

# Unconventional tourism mobilities: Insights from an African business city

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**Abstract.** Recently, it has been urged that tourism scholars should accord greater research attention to the phenomenon of ‘unconventional tourism mobilities’. In the urban Global South where informality is the dominant feature and mode of urbanization, the need is most apparent. This exploratory study opens a window on the neglected mobilities of informal domestic business travellers to one African business city. Across much of urban sub-Saharan Africa, where informality is the norm, the activities and mobilities of these unconventional tourists are the predominant form of business travel. Using semi-structured interviews conducted with 400 informal business tourists in Harare, Zimbabwe, findings are analysed concerning unconventional tourism mobilities in an African business city. Issues under scrutiny are inter alia, the characteristics of participants in this ‘unconventional form of tourism’, Harare’s attractions for informal domestic business travellers, the drivers for involvement in these mobilities, the and organization and rhythms of these mobilities. In the discussion and analysis extensive use is made of the personal narratives provided by travellers.

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years it has been urged that tourism scholars should acknowledge the phenomenon of 'unconventional tourism mobilities' (Timothy et al., 2022, 2023). This is a concept which refers to trips that are statistically invisible because they involve same-day travel, utilize mainly informal accommodation or be manifest in other ways that are not captured by official tourism statistics or otherwise conform to the definitions of 'tourism' according to the United Nations World Tourism Organisation. Arguably, 'unconventional tourism' is best considered as an umbrella term to encompass most forms of unregistered or unaccounted tourism mobilities (including day trips, illegal home rentals, stays at second homes) some of which might not appear to be 'tourism' but need to be recognized as such in certain localities. The geographies of unconventional tourist mobilities recently have come under the research spotlight (Irimiás et al., 2023).

Within debates around unconventional tourism mobilities, Timothy (2024a) points out that whilst tourism is a significant manifestation of human mobility, other mobilities – such as informal trading – should not be disregarded or discounted by tourism scholars despite having overlapping characteristics with traditional tourism. Indeed, it is disclosed that whilst unconventional tourism mobilities are statistically uncounted, these activities are essentially the same as those captured in 'normal' measurements of tourism (Timothy et al., 2022). Illustratively, the phenomenon of cross-border shopping and trading is widespread across countries of both the Global North and Global South (Timothy & Butler, 1995; Bar-Koëlis, & Wendt, 2018; Bygvrå, 2019; Makkonen, 2022; Moyo, 2023; Timothy, 2024b; Çiftci & Timothy, 2025; Timothy, 2025a). According to Timothy and Çiftci (2025) the largest share of cross-border shopping in North America and European borderlands is undertaken for purposes of leisure and entertainment. This said, the phenomenon has also extended to include business trading activities wherein individuals regularly cross borders to buy merchandise that they take home in order to sell at a higher price. It is asserted that whilst petty trade is not seen as tourism in a traditional sense these individuals are effectively part of the tourism system (Çiftci & Timothy, 2025).

In an international overview of scholarship on shopping, retailing and tourism, Timothy (2025b) highlights the gap in our knowledge concerning 'informal business tourism' which falls into the category of non-traditional tourism. Cohen and Cohen (2015) stress that the concept of informal business tourism builds upon the mobilities approach to

tourism from 'emerging world regions'. Although petty traders are not usually counted as tourists by government agencies, data analysts and many tourism scholars see that these individuals play a vital role in tourism and shopping both as shopper tourists and merchandise providers. Timothy and Teye (2005) first drew attention to the activities of such traders in the borderlands of West Africa and conceptualized these individuals as participants in a form of business tourism in the Global South as they crossed borders in the same manner as formal international business travellers. The informal traders spend money outside their home country, often stay overnight and even engage in social activities, a Global South version of 'bleisure'. However, for the most part, their activities remain neglected and outside of the scope of mainstream tourism research. In addition, the mobilities of domestic informal business tourists further must be highlighted as these are traders who are travelling and spending time away from their normal place of domestic residence (Rogerson & Letsie, 2013).

Overall, the imperative for tourism scholars to acknowledge the role and activities of 'informal business tourists' – international and domestic - is especially pressing in the resource-constrained environments of the Global South. For almost a half-century, the concept of 'informality' has shaped, influenced, and framed mainstream urban thinking, policy and mobility practices across the Global South (Cobbinah, 2025). Everyday survival for the majority of the population in the urban Global South, particularly in Africa, relies upon informal economic activities as well as informal means of shelter (Dube, 2021). In Southern cities informality is the normal base for generating ordinary or everyday practices and spaces. The term 'informality' is a multi-disciplinary concept which has an academic history stretching back to the early 1970s with the initial conceptualization of 'the informal sector' and 'informal economy' put forward in the influential studies produced by the International Labour Organization (1972) and Keith Hart (1973). Olajide (2025: 86) contends the concept of informality "has witnessed a burgeoning interest and has become an object of growing policy and scholarly debates, particularly in Africa, where it remains central to urban development discourse".

