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Adapting to Disruption: Tourism Resilience in Greenpoint

Wendy MAGANGQAZA
Centre for Tourism Research in Africa, Tourism and Event Management Department, Cape Peninsula University of Technology, South Africa, Email, maganggazaw@cput.ac.za

Abstract

This study investigates the resilience of the Green Point urban tourism precinct in Cape Town, South Africa, during the COVID-19 pandemic. The objective was to understand how local tourism businesses, stakeholders, and visitors absorbed, adapted, and initiated transformative responses to the unprecedented disruption. A quantitative cross-sectional survey was conducted with 219 residents and visitors, combining closed- and open-ended questions to capture both measurable patterns and contextual insights. Descriptive statistics and thematic analysis were employed to analyse travel behaviour, financial impacts, accommodation preferences, and recovery strategies. Key findings reveal that vaccination status significantly influenced travel intentions, while 83% of respondents reported decreased income affecting tourism participation. Preferences shifted strongly towards domestic travel, with hotels remaining the most popular accommodation, and recovery strategies emphasised domestic tourism promotion, discounted packages, and health measures. These results highlight a high degree of adaptability but limited long-term transformability within the precinct. The study implies that combining short-term recovery measures with strategic long-term planning, including stakeholder collaboration and market diversification, can strengthen precinct resilience. This research contributes unique precinct-level empirical insights from the Global South, offering practical guidance for urban tourism management and policy interventions to enhance sustainability and crisis preparedness in similar destinations.

Keywords: Resilience; tourism; recovery; adaptation; covid-19; Green point

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Introduction

The vulnerabilities of tourism worldwide were exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. This affected urban destinations with high business frequency and visitor dependence. In Cape Town, the Green Point precinct experienced this disruption. Visitor numbers significantly dropped, and tourism businesses faced financial instability (Thwala & Dube, 2023). These challenges emphasized the crucial need for resilience strategies that allow destinations to absorb shocks and recover swiftly. The term tourism resilience is defined as the capacity of a system to withstand disruptions, adjust to change and remain functional during crises (Becken, 2020). This concept also encompasses the social and economic dimensions of communities, acknowledging that human factors, such as workforce stability and visitor confidence, are critical in determining how effectively a destination withstands shocks. It is a multifaceted concept that is inclusive of robustness, adaptability and transformability. Robustness alludes to the expertise to handle shocks, adaptability is the capacity to modify operations and transformability is the structural changes that enhance lasting sustainability (Gössling et al., 2021). Within the South African context, tourism is a crucial economic sector. Literature discloses that urban precincts like Green Point are specifically delicate to shocks due to their dependence on both domestic and international visitors (Rogerson, 2022). Moreover, researchers indicate that domestic tourism, adaptable business models and precise interventions can intensify resilience and promote recovery (Dube, 2024; Ilo, 2023). However, the effectiveness of these interventions is influenced by the traveller behaviour and financial capacity (Chipumuro et al., 2024). Regardless of the growing interest in tourism resilience, quantitative studies at the precinct level remain scarce. The majority of research explores broader city and national contexts; this tends to underrepresent local interactions that outline the adaptation and recovery. The Greenpoint area is a combination of attractions, hotels and restaurants which can be described as a suitable setting for exploring tourism resilience during a global crisis. Realising the interaction of traveller behaviour, financial impacts and business recovery strategies is important for developing effective interventions. Hall et al. (2020) argue that resilience is not only about going back to how things were before the crisis but also about adjusting, developing and strengthening systems that are able to handle future shocks. This research addresses this gap by supplying empirical insights at a local level, which can contribute both in policy making and business strategies in similar urban tourism precincts (Ilo, 2024). To end, the article first exemplifies a literature review on tourism resilience, with the focus on theoretical perspectives, crisis management and recovery strategies in the urban precincts. Drawing on three existing theoretical frameworks to shape the analysis. The use of these frameworks provides a foundation for the analysis of how Green Point's tourism sector has responded to the disruption of COVID-19. The literature review pertains to these perspectives on global debates and places within the South African context, focusing on urban precincts. The discussion further moves to the study's methodology, research findings, before concluding with implications, recommendations for future research areas. This study further contextualises resilience within urban precincts, highlighting how both visitor dynamics and local economic structures shape the capacity for

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recovery. By situating Green Point within the broader Cape Town tourism economy, it is possible to observe how systemic vulnerabilities interact with adaptive measures at a micro-level, offering insights relevant to similar precincts globally.

