledge about how the favela operates, its rules, the respect among the residents.</i> <i>The guide was young, inexperienced and didn't live in favela. However, many argue that visiting without a guide is much worse, because they feel more lost and insecure.</i>
Urban exploration	<i>One of the best views of Rio de Janeiro (...) leave behind fear and prejudice and prepare your camera for the best shots of the city.</i> <i>It's a maze of tiny winding streets with sharp bends and turns linked by dangerous steps.</i>
Community Spirit	<i>We appreciate the kindness with which we were treated and were impressed by the strong community spirit (...). Almost half of the money we paid for the tour is used to fund projects that benefit the favela. It's a community that, despite its problems, functions as a whole to help each individual.</i>
Adventure	<i>I took the tour to experience an adventure into the unknown, but it exceeded all my expectations. It is a vibrant place with beautiful views and wonderful people who are always ready to help.</i> <i>The favela is controlled by criminals who carry war weapons (...) it's a very dangerous adventure, we saw armed men.</i>
Curiosity	<i>I was very curious to visit a calm, pacified, and safe favela.</i> <i>This tour is a disgrace and very sad how they exposed the poor like animals. Nobody wants someone to come to their house to see how you live, and even less if you live in this decadent situation.</i>

Source: Authors' work based on TripAdvisor

The study aimed to identify tourist preferences among the favelas analysed, counting positive and negative comments in various categories, and adjusting the results proportionally based on the sample size (Table 5). Notably, the Authenticity and Community spirit categories garnered no negative feedback, indicating that tourists appreciated the authentic experiences and sense of unity in their visits. Conversely, the Guide experience received the highest percentage of negative comments, ranging from 44.0% to 50.0%, and highlighting widespread dissatisfaction with tour guides across all favelas. Tourists stated that guides lacking familiarity with the favela, either

through residency or long-term experience, led to less engaging interactions with the local community.

Table 5. Distribution of positive comments and negative comments by favela (n = 6830)

		Rocinha	Santa Marta	Vidigal	Cantogalo, Pavão-Pavãozinho	Babilónia-Chapéu Mangueira
Authenticity (n = 988)	n	358	332	186	107	5
	% positive	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
	% negative	-	-	-	-	-
Guide experience (n = 1743)	n	602	490	415	228	8
	% positive	55.6%	55.5%	55.7%	53.9%	50.0%
	% negative	44.4%	44.5%	44.3%	46.1%	50.0%
Urban exploration (n = 1713)	n	617	412	411	234	39
	% positive	96.0%	96.4%	96.4%	94.9%	97.4%
	% negative	4.0%	3.6%	3.6%	5.1%	2.6%
Community Spirit (n = 781)	n	264	238	208	65	6
	% positive	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
	% negative	-	-	-	-	-
Adventure (n = 890)	n	444	210	136	78	22
	% positive	62.8%	62.9%	63.2%	62.8%	63.6%
	% negative	37.2%	37.1%	36.9%	37.2%	36.4%
Curiosity (n = 715)	n	373	269	17	47	9
	% positive	85.3%	85.1%	88.2%	85.1%	88.9%
	% negative	14.7%	14.9%	11.8%	14.9%	11.1%

Source: Authors' work based on TripAdvisor

Regarding the Adventure category, despite safety concerns being prevalent, only about one-third of visitors reported dissatisfaction, suggesting that the adventure aspect generally exceeded expectations. In the Curiosity category, feedback was largely positive, although a minority of tourists expressed remorse after witnessing a reality starkly different from their own, with some describing their experiences as sad and exploitative. While the Urban Exploration category yielded minimal negative comments, some tourists felt their expectations were unmet due to unplanned construction and challenging access within the favelas. Overall, these findings illustrate a complex interplay of positive experiences and notable areas for improvement in the context of tourism in favelas.

The results indicated that Rocinha received the highest percentage of positive comments, which may be attributed to its status as the largest favela in Rio de Janeiro and its perception as the “favela of the moment” among the public. However, it also recorded the highest percentage of negative comments, which may be explained by issues related to overcrowding and safety concerns. Although Rocinha was considered safer than other favelas, the violence associated with drug trafficking and conflicts

between rival groups could pose risks, especially when tourists were not accompanied by a local guide.