As Pratt (2019) reminds us, in certain parts of the world (and certainly for much of the Global South) formality is the exception rather than the rule. Dovey (2025: 39) reiterates the need "to understand the informal as normal and formality as the exception". In researching urban Africa Dube and Brown (2025: 3319) similarly write of "the normality of informality". Bandaiko and Finn (2026: 1) go further and offer the controversial argument that "informality is the

primary force shaping global urban transformation" as "informality shapes the lives, livelihoods and futures of many if not most of the global population". In Africa's rapidly expanding urbanizing centres informality represents the dominant organizational axis for daily life and existence (Carmody et al., 2024; Azunre & Cobbinah, 2026). Correspondingly, informality is a defining element also for much tourism development and mobilities occurring in Africa. A systematic review conducted by Makoni and Mearns (2025) flags the importance of the informal economy of tourism for sustainable development futures across sub-Saharan Africa. Among others, Simatele et al. (2022: 324) point out that across Africa business "is typified by informality". Correspondingly, the most striking dimension of the phenomenon of business tourism in sub-Saharan Africa relates to informality and the burgeoning economy of informal business tourism.

It has been demonstrated that the mobilities of only a small segment of Africa's business travellers are structured by corporate and formalised procedures which parallel those in the Global North (Rogerson, 2026). Instead, in several studies the nature of business tourism and the mobilities of business travellers in sub-Saharan Africa are shown to function within an immensely different socio-economic context to that of the Global North (Rogerson, 2015, 2018; Tichaawa, 2021; Makoni et al., 2023; Makoni & Rogerson, 2024; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2025). Informal entrepreneurship in Southern cities emerged because of the alarmingly high levels of unemployment and the lack of structures for social security which is typical for the Global South and most especially for sub-Saharan Africa. The largest share of business travel in Africa therefore aligns to the mostly unregulated, flexible and improvised activities of informal actors and of informal business tourists. In the region of Southern Africa the practices of these informal business tourists are shaping and reshaping new economic spaces as cross-border traders travel between different countries for the purpose of buying and selling different types of goods with the resultant economic integration of various spaces (Rogerson & Mushawemhuka, 2015; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2025).

Despite their importance, research issues surrounding these 'unconventional tourism mobilities' mostly are ignored in mainstream international literature on business tourism. Informality does not fit the dominant narratives of Northern-dominated business tourism scholarship. It is against this backdrop that the core contribution in this paper is to unpack the characteristics and organization of informal business tourism in one African city. The existing limited literature on this topic concentrates on the mobilities of cross-border traders who represent the international

dimension of informal business tourism in Africa. This study is distinctive in its intent to explore the phenomenon of domestic informal tourism and the mobilities of domestic informal business travellers. Although scholarship on urban tourism in the Global South is undeveloped with respect to informal business tourism as a whole, it is minimal with regards to flows of domestic informal business travellers (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021). The importance of an improved understanding is pinpointed by Kifworo and Dube (2023) who identify knowledge about informal business travel as one of the outstanding research gaps concerning domestic tourism in Africa.

## 2. Methodology and case study

Zimbabwe with a population estimated as 17.27 million (May 2026) is an appropriate setting for exploring the dynamics of the informal business tourism economy. In international comparative analysis Zimbabwe "is one of the world's most highly informalized economies" (Magidi, 2025: 5092). The informal economy is critical for sustaining livelihoods in Zimbabwe most especially because of the absence of the growth in the formal economy during the past two decades. Amongst others Chitaukire (2026: 7) maintains that the "expansion of the informal economy in Zimbabwe cannot be viewed in isolation from the country's macroeconomic performance". The formal economy was disrupted in Zimbabwe by a combination of government mismanagement, international economic sanctions, a programme of chaotic land reform, nepotism and rampant corruption (Magidi, 2019).

The steady deterioration of the national economy commenced in the 1990s with a crash observable in the decade of the 2000s. A major stimulus for participation in the informal business tourism economy came from the radical contraction of the economy because of the implementation of the 'fast-track land reform' programme launched under the leadership of (former) President Robert Mugabe (Makoni et al., 2024). This disastrous programme was enacted in an uncoordinated manner and resulted in violence alienating Zimbabwe from the international community and precipitating economic sanctions. Further, over the past two decades, as observed by Finn and Bandaiko (2024: 1), "Zimbabwe's economy has continued to massively deteriorate coupled with a currency crisis, skyrocketing inflation, and dwindling foreign direct investment". The massive growth of the country's informal economy can be attributed to different and misguided economic reforms that fuelled hyperinflation, monetary chaos,



**Fig. 1.** Location of Harare, Zimbabwe's capital city  
Source: author

and deindustrialization. Against a backdrop of estimated rates of 80% formal unemployment, increasing numbers of Zimbabweans therefore were 'pushed' to take up informal livelihoods (Magidi, 2019, 2025).