Literature review

Resilience theory establishes the conceptual foundation for this study. Holling's (1973) socio-ecological resilience theory pinpoints how systems handle disruption while maintaining their core functions. In the context of tourism, this permits researchers an opportunity to explore how destinations, businesses and communities respond to crises without breaking down (Folke, 2016). Hall et al. (2018) expand this thinking through by means of the adaptive resilience framework that focuses on learning, innovation and transformation within the systems of tourism. Lastly, Becken & Heghey's (2013) destination resilience model further classifies robustness (capacity to absorb shocks), adaptability (capacity to adjust operations) and transformability (capacity for structural change) as core dimensions of resilience in practice. These three frameworks together position resilience as both a rapid response to shocks and a trajectory for long-term transformation. In understanding resilience from the aspect of robustness, adaptability and transformability, it becomes possible to draw an analysis on how tourism systems, businesses and destinations respond to huge disruptions. This conceptual foundation offers a lens through which the impacts of events such as COVID-19 pandemic on tourism can be explored. The COVID-19 pandemic characterised an unparalleled global shock to tourism systems (Brouder et al., 2020). It revealed weaknesses such as overreliance on international visitors, insufficient crisis management structures and unstable employment (Sigala, 2020; Gössling & Hall, 2021). Researchers argue that the pandemic has reshaped resilience research, diverting focus from mere recovery to adaptability and transformation, highlighting the need for tourism systems to not only be shock absorbers but also to emerge in their response to large-scale disruptions (Praya, 2020). In particular, the pandemic revealed that destinations with pre-existing contingency planning and flexible operational frameworks were able to respond faster, highlighting the importance of proactive management alongside reactive measures. This shift has highlighted the importance of integrating resilience strategies within both business operations and governance frameworks to maintain sustainable futures for tourism systems. Urban tourism precincts where culture, entertainment, retail and hospitality are concentrated and economically vibrant; however, they are prone to crises (Griffin et al., 2021; Pastras & Bramwell, 2021). Findings from Europe, Asia and Africa reveal that event-driven precincts sustained major losses during COVID-19 from closure to cancellation of offerings that extended well beyond the easing of restrictions (Kock et al., 2022; Rogerson, 2021). Heavy dependence on international visitors revealed the vulnerability of these precincts. In a Southern African context, this finding is reinforced. Johannesburg's Moboneng precinct and Cape Town's V&A Waterfront reported major declines in earnings during the broader closures due to their reliance on international markets (Visser & Ferreira, 2021). Green Point shares similar traits as a location with its stadium, park, accommodation venues, nightlife life making it a hub of economic and cultural life, making it an important case for analysing resilience within South Africa.

Tourism resilience is frequently conceptualised in three aspects: absorptive capacity, adaptive capacity, and transformative capacity (Hall et al., 2018). However, Biggs et al. (2019) argue that resilience should not only be classified as "bouncing back" after a dilemma, but instead it should be seen as a method of adjustment and transformation. During COVID-19, some organisations demonstrated absorptive capacity through financial reserves, whereas others pursued adaptive strategies by shifting to digital platforms and targeting domestic visitors, or diversifying income streams (Gössling & Hall, 2021). Transformative capacity extends beyond change; it requires structural change such as entrenching sustainability principles or restructuring governance systems (Cheer & Lew, 2019). These perspectives illuminate resilience not only as an operational necessity but also as a strategic approach for sustainability and inclusive futures. Precinct resilience relies heavily on collaboration. These are multi-actor environments that include residents, businesses, community groups, municipalities and visitors whose coordinated responses shape the outcomes (Hall et al., 2020). Lapointe (2020) demonstrates that collaborative alliances between local businesses and tourism boards fostered faster adaptation during COVID-19. While Rogerson & Rogerson (2021) document how bottom-up initiatives in South Africa validated small businesses and informal workers, complementing recovery measures. However, fragmented governance mostly prolonged responses and delayed recovery trajectories (Pastras & Bramwell, 2021). In the case of Green Point, tourism stakeholders' dynamics were important as organisations were analysing new operational models while local authorities tested coordination mechanisms under conditions of uncertainty.