## Discussion

Favela tours are controversial and, in the perspective of most researchers, connoted with the exploitation of poverty through voyeurism. Regardless of its positive and negative aspects, slum tourism has seen increasing demand around the world, which generates some controversy as it raises ethical concerns about the exploitation of poverty as a tourist attraction. While some argue that this form of tourism can raise awareness and contribute to the local economy (Cardoso et al. 2022), others criticize it for turning human misery into spectacle, disrespecting the dignity of residents, and perpetuating negative stereotypes (Iranmanesh and Kamalipour 2024). Favela tours allow visitors to connect with the reality of marginalized communities. Considering the results of our study, this “reality check” may, as Moya-Latorre (2022) states, be considered a celebration of urban life. In an educational perspective, it promotes a change in mentalities regarding the marginalization in large cities, by showing the spirit of resilience of inhabitants (Altamirano 2022a). Furthermore, whoever visits the favelas is confronted with a life lesson about community spirit, characterized by the union of people in a common feeling of sharing and mutual help (Angelini 2022), which contrasts with the feeling of loneliness and social disconnection that affects inhabitants in an urban context (Moore et al. 2022, Ljubojevic 2025). The increasing visibility of favela tours has also a political impact. Tourists’ perceptions, and behavioural reactions during and after their visit can be seen as the trigger for authorities to take political actions (Frezzel et al. 2015, Altamirano 2022a).

Despite some tenuous efforts to improve the lives of favela communities, inhabitants deal daily with problems of accessibility, health, safety, and lack of basic social services (Altamirano 2022a). To Light et al. (2025), the lack of political intervention in the rehabilitation of decaying urban locations reduces their interest in the eyes of tourists. In this line of thought, favelas have been historically neglected by Brazilian local and federal governments and the upper class (Altamirano 2022b). An example of the importance of government intervention was the pacification of favelas, through police actions. The immediate consequence of these actions was the emergence of guided tours, which started tourism in favelas (Freire-Medeiros 2011).

## Theoretical and practical contributions

This research aimed to analyse the visitors’ comments objectively and without any type of prejudice to understand their opinions regarding the experience of visiting five of the most touristic favelas in the city of Rio de Janeiro.

The study's contributions to current bodies of knowledge can be approached from two different perspectives. In theoretical terms, to the best of our knowledge, this is the first time that the opinions of visitors to the five most touristic favelas in Rio de Janeiro have been simultaneously compared. The favelas under study are located in different parts of the city, present specificities regarding their social dynamics, which makes their individual and collective analysis pertinent. Hence, the study contributes to a better understanding of tourists' opinions regarding the experience resulting from visiting five favelas.

The study reveals that the tourists' opinions on TripAdvisor about visiting favelas are made up of different factors, which complement each other under the direction of the tour guide. Furthermore, the words of the tour participants do not show voyeuristic feelings regarding the poverty of the places and their people. Instead, the feelings reveal respect for the inhabitants' resilience and community spirit, but also a desire to explore the other side of the city. In practical terms, local authorities responsible for promoting tourism, despite all the controversy surrounding visits to favelas, can use tours not from the perspective of exploiting poverty but to create greater awareness among visitors to the city about the problem of urban poverty. Simultaneously, tours can improve the living conditions of favela, generating revenue for local businesses and creating jobs for inhabitants.

### **Limitations and suggestions for future research**

Despite the results, some limitations of the study are acknowledged. A limitation of this study concerns the impossibility of identifying the nationality of visitors other than Brazilians, although we did not detect a difference of opinion between national and foreign visitors. Additionally, we must consider that there are many tour participants who do not leave comments on the TripAdvisor platform and, therefore, we do not know whether their opinions would be in line with those recorded and subsequently analyzed. Furthermore, the study does not differentiate between experiences relating to short-term tours and longer experiences, which include accommodation, and allows for deeper contact with the inhabitants and life in the favela. In methodological terms, the fact that we chose to classify the data into categories previously defined through a literature review can also be seen as a limitation, as other categories could have been explored. Furthermore, the interpretation of visitors' words may lead to some subjectivity, inherent to qualitative studies.

Future research could address how favela tour experiences influence tourists' general perception of the Rio de Janeiro city image. Furthermore, investigations could explore the perspectives of tour guides and residents regarding the increase in tourism in favelas, as well as interaction with tourists. Considering the impact images can have on urban studies and in particular on this theme, it would be equally interesting to add

photos reporting the experiences of visiting favelas. These approaches will allow us to obtain a better understanding of the role of tourism in the social dynamics of favelas.