The research was undertaken in the city of Harare - formerly called Salisbury from 1890 to 1982 - which is the political and administrative capital of Zimbabwe (Fig. 1). It was renamed Harare in 1982, two years after the close of colonial rule and of the independence of Zimbabwe. Today, the city is the most populous urban area in Zimbabwe, the locus of government, the country's major commercial centre and main international airport gateway. The status of capital city accords Harare several advantages as a destination for formal business tourism. Harare's major asset is as the centre of both political and economic power in the country. Beyond government events the city is an attractive venue for the hosting of business events and trade fairs and is the location of the major national cluster of accommodation services for business travellers in terms of business hotels and conference facilities (Makoni & Rogerson, 2023). In addition to its status as premier destination for formal business tourism in Zimbabwe, Harare is also a major pole in the regional networks of cross-border informal trading that stretch across the region of Southern Africa (Tawodzera & Chikanda, 2017; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2025). These cross-border traders constitute the international segment of informal business tourism in Harare and assume a vital role in provisioning the city with goods

that are unavailable, expensive or in limited supply in the city's formal retail outlets (Makoni et al., 2023). In its planning and development visions, Zimbabwe's capital is a city shaped by world class aspirations albeit defined by the everyday issues of urban informality (Bandaiko & Arku, 2025a). It is a paradoxical city exemplifying tensions between elite-led visions for urban modernity and of the authorities challenged to manage the daily realities of marginalized groups struggling to survive in an informalizing city (Finn & Bandaiko, 2024; Bandaiko & Arku, 2025b; Bandaiko, 2026).

As only limited information is available on the poorly understood phenomenon of informal domestic tourism, exploratory studies are valuable and most especially in the resource-constrained environments of sub-Saharan Africa. The research applied semi-structured interviews to gather both quantitative data and qualitative information between December 2021–November 2022 from 400 informal domestic business tourists in Harare. The vast majority (98 %) of the semi-structured interviews were conducted in English; in a small number of instances respondents felt more comfortable expressing themselves in Shona which is an official language in Zimbabwe. A multiple sampling technique was applied. First, a convenience sampling technique was used for the known, identified, targeted population. Since these individuals travel to Harare from other areas in Zimbabwe for the purpose of engaging in the activities of informal sector business tourism, the population was selected in terms of the convenience of being in the research area during the study period. Second, because of difficulties drawing any representative population of informal traders and their businesses in the city, snowball sampling was further employed.

For participation in the study, it was a requirement that the domestic informal business tourists should not be residents of Harare city but instead travelling from any location in the ten provinces of Zimbabwe or even from the peri-urban areas of Harare. Only those participants visiting Harare for more than 24 hours (and thus staying at least one night), were selected to participate. The age requirement for the study sample was 18 years and above, with the participants' main purpose of traveling into Harare either to buy or sell goods. In the research process the collection of extensive personal narratives was undertaken of the mobilities and daily experiences of traders. Thematic analysis of these narratives furnishes additional insight into the everyday lived experiences of domestic informal business tourists.

### 3. Results

The findings are presented on four themes concerning unconventional tourism mobilities in an African business city. The first section reveals the characteristics of participants in this 'unconventional form of tourism'. In the second, attention turns to the attractions of Harare for the mobilities of informal domestic business travellers. The third centres on the reasons for involvement in these mobilities. Finally, the focus pivots to explore facets of the organization and rhythms of these mobilities which constitute the basis of the informal business economy. Details concerning the organization of these businesses, their challenges and impacts are explored elsewhere (Makoni, 2024). Throughout the discussion and analysis extensive use is made of the personal narratives provided by the travellers.

#### 3.1. Profile of unconventional business travellers

The demographic and income profile of the 400 respondents is captured on Table 1.

Several points must be observed. First, is that the findings reveal male dominance in the activity of domestic informal business tourism (Table 1). This result stands in contrast to other studies on informality and informal trade in sub-Saharan Africa, which highlight the dominance of women and particularly in informal cross-border trading (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2025; Chitaukire, 2026). The leading reason put forward for women's high level of representation in much of Africa's informal trade economy of Africa relates to limited formal sector opportunities for women. In the Zimbabwe experience since the early 2000s the formal economy crumbled with minimal formal job opportunities available both for men and women. The higher level of male participation in the informal economy of domestic trading must therefore be viewed against this backdrop that in Zimbabwe the

informal economy increasingly has been the only livelihood option available for unemployed males seeking to survive the chronic national situation of poverty (Moyo & Gumbo, 2021). Young males graduating from high schools and higher training institutions resort to informal livelihoods in the wake of challenges in entering the formal job market (Magidi & Gwekwerere, 2024).