The majority of resilience research has focused on the Global North. However, the pressures in the tourism systems of the Global South are different: informality, structural inequality, fragile financial capacity and big exposure to external shocks (Rogerson, 2020). Literature from Scheyvens & Biddulph (2018) reiterates that resilience in these circumstances must be further than economic recovery and address issues of equity, social justice and sustainability. Correspondingly, Nairobi, Accra and Rio de Janeiro have similar patterns where tourism districts infuse global aspirations with vulnerable local foundations (Novelli et al., 2022). Cape Town exemplifies these challenges. The city is globally marketed as, however majority of the precinct economies and informal and unstable (Visser & Ferreira, 2021). Green Point showcases these contradictions, making it a substantial case study for examining resilience as a multifaced and context-specific process in the Global South. Despite growing scholarship on resilience, research at the precinct level remains underdeveloped. Existing studies tend to focus on destinations as a whole or on national tourism systems, overlooking the localized interactions that shape recovery trajectories (Griffin et al., 2021). This gap is particularly pronounced in Global South contexts, which are often underrepresented in resilience debates despite facing some of the most acute vulnerabilities (Rogerson & Baum, 2020). Addressing this gap, the present study investigates the Green Point precinct in Cape Town as a case of urban tourism resilience, providing empirical insights into how businesses and stakeholders absorbed, adapted, and initiated transformative responses during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methodology

This study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional design. A structured online survey using Google Forms was used to collect data from residents and visitors of the Green Point precinct in Cape Town. This survey approach became appropriate because it allowed for the collection of primary data from a relatively large group within a period of uncertainty and shock. This was justified given the restrictions and health risks of face-to-face data collection during COVID-19 (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The population of the study consisted of both residents and visitors in the Green Point area. These groups were an interest because of their direct engagement with the tourism system of the precinct through everyday activities, travel, or leisure consumption. A link to the online questionnaire was distributed randomly to potential participants. Randomisation was used to reduce bias in the selection process and improve the representativeness of the responses (Bryman, 2016). In all, a total of 219 complete responses were received and included in the analysis. While understated, this sample size is adequate for an exploratory precinct-level study, especially as previous research on urban tourism resilience has worked with similar or smaller datasets (Rogerson, 2021). The size of this sample also reflects the practical limitations of conducting research during the pandemic, when response rates were driven by online access and voluntary participation. The survey instrument was designed into two sections. Section A focused on resilience-related issues such as travel intentions, financial impacts, preferred accommodation, and perceptions of domestic tourism as a recovery strategy. Section B captured demographic data, including age, gender, marital status, education, income, occupation, and residency status. The questionnaire included both closed-ended and open-ended questions. Closed-ended items generated quantitative data, while open-ended items provided qualitative insights into recovery strategies and resilience practices. The survey was hosted on Google Forms, an online platform, and the link was distributed to residents and visitors of Green Point. Respondents were invited to complete the survey voluntarily. This distribution was the most suitable approach during the COVID-19 pandemic, as it allowed for safe participation and reached both resident and visitor groups. Data collection was time-limited to capture perspectives within the immediate post-lockdown recovery period.

The analysis integrated descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. Descriptive statistics were generated in Microsoft Excel to present frequencies, percentages, and simple cross-tabulations. These were utilised to describe the demographic profile of respondents and to summarise their travel behaviours and perceptions of COVID-19 impacts. Graphs and tables were generated to visualise key findings. Thematic analysis was applied to open-ended responses to identify recurring themes related to recovery strategies. Responses were read, grouped into categories, and counted to determine the most common themes. This combination of methods guaranteed that the analysis gathered both measurable patterns and contextual insights. It also aligned with the study's resilience framework, which highlights absorptive, adaptive, and transformative capacities. To add, the survey design allowed for cross-sectional insights into demographic variability, capturing nuanced differences in age, gender, education, and income levels that influence tourism behaviour. By combining quantitative data with thematic qualitative responses, the study ensured that both structural patterns and individual perspectives were incorporated into the analysis, enhancing the robustness of conclusions. This research's ethical clearance was acquired from the Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC) of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT). Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents. Anonymity and confidentiality were protected by not collecting any personal identifiers.

