

Township Tourism Marketing in South Africa: Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract: Township tourism is increasingly seen as a tool that can be used to transform the overall tourism industry. For South Africa, township tourism illustrates attempts to drive inclusive growth, safeguard cultural resources, and promote socio-economic benefits to historically marginalised communities. Despite the opportunities presented by township tourism, its marketing faces persistent challenges that impede successful implementation. This conceptual paper critically examines challenges and prospects of township tourism marketing in South Africa. Utilising the extant academic literature as points of discussion, this study identifies marketing challenges in marketing townships as tourism products. These problems comprise a continual negative destination image, insufficient infrastructure, low level of digital visibility, safety and security issues, and fragmented marketing. The study also brings to the fore new opportunities that are linked with township tourism in South Africa. The article also highlights the importance of strategic multi-stakeholder partnerships and collaboration in developing sustainable township tourism. Theoretically, the study synthesizes stakeholder and destination branding models to gain a comprehensive understanding of different marketing approaches that can be applied to reposition township destinations as culturally rich tourism environments. The paper concludes by outlining a framework for marketing township tourism in South Africa. This framework underlines the need to focus on collaboration, authenticity, and innovation as three basic pillars for ensuring sustainable township tourism marketing. The study provides recommendations on how to use digital marketing, storytelling, and co-branding interventions that increase awareness and attractiveness of township tourism. This paper adds to the body of knowledge regarding 'emerging market' tourism by creating a conceptual base for future empirical studies about township destination marketing.

Keywords: Community Participation, South Africa, Sustainable Tourism Development, Township Tourism, Tourism Marketing

1. Introduction and Background

Township tourism is one of the fastest-growing sectors in South Africa's tourist economy. It provides exclusive cultural experiences based on the country's social and political history as well as urban life (Dube & Muresherwa, 2025). South African townships such as Soweto, Khayelitsha, and Langa are by-products of Apartheid's spatial planning that once existed in cities and towns. These peri-urban residential spaces have become tourist attractions that depict local culture, heritage, dance and music, food, and the community's way of living (Booyens & Rogerson, 2019). Over the years, township tourism has been heralded as an instrument for social and economic change. This tourism contributes to inclusive socio-economic development, job creation, and cultural conservation (Ebrahim & Muresherwa, 2021). Despite its significance, township tourism still encounters some marketing-related challenges that impede its growth and global competitiveness.

South Africa remains one of the most visited destinations in Africa, and this is mainly because of its abundance of beautiful landscapes and rich cultural heritage. Because of this, the country has increasingly leveraged tourism as a key economic sector and tool for development (Hill et al. 2022). Thus, the tourism sector continues to be favoured for its value in steering socio-economic transformation and development. Within this context, Muldoon and Mair (2022) note that township tourism is a distinctive niche that offers visitors an immersive experience. In fact, township tourism provides tourists with the opportunity to experience the historically marginalised parts of the country.

According to Booyens and Hoogendoorn (2025), township tourism provides economic opportunities for residents. It also serves as an important platform for challenging the historical narratives and cultural exchange (Auala et al. 2019). However, the growth and sustainability of township tourism continue to face significant marketing challenges requiring strategic interventions. Dube and Muresherwa (2025) note the pervasive challenge confronting townships, especially in relation to accessing and engaging visitors. This paper, therefore, examines the multifaceted marketing challenges inherent in promoting township tourism in South Africa. In addition, it explores the opportunities that can be strategically harnessed to foster sustainable growth.

Township tourism, which is also widely known as 'slum tourism', 'heritage tourism', and 'dark tourism', has flourished in several contexts (Booyens, 2010). Despite the negative association that usually accompanies township tourism (Steinbrink & Voshage, 2021), careful planning that considers the locals often leads to its success. An ability to foster inclusive economic growth, cultural preservation, and community empowerment are

some of the desired outcomes (Dube & Muresherwa, 2025). It has, however, been noted that township tourism remains inadequately positioned and under-marketed, particularly within the South African context (Dube & Muresherwa, 2025). For example, the existing marketing strategies for township settings often fail to capture the authentic lived experiences of township communities. Consequently, low socio-economic returns for local business owners and entrepreneurs, and limited visitor engagement are easily noticed and experienced.