## Conclusions

One of the conclusions that can be drawn from this study is that although the favelas under study have their own specificities described previously, namely different locations, multiple points of tourist interest and different types of community projects, the results did not reveal major variations in each of the classes analysed, referring to each favela. There were also no substantial differences in opinion between local and foreign visitors regarding the categories under study. Another important conclusion to be drawn from this work is that, in the words of tourists, visiting favelas is mainly a very positive experience, which allows the visitors to immerse themselves in a reality parallel to daily life on the other side of the city. This reality bath is reported as social learning, without pejorative contours. Overall, positive comments represent more than 80.0%, which leaves no doubt as to overall the satisfaction of the favela tour experience.

Concerning the categories analysed, *Authenticity* collected only positive comments regarding the tours of all the favelas, which highlighted the genuineness of each place, the hospitality of their inhabitants, and the reality of life in the favelas. These results suggest that positive emotions resulting from visiting the favela contribute to the tourist's perception of the authenticity of the place.

Regarding the *Guide Experience*, the comments highlight the decisive role in making tours unforgettable, thus unequivocally contributing to visitor satisfaction. The comments reveal that the guides, in addition to organizing and leading the visit, are the visitor's link with the community, thus giving them a sense of security and, at the same time, building the narrative that serves as an itinerary for the visit. This category presents the highest percentage of negative comments, which express visitors' dissatisfaction when expectations regarding the guide's performance, irrespective of the favela they visit. Negative comments concerning visits with guides who haven't lived or live in the favela provide a less positive experience because they are more unfamiliar with reality and don't have as much interaction with the local community.

With regard to *Urban exploration*, tourists often highlight the privileged location of the favelas, which allows them to view the city from a different perspective. Many visitors describe the experience positively, highlighting the opportunity to confront preconceived ideas with reality and to engage with the social and cultural aspects of favela life. However, for some, expectations are not fully met, as the encounter with unplanned construction, infrastructural limitations, and restricted accessibility contrasts with the more romanticized or adventurous image they initially held. In these cases, disappointment arises not from the authenticity of the favela itself, but from the gap between imagined representations and the material and physical conditions

encountered on site. The tourist as explorer confronts the preconceived idea of the favela with reality, and in this sense, the comments reveal great satisfaction with the experience, where exploration has a positive connotation and merges with the social and cultural aspects of life in the favela. For some tourists that seek urban exploration, the experience falls short of their expectations in these favelas, due to the slums' characteristics, unplanned construction, and difficult access.

The comments that fall into the *Community Spirit* category are all positive, with praise for the spirit of resilience, sharing, and working together, despite the difficulties of those who live in the favela. Visitors admire this mutual help between the inhabitants, which contrasts with the everyday isolation of life in cities. Visitors are surprised by the gestures of kindness and affection of the residents who welcome them, which is contrary to the news that reports the climate of violence in the favelas. Many tour organizers share a portion of the revenue with the community, which is seen as a way of helping residents.

Comments falling within the *Adventure* category are mostly positive, where visitors compare initial expectations with reality. The adventure of visiting the favelas is characterized by a certain risk, controlled by the tour guide, who assumes the role of protective host. The adventure of favela tours is, in the words of the participants, a mixture of facing unknown territory, leaving their comfort zone, with cultural nuances such as capoeira and music and social nuances in coexistence with the people of the favela. There is a moderate amount of negative feedback regarding the adventure component of the tours, with comments being negative across most favelas. This indicates that a considerable number of tourists consider that safety issues are the most addressed.

Regarding the category of *Curiosity*, the comments suggest that one of the reasons for the visit is to witness the precarious way of life of part of the population of Rio de Janeiro (Freire-Medeiros 2011). Observing the daily lives of people who live with few conditions makes some tourists want to discover another reality other than theirs, although few openly admit that this is the purpose of the visit. Curiosity is never approached in the sense of fascination with difference, but from a social perspective and awareness about poverty. The small percentage of negative comments suggests that curiosity as a motive for visiting favelas is generally met with positive experiences, but a small number of tourists still feel their curiosity was not satisfied. After visiting the favela, these tourists felt some remorse for seeing a reality different from their own, a poorer reality.

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