Second, the average age of domestic informal business tourists was 30 years; 81% of respondents were below 40 years of age. The research discloses the domestic informal business tourism economy in Zimbabwe attracts young adults and those with family responsibilities with dependents to provide or supplement household income. Most people participating in the domestic informal business tourism economy would be viewed as young adults, many are married couples/parents with dependants. These demographics signal that their participation in this economy is for the support (if not) survival of their families. A segment of the cohort of young adults below 30 years were engaged in domestic trading because of the limited jobs within the formal economy following graduation from higher learning/tertiary institutions. For an older cohort of participants, as there is no welfare support system, most find themselves within this segment of the informal economy in Harare as a means for basic survival.

Three, arguably, this demographic profile must be understood in relation to the employment problems within the Zimbabwean formal economy. Table 1 reveals most study participants had a good academic background. The strong educational background of these unconventional tourists contrasts with the analysis of other observers that participation in the informal economy is an activity for individuals who do not have relevant qualifications for entry into the formal sector (Nshimbi, 2020). The importance of having a good educational background is to confer competitive advantage for running and sustaining an informal business (Magidi, 2025).

Four, the study reveals these unconventional tourists in Harare have a considerable number of

**Table 1.** Profile of Harare's unconventional business travellers (n=400)

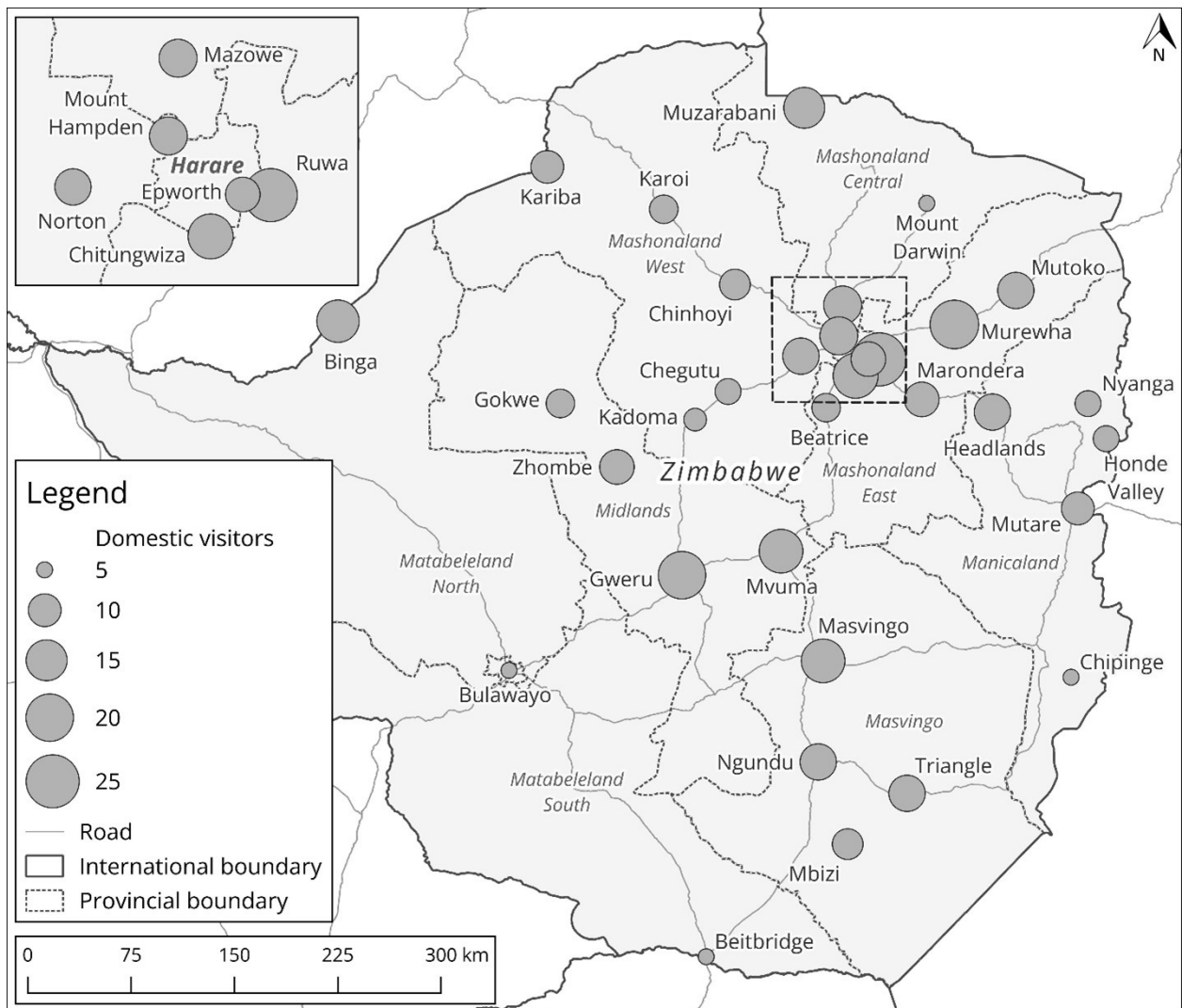
<b>Gender</b>	60% male
<b>Age</b>	60% age 30-39 years; 21% age; 21-29 years
<b>Education</b>	63% completed secondary school and 9% with University degrees; 10 % primary school; 9% no formal education
<b>Household dependants</b>	20% None; 16% Between 1-3 dependants; 33% Between 4-6 dependants; 20% Between 7 and 10 dependants; 11% More than 10 dependants.
<b>Monthly earnings</b>	85% more than US\$ 300; 43% more than US \$ 500