Moreover, the persistent challenges that stand in the way of township tourism include inadequate infrastructure, safety and security perceptions, fragmented marketing, and limited digital visibility (Booyens & Hoogendoorn, 2025; Chaturuka et al. 2020; Dube & Muresherwa, 2025). These challenges continue to constrain township tourism's competitiveness and, hence, require dedicated interventions to address. There is, therefore, a need to understand how effective marketing strategies can be developed to reposition townships as appealing, sustainable, and culturally rich spaces. This study thus conceptually examines the challenges and opportunities of South African township tourism marketing. The overall aim of the study is to propose a strategic township tourism marketing framework that promotes stakeholder collaboration, supports authentic experiences and innovation, leading to long-term sustainability and enhanced visibility.

2. Methodology of the Work

This research is conceptually designed to critically analyse the issues and prospects of township tourism marketing in South Africa. Instead of gathering new data, the paper is based on a full desk-based review of existing secondary sources. In doing so, relevant scientific literature, policy papers, and government reports, as well as tourism strategic plans, were accessed. According to Koskela-Huotari (2024), the conceptual research design enables the synthesis of diverse perspectives and empirical insights. The emerging themes from the examination of the reviewed literature on township tourism marketing guided the discussions.

The selection of sources for analysis was guided by relevance, credibility, and publication recency that ensured analytical rigour. Ultimately, this methodological orientation allowed for the development of a conceptual strategic framework for township tourism marketing. The approach was interpretive, seeking to generate insights that could inform future empirical research on township tourism marketing.

3. An Overview of South African Township Tourism

Townships in South Africa have historically evolved from segregated settlements under the separate development policy of Apartheid, becoming vibrant cultural spaces (Booyens, 2021). Today, townships attract thousands of visitors seeking authentic cultural experiences (Booyens, 2021; Donaldson, 2021; Dube & Muresherwa, 2025). The study situates township tourism within national development policies such as the Tourism Sector Master Plan and the National Development Plan (NDP) 2030, which emphasise inclusive growth, local participation, and cultural preservation as central to tourism-led development (South Africa Gov, 2025).

South African township tourism involves guided tours to historically marginalized urban communities commonly known as townships. Townships were established for non-white populations under the Apartheid regime (Ndzumo et al. 2021). Since the end of the Apartheid era in 1994, townships have grown significantly. Township tourism have evolved into key tourism products, providing visitors with an authentic, immersive look at the nation's history, culture, and current social realities (Dube & Muresherwa, 2025).

Township tours in South Africa are mostly experienced in Soweto (Johannesburg) and Langa (Cape Town). In these areas, visitors go beyond mere sightseeing, and witness the resilience, creativity, and vibrant culture of the residents that is showcased (Mpotaringa & Tichaawa, 2024). Visitors' experiences on a township tour typically include visits to historical sites, local businesses, craft markets, and eateries. These experiences foster direct interaction with the community members through performative arts, craft sales and home visits.

While sometimes viewed as controversial or voyeuristic (Huysamen et al. 2020), the intent of responsible township tourism is to promote cross-cultural understanding. This is enhanced through fostering authenticity by encouraging engagement between visitors and local communities (Dube & Muresherwa, 2025). In Langa and Soweto, for example, township tourism has enabled tourists to experience the daily lives of community members. At the heart of township tourism is the respect of local culture and support for community development initiatives. A notable example is the guided walking tours in Soweto that permits visitors to learn about the struggle for freedom while supporting local entrepreneurs. Similarly, cultural experiences in Langa Township include home dining, craft markets, and music performances that offers unique platforms for mutual learning and dialogue. In Khayelitsha, social enterprises and art collectives are seen using tourism revenues to

fund youth empowerment projects (Nkosi et al. 2025). Through these community-led and participatory initiatives, township tourism reduces exploitative practices (Dube & Muresherwa, 2025). Consequently, it helps foster respect across cultural divides and promote economic inclusivity.

Furthermore, township tourism is aimed at generating direct economic benefits for local entrepreneurs, guides, and businesses (Mpotaringa & Tichaawa, 2024). The main goal of township tourism is to move beyond showcasing poverty and instead highlight the energy, art, music, and hope prevalent in these communities (Dube & Muresherwa, 2025). By doing this, advocates for township tourism want to make it a critical sector for both historical education and socio-economic development (Auala et al. 2019).