Results and discussions

The section below represents a detailed analysis of the Green Point survey results covering the demographics profile, travel decisions, vaccination influence, financial impacts, preferred travel patterns, accommodation preferences, recovery strategy themes and support for domestic tourism strategy. These results were interpreted within the resilience framework and connected to existing international and local literature for contextual insights.

Demographic profile of the respondents

A total of 219 valid survey responses were analysed for this study. Females comprising 54.29% and males 45.71% the gender distribution was balanced. This similar balance supports the representativeness of the findings. The extensive age cluster was 21-30 years, accounting for 46.49% of females and 44.79% of males. Females showed more representation in the 31-40 and 41-50 categories, whereas males extended more evenly into mature brackets (51-71 years). These distributions indicate a youthful and educated population with a progressing female representation at higher education levels, especially postgraduate attainment within the ages of 21 to 30 group (3.65%). The majority of respondents lived in the area for over ten years (42%), while one-third had lived within the Green Point area between 5-10 years. This reveals a stable population base supplemented by newer entrants. In the area of occupation, skilled workers (36%) and professionals (19%) were subdued, showcasing the service-oriented economy of the precinct. Results revealed that (74%) of the respondents are South African citizens, though a notable proportion were non-citizens (26%), underscoring Green Point's cosmopolitan character. The income levels represented a concentration in middle brackets (R10 001- R30 000). More than one-fifth of respondents chose not to disclose their income level by selecting "confidential". Moreover, 83.1% reported a decrease in income since the lockdown, reinforcing the financial fragility of households and businesses. This supports the research reports of income decline and unemployment strain within the tourism economy during COVID-19 (Rogerson, 2021). These demographic results substantiate the fragility of urban tourism

precincts. A youthful but financially challenged population reveals both potential demand and economic sensitivity. The importance of skilled workers and professionals demonstrates resilience in service industries that were interrupted by lockdown measures. These results highlight the socio-economic context in which resilience must be understood: resilience strategies must not only meet the dynamics of visitors but also the challenges of local workers and residents (Cheer & Lew, 2019).

Key findings from the Green Point survey

The analysis revealed six key findings, which will be expanded below with percentages to communicate the results.

Travel decisions and vaccination

More than half of the respondents indicated that vaccination status influenced their travel intentions. Especially, 62.56% indicated that they would only travel if fully vaccinated, while 26.03% regarded vaccination as a moderate factor, and 11.42% regarded it as a minimal impact. This emphasises the developing sensitivity to health risks in post-pandemic travel behaviour. This is in alignment with international studies on health-driven tourism choices (Sigala, 2020; Gössling & Hall, 2021). The Green Point data agrees with the shift, suggesting that destinations need to incorporate health insurance into ongoing marketing and operations. This echoes Hooling's socio-ecological resilience framework, where maintaining system function requires integrating new risk variables such as public health as an operational norm.

Financial impacts

The majority of respondents declared negative financial shifts since the lockdown. 83.11% reporting decreased income or financial challenges affecting their travel plans. Furthermore, 13.7% highlighted moderate impacts, and a small minority of 3.2% was unaffected. Middle-income groups (R10 001-R30 000) were majorly hit, indicating high instability in this bracket. Respondents who indicated no change in financial situation clustered "confidential" income group, which has the potential of hiding weaknesses. These findings agree with existing literature from other Global South destinations where tourism-dependent households faced sharp income declines (Novelli, 2022).

Preferred travel patterns

Respondents showcased substantial intentions toward domestic tourism and regional travel over international trips. Specifically, 60.27 % preferred domestic destinations, only 17.81% regarded international travel, 6.39% chose regional destinations and local area travel 4.11%. This analysis agrees with the repositioning of domestic tourism as a resilience strategy within the Global South contexts (Novelli et al., 2022). This preference also reflects comprehensive trends of tourism "relocalisation", where domestic markets continue to support destinations during global disruptions (Rogerson & Baum, 2020).