Source: authors

dependants reinforcing that one of the main reasons for participation is basic household support; 80% of the participants have at least one family member that depends on their support. This confirms domestic informal business tourism is a vital household activity and supports local social structures. The income data suggests 43% of the study participants secure a return of over US\$ 500 per month from their business, a finding which underlines the viability of the domestic informal business tourism for sustaining livelihoods in Zimbabwe.

In terms of source areas of these unconventional tourists Figure 2 shows the spatial patterns of tourism mobilities at the most fine-grained level of individual settlements. Several points are of note. First, is the widespread geographical nature of these unconventional business tourists visiting Harare and correspondingly the importance of this economy for settlements throughout Zimbabwe. Unquestionably,

Harare is the central axis of the national economy of domestic informal business tourism. Its significance and nationwide reach is demonstrated by the finding that all ten provinces of the country were represented. Participants originated from 45 different settlements, including Beitbridge on the border with South Africa. Second, despite the widespread character of these mobilities, an unevenness in the geographical patterns is observable (Fig. 2). Almost half of tourists derived from settlements located within a 100 km radius (or approximately 90-minute drive) from Harare. At a provincial scale, almost two-thirds of visitors were accounted for by Mashonaland East (23%), Midlands (16%), Mashonaland West (13%) and Manicaland (13%). Three, it is notable Zimbabwe's other leading cities (namely Bulawayo, Gweru and Mutare), supply only a relatively small share (less than 10%) of total informal business tourists to Harare. The proximate



**Fig. 2.** The geographical origins of informal business tourists visiting Harare  
Source: authors

settlements in the peri-urban fringe of Harare contribute 11% of the total. The greatest flows of informal business tourists emanate from smaller urban centres and towns, which together account for over half (55%) of the cohort of domestic informal business tourists. Further, a significant flow of informal business tourists to Harare occurs from Zimbabwe's rural areas which account for nearly one-quarter of the informal business tourists in the nation's capital.

The most significant individual settlements were recorded as Ruwa and Murewa in Mashonaland East, the city of Gweru, Chitungwiza in peri-urban Harare, Mazoe in Mashonaland Central, and the rural settlements of Binga in Matabeleland North and of Muzarabani in Mashonaland Central (see Figure 2). The reasons for the flows from these individual areas require detailed investigation. However, some observations can be offered concerning the importance of Ruwa, Murewa and Gweru as source regions. Gweru was the largest city represented. This can be linked to the Zimbabwean government's initiative during the early 2000s to address poverty through the establishment of flea markets designed to support the informal economy. Harare and Gweru were key strategic locations of these initiatives. As Harare is the hub for Zimbabwe's informal economy, local flea market traders in Gweru see the capital as their key supply base for the goods that they would come and sell at the 'Global Flea Market' which was established in Gweru. Murewa is a notable small town for informal business tourists. The town is a major agricultural supplier of Harare, with farmers travelling from this area and its rural surrounds with a variety of fresh produce, including vegetables, fruits and crops, to sell in Harare markets. Ruwa is a small settlement area situated 23km from Harare. Formerly an agricultural area, the town was developed as a growth point as part of the support for urban development in Zimbabwe between 1980 and 1990 (Nyandoro & Muzorewa, 2017). Given that Ruwa was a satellite settlement with limited space for adequate infrastructure to support provision of all the necessary goods and services needed by residents, the settlement depends on Harare for essential services and as supply base for the town's informal business tourists.

### 3.2. Harare as business city destination

The research explored further the reasons for choice of Harare as the preferred location for domestic informal business tourists. Several factors can be extracted from a thematic analysis of the interviews. The first (and most important) is the scope of market opportunities that Harare offers as a result of the size

of the city's population, the shortages of most goods because of the diminished formal economy, and the potential of traders to access and purchase goods for resale in their home areas. As the national capital and primate city, Harare represents the location providing the biggest opportunities for buying and selling goods. The comparative advantages of Harare against other cities, towns and smaller settlements were regularly flagged by traders. Typical responses of interviewees were: "*Harare has more business opportunities in the informal economy than other major cities in Zimbabwe*" (Male trader [Gweru] 38yrs) and "*There are many people coming to buy things sold in the flea markets of Harare, compared to anywhere else in this country*" (Female trader [Epworth] 36yrs).

It was stressed that Harare was viewed as the nation's 'business city':

*Every day is business day in Harare. There is no buyer and there is no seller. We are in a mix of give and take from each other, that is the reality in Harare. I have customers back in my village, and I have customers here also. I am also a customer too and if you are very slow you lose money because we are all surviving in this buying and selling. On a daily basis you must be up early, Harare never sleeps* (Female trader [Ruwa] 33yrs).