Despite its growing recognition, township tourism remains under-represented in mainstream tourism marketing campaigns. It is often perceived through stereotypical or deficit-based narratives that emphasise poverty rather than resilience and creativity (Dube & Muresherwa, 2025). This misrepresentation limits its potential contribution to destination branding and sustainable tourism growth. Nevertheless, the growing interest among domestic and international visitors for locally authentic experiences presents opportunities for repositioning townships as cultural landscapes of innovation, diversity, and shared identity. Thus, township tourism continues to evolve as a critical pillar of responsible tourism and local development in South Africa (Tourism Update, 2025).

4. Conceptualising Township Tourism Marketing

Township tourism marketing can be understood as a strategic process of promoting, branding, and positioning peripheral urban areas as desirable and authentic tourism destinations (Auala et al. 2019). Conceptually, township tourism marketing extends beyond traditional destination marketing as it incorporates community narratives, local creativity, and social transformation objectives. Within this framework, Destination Branding Theory (Hankinson, 2010) and Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984) provide a useful foundation for understanding how multiple actors shape the township brand. Several stakeholders, including residents, entrepreneurs, tour operators, government agencies, and visitors, work to shape townships and activities happening in such areas.

Marketing township tourism requires the careful negotiation of identity and representation. This is due to the complex nature of these socio-cultural spaces embodying both historical trauma and contemporary creativity (Mary, 2020). Therefore, effective marketing must highlight community pride, cultural vitality, and human stories rather than perpetuating deficit imagery (Dube & Muresherwa, 2025). Community initiatives such as the Vilakazi Street precinct in Soweto, Guga S'thebe Cultural Centre in Langa, and Khayelitsha's Spinach King Café close to Cape Town illustrate how local entrepreneurs have redefined township spaces. This has been achieved through innovative branding and authentic storytelling, the key aspects in marketing these spaces as tourism products.

With the help of digital media, township tourism marketing has been transformed in a greater way. Tau et al. (2024) note the value of digital media in the marketing of townships, particularly their role in democratising access to global audiences. Several digital tools and platforms are increasingly playing a critical role in marketing townships (Ghauri et al. 2022; Ordoñez de Pablos, 2023). Examples of these digital media include Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube. With these, residents and entrepreneurs can share visual narratives that celebrate everyday life, music, and cuisine (Dube & Muresherwa, 2025). This participatory approach enhances both destination authenticity and visitor engagement. This way, it reflects the shift from the traditional top-down marketing to community-driven branding (Muldoon & Mair, 2022).

However, conceptual clarity for township tourism marketing remains critical. Township tourism marketing involves selling experiences and co-creating value, particularly between hosts and visitors (Booyens, 2010). It thus requires a balanced blend of economic, cultural, and ethical considerations that support long-term sustainability (Dube & Muresherwa, 2025). Thus, conceptualising township tourism marketing involves recognising the township as both a living community and a cultural brand. Considering this, responsible representation, collaboration, and inclusivity become the foundation of all marketing strategies for township tourism.

5. Challenges in Marketing Township Tourism

Despite its potential, township tourism marketing in South Africa faces several interrelated challenges that continue to limit its competitiveness. One of the most persistent issues is the negative destination image associated with perceptions of poverty, insecurity, and poor service quality (Donaldson et al. 2023; Dube & Muresherwa, 2025; Huysamen et al. 2020; Ndzumo et al. 2021). These perceptions, often reinforced by

mainstream media, discourage potential visitors. In addition, they undermine the branding efforts of local entrepreneurs (Booyens & Hoogendoorn, 2025). Moreover, many townships continue to suffer from infrastructure deficits, including inadequate roads, unreliable public transport, and limited signage, which restrict accessibility and visitor mobility (Chaturuka et al. 2020; Dube & Muresherwa, 2025; Mpotaringa & Tichaawa, 2024).

Dube and Muresherwa (2025) note the evident marketing fragmentation within townships, which presents significant challenges. In most cases, township tourism initiatives are small-scale in nature and uncoordinated, which presents further marketing challenges. Moreover, the limited visible collaboration, especially between the various stakeholder groups, makes it more challenging to successfully market these spaces (Leonard & Dladla, 2020). The absence of a unified marketing strategy leads to duplication of efforts and weak brand visibility both domestically and internationally (Brown et al. 2025). Safety and security concerns further exacerbate these challenges, particularly for first-time visitors who are mostly unfamiliar with township environments (George & Booyens, 2014).