Accommodation preferences

The respondents indicated hotels as their preferred individual option 71.79%, followed by self-catering 32.31%, friends and relatives, 14.87% and smaller shares for alternatives such as Airbnb and lodges. The popularity of self-catering reflects both financial pressures and health concerns, supporting earlier research on drifting consumer demand in post-pandemic tourism (Kock et al., 2022). This additionally reveals the diversified use underlying penetration of hybrid models that showcase adaptation within accommodation sectors that support resilience and recovery pathways (Hall et al., 2018).

Recovery strategies

Thematic analysis of open-ended questions ascertained three dominant recovery strategies: The first one is promoting domestic tourism through targeted marketing (89.04%) of respondents. Secondly is offering discounted processes or packages (59.36%) and lastly, ensuring strict health and safety measures (7.76%). These methods mirror documented adaptation measures in urban tourism systems (Lapointe,2020). However, the limited emphasis on health and safety may overlook long-term resilience, as risk interpretations remain high. Additionally, respondents indicated that innovation in digital marketing and online engagement could serve as supplementary recovery tools, suggesting that technology adoption is becoming an integral part of adaptive strategies. The strong reliance on domestic tourism reiterates its role as a resilience anchor in the Global South (Cheer & Lew, 2019). Seemingly, the reduction of prices increases concerns of sustainability if discounting erodes profitability. Transformability, as Hall et al. (2020) recommend, we do not only require survival strategies but also structural reforms such as diversifying markets, embedding sustainability and anchoring government systems.

Support for domestic tourism

An adequate majority (90.87%) regarded domestic tourism as a suitable recovery strategy, (8.22%) indicated "Maybe", and (0.91%) indicated "NO". This substantiates research calls for anchoring the local visitor economy as a component of destination resilience. It confirms calls in the literature to prioritise local visitor economies (Cheer & Lew,2019; Rogerson, 2022). Regardless of the stability offered by domestic tourism, its spending is often lower than in international markets. This would require precincts like Green Point to use domestic tourism as a short-term reliance with long-term diversification strategies. Practically, this indicates that precinct managers and policy makers should develop incentive structures to retain domestic visitors while gradually rebuilding international visitor confidence. Training programmes for tourism staff, improved health protocols, and targeted marketing campaigns could collectively strengthen the overall resilience of the precinct. By combining immediate recovery measures with strategic long-term planning, Green Point can not only withstand future shocks but also become a model for other urban tourism precincts in the Global South. Strategic planning may therefore need to balance

domestic reliance with measures to gradually regain international visitor confidence, ensuring that recovery efforts are both sustainable and economically viable in the long term.