*The reality of Harare is that no one comes to this city to just walk around. They are all coming with business, either to buy or to sell. Some people you just see them standing quietly, but if you go to them you will see they are selling something. When I started coming to Harare, I just came with money and no idea of what to buy. I knew I would get a lot of cheap things here to go and sell back home, since then I have been coming here almost every chance that I get* (Female trader [Headlands] 30yrs).

The relative ease of doing business in Harare's market spaces and streets was another attraction of Harare as a business city:

*It's always packed in Harare streets and flea markets, I enjoy doing business here because every minute I am getting money. The only time you don't see us on Harare pavements is when the police are raiding. But even they cannot stop us, because they have no solution for people to get what we sell in the streets. People will starve if we are stopped*" (Male trader [Zhombe] 37yrs).

For most unconventional business travellers the logical choice of Harare therefore was because of profit considerations. Many of these unconventional tourists supply food products and viewed the

shortages of most types of foodstuffs in Harare as a business opportunity.

*I gather wild plants and fruits in the forests. There are always fruits in the forests in every season and it's easy to make money out of it, because even a dollar is a profit because we don't buy them, we just pick them. I come to Harare to sell my fruits then I use the money to stock things that are hard to find in my village and sell them there (Male trader [Binga] 32yrs).*

*Me and my team spend weeks fishing kapenta in Kariba. And after processing the kapenta, we travel to Harare to sell it in bulk at flea markets or to big shops in the city. We are called sometimes by big companies to supply them with kapenta. It is big business. We decide as a group what to do with the money we get. Usually we share the money and every one of us buys something in Harare to go and sell in Kariba. As for me I buy hats and slops, they sell fast in Kariba because it's very hot there (Male fisherman [Kariba] 36yrs).*

The lack of supplies also of non-foodstuff items makes Harare a destination for certain other informal business tourists. This particular group of traders often connect to the networks of cross-border traders who provision Harare with goods in shortage:

*"I travel to Harare to meet people coming from other countries who sell their goods to me then I sell them on city pavements in Harare. I use my profits to buy things needed in my place and sell to my neighbours" (Female trader [Mazoe] 31yrs).*

Another respondent:

*"This business is not an easy one. You have to be active and not lazy to walk around and get your stock bought. How I do this business is I travel in Harare to different flea markets to buy cheap things that are not there in our village. When I go back home, I go around from door-to-door selling the stuff" (Female trader [Mutoko] 27yrs).*

Overall, the interviews disclosed strong connections between rural and urban areas concerning the provision of goods and services needed by residents of these areas:

*"We have become a big family here. We cannot survive without one another. I sell traditional herbs and African medicines, so I bring the hospital to the people in Harare. I buy solar and refill gas cylinders which I go back to sell in Chinhoyi because there is no electricity" (Male herbalist [Chinhoyi] 36yrs).*

### 3.3. Drivers for unconventional business travel

The research explored the reasons for individuals to enter the economy of informal business tourism in Zimbabwe and revealed a familiar picture of poverty, unemployment, job losses and the necessity to provide support to household dependents or supplement inadequate household incomes even under circumstances when a household member had a formal job. Multiple responses were recorded. In total 88% respondents cited poverty, 80% stated lack of formal employment opportunities, 62% flagged the imperative to provide family support, and 60% stressed either loss of formal job through retrenchment or the inadequacy of incomes received in formal employment that impel individuals to source a supplementary source of household income. Such findings reflect the downward spiral of the Zimbabwean economy as a whole and most especially of the post-2000 advance of informalization (Moyo & Gumbo, 2021). Other factors influencing these unconventional business mobilities were recorded in terms of the increased demand for goods in short supply in Harare (79%), entrepreneurial opportunities (68%) and the flexibility of work in this activity (63%). Once again, these factors are both familiar and unsurprising in the broader context of the collapse of the formal economy of Zimbabwe and align closely to those reported in other Zimbabwe investigations (Moyo & Gumbo, 2021).

The personal narratives collected from respondents give additional insight into the drivers of this unconventional form of tourism mobility. The key compelling push factors of poverty and the absence of formal employment opportunities are well-articulated in three responses offered by vendors from the cities of Bulawayo and Gweru and from a peri-urban settlement of Harare.

*There is nothing, absolutely nothing in Zimbabwe. We are just surviving here but things are not normal to be honest. I just don't know how we make it every day. Many people have no jobs. They just wake up and get into town and spend the whole day just hustling just to get food for the day and small money for the things needed at home. We are not even living from hand to mouth. We are living from hand to mid-air, and it's very painful here (Male trader [Bulawayo] 35yrs).*

*It is not a secret anymore that our country is now a very poor country and our government is not helping at all with our situation that gets worse every day. There are no jobs and things are very expensive. When I started*

*this business in 2008 it was because I wanted to survive poverty and be able to buy and sell things at cheap price* (Male vendor [Gweru] 31yrs).