Another critical barrier limiting the full potential of township tourism marketing relates to digital exclusion. For example, many township entrepreneurs are crippled by a lack of resources, skills, or connectivity to effectively utilise digital marketing tools. As a result, township tourism remains underrepresented on global platforms such as Booking.com and TripAdvisor (Dube & Muresherwa, 2025). Furthermore, insufficient policy support and limited access to funding constrain innovation and marketing capacity-building initiatives.

Lastly, the representation dilemma continues to be felt, particularly on how to market township spaces in a more ethical way. In some instances, marketers tend to reinforce stereotypes or, at times, unintentionally exploit community narratives, thereby affecting the destination. Responsible marketing thus requires sensitivity, community participation, and transparent benefit-sharing (Booyens, 2010). Without these, marketing efforts risk being extractive rather than empowering. Therefore, addressing these interconnected challenges is essential for positioning township tourism as a sustainable segment of South Africa's tourism economy (Dube & Muresherwa, 2025).

6. Opportunities for Enhancing Township Tourism Marketing

Amid the presented challenges of township tourism marketing, significant opportunities exist for revitalising township tourism marketing in South Africa. The growing interest in responsible and experiential travel provides a valid basis for promoting township-based experiences (Matiku et al. 2020). Focus needs to be put towards the promotion of authentic, interactive, and community-led experiences (Dube & Muresherwa, 2025). With township tourism, travellers increasingly seek cultural immersion, thus making townships ideal spaces for storytelling and meaningful engagement.

The digital transformation of tourism presents another powerful opportunity (Ghauri et al. 2022). Through social media, websites, and influencer partnerships, township entrepreneurs can reach new audiences with minimal cost. Social media platforms have allowed initiatives such as Soweto Wine Festival, Maboneng Township Art Walks, and Khayelitsha's Bicycle Tours to attract diverse visitors to experience the local culture, food, and creativity. Furthermore, digital storytelling has allowed township hosts to reposition their communities as spaces of innovation and resilience (Dube & Muresherwa, 2025).

Community-based tourism businesses are offering opportunities for inclusive growth. When locals are integrated into tourism value chains, it allows for the creation of shared ownership that is grounded in authenticity, a factor for successful marketing of townships as tourism products. With township tourism, there are also vast opportunities for stakeholder partnerships, which can amplify township marketing through co-branding and joint promotional campaigns.

Moreover, leveraging township events has been instrumental in creating avenues for year-round tourism activity, thus helping extend the tourist season (McKercher et al. 2024). When marketed effectively, such events strengthen township identity and visitor loyalty (Dube & Muresherwa, 2025). These opportunities highlight the potential of combining digital innovation and strategic collaboration to transform township tourism marketing into a driver of sustainable development and cross-cultural exchange.

7. The Role of Stakeholders in Promoting Township Tourism

Effective township tourism marketing depends on multi-stakeholder collaboration (Ndzumo et al. 2021, Thetsane, 2019) involving several stakeholders. Each actor contributes unique resources and perspectives that can enhance marketing impact and sustainability. For example, local communities' role would involve providing local knowledge, cultural authenticity, and local knowledge, while the government's role relates to policy direction and infrastructural support (Selebi & Mhlongo, 2022). Meanwhile, the private sector invests capital and contributes innovation and marketing.

The City of Cape Town's Responsible Tourism Policy exemplifies a successful governance model. This policy has integrated township experiences into broader destination marketing strategies (City of Cape Town, 2025). Similarly, the Gauteng Tourism Authority has been instrumental in supporting township tourism. For example, targeted campaigns highlighting community-led experiences in Mamelodi and Soweto have been implemented (South African Tourism, 2025). However, sustained partnerships and collaboration remain limited, and most community tourism initiatives operate in isolation (Dube & Muresherwa, 2025).