Holistically, the results reveal that Green Point's resilience is shaped by both vulnerabilities and changeable practices. Robustness is challenged by financial instability within households and businesses. Adaptability is visible in the shift to domestic tourism and budget accommodation. Transformability is still a limited aspect as recovery strategies focus on short-term measurements and not on structural change. Moreover, the findings suggest that the interplay between stakeholder collaboration and visitor behaviour significantly influences the effectiveness of these resilience strategies. The data indicate that while businesses adapted operationally, stronger institutional support and coordinated governance could enhance both adaptability and transformability. This underscores the need for precinct-level resilience planning that actively incorporates feedback loops from local communities, business owners, and visitors to anticipate future disruptions. This agrees with Hall et al's (2020) argument that resilience is not only a "bouncing back" tool, but it should expand in a shape that drives innovation and sustainability. For Green Point, this means investing in collaborative governance, supporting small organisations and reimagining urban precinct tourism that withstands future disruptions. Moreover, these findings underscore the critical role of financial and policy support mechanisms. The concentration of respondents in middle-income brackets, coupled with high sensitivity to travel costs, highlights the precarity of both residents and tourists as drivers of urban tourism. Policy measures that incentivise domestic travel, provide financial relief for small businesses, and enhance public-private collaboration can strengthen the overall resilience of precincts like Green Point. Similarly, tourism operators may consider embedding long-term sustainability principles, diversifying target markets, and leveraging digital platforms to buffer against future shocks.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study explored tourism resilience in Cape Town's Green Point precinct during the COVID-19 pandemic, situating its findings within resilience theory and broader global debates. The results demonstrate that resilience at the precinct level is multidimensional, involving not only the absorptive and adaptive capacities of businesses and households but also the potential for transformative change. However, the findings suggest that while absorptive and adaptive measures were evident, structural transformation remained underdeveloped. The study provides several practical implications for policymakers, tourism practitioners, and urban planners. First, the findings highlight the necessity of promoting domestic tourism as a stabilising factor during global disruptions. Second, financial support targeting middle-income households and small tourism operators can mitigate vulnerability and enhance adaptive capacity. Third, collaborative governance involving local authorities, business associations, and community stakeholders is essential to implement coordinated recovery strategies. Finally, integrating sustainability and transformability measures into tourism planning ensures that precincts not only recover but are better prepared for future crises. The study contributes to resilience theory by applying three complementary frameworks: the socio-ecological model (Holling, 1973), adaptive resilience (Hall et al., 2018), and the destination resilience framework (Becken & Hughey, 2013) at a micro-scale urban tourism precinct. By doing so, it illustrates how resilience is not homogeneous across a destination but shaped by localized interactions between residents, visitors, and businesses. The case of Green Point highlights how absorptive strategies (such as financial reserves) are often insufficient without adaptive responses like market diversification or digitalisation. To add, the findings support arguments by Biggs et al. (2019) that resilience must move beyond "bouncing back" to embrace transformation. Yet, transformative capacity was weakly represented in Green Point, reflecting similar trends in other Global South contexts (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018). This underlines the need for resilience research to focus on urban tourism nodes, where global vulnerabilities integrate with local realities.

For practice, the results indicate that domestic tourism emerged as a key recovery anchor, with over 90% of respondents supporting it as a strategy. However, reliance on domestic markets alone cannot guarantee long-term resilience given their limited spending capacity. Policymakers and business leaders should therefore view domestic tourism as a stabiliser but simultaneously invest in diversifying visitor markets and revenue streams. Financial fragility, as indicated by the high percentage of respondents reporting income losses, calls for targeted support for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) within precincts. Discounting strategies, while popular, may undermine long-term sustainability if they erode profitability. Instead, resilience strategies should be linked to innovation; digital adoption, hybrid accommodation models, and value-added services that enhance competitiveness without compromising financial viability. Governance implications are also important. The evidence supports those fragmented responses delay recovery, whereas collaborative frameworks linking residents, businesses, and municipal authorities allow for quicker adaptation. Strengthening precinct-level governance structures and embedding resilience planning within municipal frameworks can therefore enhance long-term capacity. This aligns with calls for "networked governance" approaches in tourism resilience (Cheer & Lew, 2019; Pastras & Bramwell, 2021). The study's cross-sectional survey design was conducted during the immediate post-lockdown recovery period; it captures a snapshot rather than longitudinal change. Future studies could track the evolution of resilience strategies over time to assess whether adaptive measures transition into transformative change. In addition, the sample size, though adequate for exploratory analysis, limits statistical generalisability. Comparative studies across multiple precincts in South Africa or the wider Global South would help establish whether the dynamics observed in Green Point are general patterns or place-specific. Finally, qualitative methods such as interviews with municipal authorities and business leaders could deepen insights into governance processes and collaborative strategies. In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic showed the fragility of urban tourism precincts, with Green Point showcasing both vulnerabilities and changeable responses. The study confirms that tourism resilience includes robustness, adaptability, and transformability, with current practices predominantly focusing on immediate recovery rather than structural change. Green Point's experience demonstrates that domestic tourism, flexible accommodation options, and targeted marketing

are effective short-term strategies, yet long-term resilience requires systemic reforms, collaborative governance, and sustainability-oriented interventions. These insights contribute to a better understanding of localized tourism resilience in the Global South and offer a roadmap for similar urban precincts facing future disruptions.

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