*Due to the poverty in our country, this business is the only viable solution for us. As traders we need the money to sustain ourselves. Our customers are also poor and they need these goods as cheap as possible, which is how we survive* (Male Trader [Chitungwiza] 43yrs).

One female trader provided a similar perspective on the nexus of poverty and the growth of the economy of domestic informal business tourism:

*"Our living conditions are just beyond poor. Doing this business helps me and my family to be able to get a meal every day, and we are able to buy African medicines from the herbalists who come to Harare because when you go to the clinic, you are told there is no medication. So, this business is very important to us"* (Female trader [Cha Cha Cha] 33yrs).

The core driver of poverty was reiterated also in an interview conducted with a male police officer in Harare whose job responsibilities included the monitoring of the activities of informal market traders and street vendors. He stated as follows:

*"There is only one problem in our country. All the citizens are living in poverty and operating in a black market economy. It is difficult for us to uphold and enforce the law when the situation is like this. That is why sometimes we just leave them to flood the streets and do their businesses"* (Male police officer- Harare).

Several respondents with formal jobs expressed the everyday hardships of urban survival in Zimbabwe and of conditions of 'poverty-in-employment'. For example:

*"It does not matter whether you are employed by the government or a private company, they just do not pay well. We get paid in RTGS (Zimbabwean currency) and that money is useless because it does not even sustain a family for a week. The only option is to get into this business of buying and selling"* (Male trader [Marondera] 39yrs).

Another woman trader responded:

*"I was employed for about 20 years before I started the business of trading. These days everyone needs a job even for us civil servants because our main jobs are like volunteering jobs and we don't get good money at all. So, I decided to start this business because it provides a better employment solution for me"* (Female nurse/shopper [Mvuma] 47yrs).

Those employed in the formal sector often see the informal economy offering better income prospects than formal jobs:

*"I only got a normal job because I needed to have a bank account. In Zimbabwe you cannot open a bank account without a formal paying job. So I did this so I can be able to bank my money that I make in this trading business. My formal job does not pay me well, and sometimes I don't get paid at all. But I am not worried because my trading business in just one week I get three to four times more than my month's salary"* (Male trader [Beitbridge] 31yrs).

Often employment in the informal economy was seen as a 'smart move' to supplement household income, especially by those trapped in poorly paid formal jobs. Supplementing household income was widely considered one of the drivers for unconventional tourism mobilities:

*"Since 2012 my job has not been paying me well. One year we were paid through coupons which was a bit challenging to survive. I was forced to start this business so I can get more money to survive. I have a sick mother and three children who are still going to school. My job alone is not enough for me to take care of all of them"* (Female trader [Gokwe] 37yrs).

Lack of formal employment opportunities and low pay in formal jobs was most strongly articulated by younger and well-educated individuals. Typically,

*"I started this business after high school when I was 18 years old just to get something to do while I was looking for a job"* (Male trader [Karoyi] 24yrs).

It was widely observed among increasing numbers of young adults between the ages of 18- 29 years to view informal trading as an alternative stopgap whilst retaining hopes for formal employment. Key



**Fig. 3.** Zimbabwean youth protest at a political rally in Harare

Source: Makoni, 2024

amongst this cohort are the growth of unemployed university and college graduates:

*"I am an LLB graduate from the University of Zimbabwe. But five years later since my graduation I have been on the streets selling fruits for a living"* (Male trader/university graduate [Chitungwiza] 35yrs).

Figure 3 signals the frustrations of unemployed university graduates engaged in informal trading in urban Zimbabwe.

Overall, a common thread in the interviews was of the role of informal business tourism as a basis for urban survival and for dealing with significant shortages of basic commodities, most notably of foodstuffs. The Shona word used by locals to refer to the situation in Zimbabwe is *"Pakaipa"* which simply translates to "it is bad". The word is slang amongst Zimbabweans as they refer to it in order to encapsulate the daily difficulties they face with regards to bad living conditions, lack of employment, water, electricity and basic community services, shortages of food, and insufficient public transport. For certain respondents the desperate plight of Zimbabweans was viewed the legacy of policies implemented during the 37-year tenure of former President Robert Mugabe. Beyond *Pakaipa*, a small number of interviewees reflected more positively on their entry into Harare's informal trading economy stressing opportunities for incomes and entrepreneurship:

*"This is a very lucrative business, because every day you make money and your customers will tell you what they want and you can know exactly what can sell"* (Male trader [Murewa] 32yrs).

For others, the positive aspects of undertaking unconventional tourism mobilities surrounded flexibility and choice of working days and hours, which did not exist with formal sector jobs. Typically,

*"Our business is flexible because I don't need to sign any paperwork to go and deliver an order to a client. Any time I can get up and deliver orders and collect my*

*money. Even sometimes I have to travel in the evening and make money"* (Female trader [Ruwa] 38yrs).