Overcoming the often-experienced fragmentation requires multi-stakeholder partnerships, prioritising capacity building and empowerment (Dube & Muresherwa, 2025). Also important is focusing on skills development through initiating targeted training programs for local entrepreneurs. More specifically, training in digital marketing and visitor management helps equip township entrepreneurs with the essential skills (Booyens, 2010; Ghauri et al. 2022). Marketing platforms such as the online marketplace or through regional tourism associations can help collective promotion and facilitate resource sharing (Graci, 2020). Importantly, stakeholder engagement should follow the principles of inclusive governance. This helps ensure involvement, especially that community voices become part of marketing narratives. With transparent, mutually beneficial partnerships, township tourism marketing can be improved (Thetsane, 2019).

8. Towards a Strategic Framework for Township Tourism Marketing in South Africa

This study proposes a strategic framework that could help guide sustainable township tourism marketing in South Africa. The framework (see Figure 1) is anchored on three interrelated pillars - authenticity, innovation, and collaboration. Following these pillars are the aspects that should be present for the successful marketing of townships, and include the enabling conditions and supporting systems. At the end of the framework are the expected outcomes, which entail the aspirations of tourism developers.

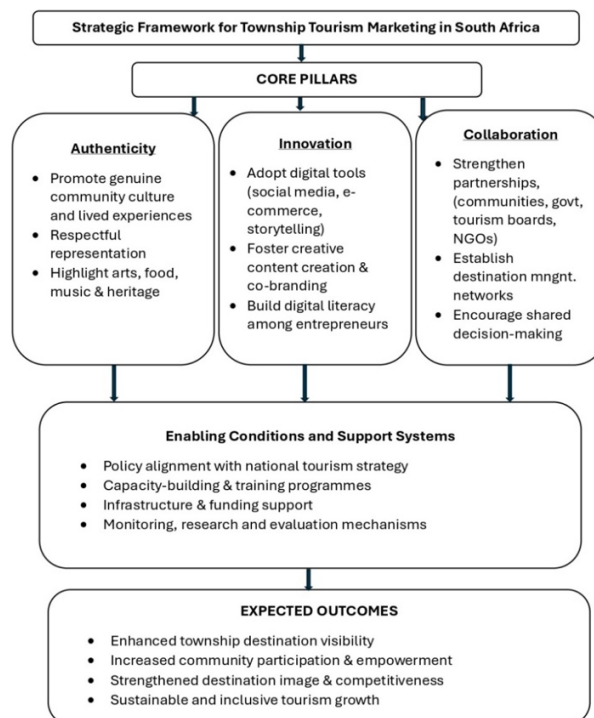


Figure 1: Township tourism marketing framework

Source: Authors' Construction

Township tourism marketing focuses on the promotion of tourism experiences, especially in historically marginalised urban areas. In most cases, it highlights the local culture, heritage, and creativity. Its success rests on the concept of 'authenticity', the real representation of township life, traditions, and community narratives. In other words, authenticity involves promoting township experiences that reflect the real community culture, creativity, and lived realities (Dube & Muresherwa, 2025). At the heart of celebrating local cultures and showcasing them to visitors, it is critical to ensure their respectful representation. When authentic experiences are available, it becomes easier for visitors to engage meaningfully with residents, thus fostering cultural understanding (Booyens & Rogerson, 2019). Booyens (2010) emphasizes the importance of providing authentic experiences by allowing tourists to engage with locals' lived accounts, thereby empowering local entrepreneurs. However, maintaining authenticity remains a challenge as increasing tourist demand could risk commodifying culture and eroding local values. Therefore, township tourism marketing should strive to strike a balance between community integrity and economic goals.

The second core pillar for township tourism marketing emphasises innovation. The digital interventions that marketers and local entrepreneurs should utilise include content creation, social media marketing, and e-commerce platforms. It has been known that when digital tools are carefully and strategically applied, it expands visibility and enhance competitiveness (Ordoñez de Pablos, 2023). By using creative digital technology, entrepreneurship, and community-driven initiatives, innovation has the power to enhance accessibility and marketing visibility. The innovative marketing tools can empower township entrepreneurs to engage directly with target audiences (Ghuri et al. 2022). Moreso, with these tools, it becomes easier to gather feedback and adapt offerings to market trends.

Collaboration is another core pillar that underscores the importance of coordinated action among various stakeholder groups (Bisani et al. 2024). Establishing township tourism groups or destination management networks is invaluable, as it allows the pooling of resources and assists in the marketing of townships. Of note is the involvement of community members, which should be prioritised in all tourism-related decisions (Dube & Muresherwa, 2025). Moreover, collaboration through partnerships with digital platforms, academic institutions, research centres, and NGOs can enhance skills development, advance research, and steer innovation in marketing. Collaborative networks also enable joint branding among township attractions (Graci, 2020). Ultimately, collaboration fosters trust and shared value creation, thus helping ensure that township tourism contributes to long-term socio-economic growth, cultural preservation, and long-term economic growth.

The framework also recognises the need for policy alignment with national tourism strategies and capacity-building initiatives to help strengthen local participation. By integrating these elements (enabling conditions and support systems), township tourism can evolve from fragmented marketing initiatives into a cohesive sector that contributes to South Africa's sustainable tourism agenda. This strategic orientation enhances the marketing effectiveness and helps ensure that township tourism remains a vehicle for cultural preservation and socio-economic development.

9. Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper supports the view that township tourism holds immense potential for South Africa. In fact, this type of tourism has been identified in numerous tourism development strategies for its potential to promote inclusive economic growth, social reformation, and conservation of culture (Donaldson et al. 2023; Dube & Muresherwa, 2025). Important to note from this conceptual analysis is that although township tourism is presented as an identifiable niche in the national tourism space, its marketing appears limited. However, the persistent challenges, such as inadequate infrastructure, negative perceptions, limited digital visibility, and fragmented marketing efforts, continue to constrain the full potential of township tourism. Conversely, opportunities exist through digital innovation, community-based entrepreneurship, and collaborative partnerships (Ndlovu et al. 2024). These can assist in repositioning township tourism as both an authentic and competitive niche within South Africa's mainstream tourism sector.

To realise the potential of township tourism, authenticity and ethical representation should underpin all marketing initiatives (Dube & Muresherwa, 2025; Ndzumo et al. 2021). This helps to ensure that township communities are accurately portrayed with dignity. Digital transformation must also be prioritised. This can be through capacity-building programs that help make local entrepreneurs more empowered, or it could be around social media and storytelling. Booking platforms (internet) serve as great tools to help local entrepreneurs to market their products and reach a wider customer base. Strengthening stakeholder collaboration through structured partnerships is critical for the success of marketing townships. Ideally, mutually beneficial

partnerships with different stakeholders need to be established to ensure resource sharing and coherent branding (Bisani et al. 2024; Graci, 2020).

Furthermore, funding mechanisms need to be established and accompanied by policy support to assist township-based tourism businesses. This funding should be directed towards improving local infrastructure, skills development programs (e.g., training), and subsidised marketing (Mnisi & Ramoroka, 2025; Tourism Update, 2025). Finally, ongoing research and monitoring are necessary to assess the socio-economic benefits of township tourism, which will help inform more responsive marketing initiatives. By implementing these recommendations, township tourism can be transformed into a model of sustainable tourism. Ultimately, this helps enhance community well-being, reinforce South Africa's cultural identity, and promote meaningful cross-cultural understanding.

A key limitation of this paper is its purely conceptual design, which relies exclusively on secondary data sources such as academic literature, policy documents, and reports. While this approach enabled theoretical synthesis and the development of a strategic framework, it does not provide empirical validation of the proposed relationships, stakeholder dynamics, or marketing outcomes discussed. As such, the findings remain interpretive rather than empirically tested, which may limit their immediate applicability to specific township contexts. In addressing this, future studies could attempt to empirically validate the proposed township tourism marketing framework. Surveys with tourists, interviews with township entrepreneurs, and stakeholder focus groups would provide empirical evidence on the effectiveness of collaboration, authenticity, and innovation as core marketing pillars. In addition, comparative and longitudinal research across different townships (e.g., Soweto, Langa, Khayelitsha) or between countries in the Global South could enhance theoretical robustness. Longitudinal research would be valuable in tracking how digital marketing adoption and stakeholder collaboration evolve over time and influence destination image and socio-economic outcomes.

Ethics Declaration

This study was ethically approved by the University of South Africa's College of Economic and Management Sciences Ethics Research Committee - ERC Marketing and Retail Management (Ref #: 11441).

AI Declaration

No AI tools were used in the conception, writing, and editing of this manuscript. All content reflects the authors' original work and intellectual contribution.

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