### 3.4. Organizing travel mobilities

The rhythm and organization of the travel mobilities of domestic informal business traders visiting Harare was scrutinised. Attention was focused variously on the frequency of travel visits, mode of transport, length of stay, nature of accommodation used and participation in non-business-related activities during the stay in Harare.

Table 2 presents findings concerning frequency of visits by these unconventional tourists and their mode of transport between place of residence and Harare. It is evident that there are regular circuits and patterns of travel from the source area of these domestic business tourists for travel into Harare. Most common were travel visits organized on a weekly or monthly basis. For many visitors it was movement determined by the regime of holidays, mainly by schools and Universities. Although frequency of travel varied among participants, it was evident regular rhythms of travel existed. Often these were to ensure sufficient a supply of particular goods for domestic consumption through the channel of the informal economy in Zimbabwe's capital city. Reasons for variability in travel frequency were raised in the qualitative responses:

*Once a week because this is a self-sufficient business I need to survive. I have to make money or my family will go hungry* (Female trader [Chitungwiza] 28yrs).

*Each time a get enough money to go to Harare because sometimes it takes time for my clients back home to pay their debts so I can go to buy more products in Harare* (Male trader [Kwekwe] 35yrs).

*I travel to do this business during school holidays when I have the time to do the business. I wish I can do this every time but I can't because I am a school teacher and*

**Table 2.** Frequency and mode of travel to Harare by the domestic informal business tourists (n=400)

Frequency of travel	%	Mode of transport	%
Once a week	36	Bus	68
Once every two weeks	17	Lorry	14
Once every month	35	Private vehicle by hitch hike	12
During school/University holidays	8	Personal vehicle	6
Other	4		

Source: authors' elaboration

*I will lose my job if I do this during school days. Teaching is not paying but I want to stay so I at least have more years of teaching experience. You never know what the future may bring. But every holiday I come to Harare as many times as I can before we open (Male School Teacher/shopper 37yrs).*

The preferred mode of transportation of informal business tourists travelling to Harare is captured on Table 2. Buses are the most common mode followed by trucks/lorries, and private vehicles. Of note is the business of using private vehicles to pick up and transport ‘hitchhiking’ business travellers. The reasons for choice of transport mode were elaborated by study participants. The advantages of buses linked to the convenience of transporting the goods quickly and safely.

*Bus, because it is cheaper and affordable compared to other modes of transport. Also because I can easily find buses and bus stations (Female trader [Ruwa] 34yrs).*

*I use a bus because it is safer to use a bus. A bus is very reliable (Male trader [Gokwe] 35yrs).*

*I use a bus, because it is the most accessible mode of transport (Female trader [Chiredzi] 30yrs).*

The choice of trucks often related to the load and weight of goods to be transported. Typical responses were *"I use trucks because they can carry a lot of luggage and I don't pay for luggage"* (Male craftsman [Honde Valley] 43yrs) and *"A lorry is good for me because I have a lot of goods to transport to Harare and they can carry [transport] my goods at a very cheap price"* (Male builder [Epworth] 40yrs). Another benefit of trucks was as highlighted: *"I use trucks because police at the roadblocks do not search them"* (Male trader [Mutoko] 37yrs).

As an additional mode of transport beyond buses and lorries, it was discovered that ‘hitch hiking’ and use of private vehicles emerged as a relatively

common mode of travel to Harare by some ‘unconventional business tourists’. Many motorists in Zimbabwe utilize their private vehicles to provide transport services for traders travelling to the city. A female shopper from Ruwa explained the process:

*"I hike to Harare every time I travel. I wait on the main road to Harare with my goods, sometimes private cars stop for me and ask if I am going to Harare. It is good business for them because I pay for myself and my luggage. I think many people with private cars are doing this as a business. I think that is the only reason they are going to Harare, to look for passengers and make money"* (Female shopper [Ruwa] 34yrs).

The activity of ride-hitching was found common even for those traders travelling longer distances:

*"It is convenient for me to hike because buses delay me. The buses also want to charge me more for my luggage, and they don't want to negotiate. Its better with hiking because those guys are desperate to make business so we can negotiate a reasonable price for my luggage. It's a win-win situation really"* (Female trader [Gweru] 30yrs).

Finally, there was a group of the informal business tourists who use their own personal vehicles to travel to Harare and many at times also offer lifts to other domestic informal business tourists who stay within their area and visit Harare. Further, many of those who utilise their personal vehicles are engaged in mobile or car boot trading on the roadsides in Harare. An angler from Kariba indicated as follows:

*"My fish go quicker when I get to Harare. I just have to find busy roads and park my car on the roadside. Many people come to buy there, and sometimes they buy in bulk and place more orders, so I have to make sure that I am back in Harare in no time. It is easier with a car because it's very convenient, even though the drive is long between Harare and Kariba"* (Male Fisherman [Kariba] 34yrs).

**Table 3.** Length of stay and accommodation of informal business tourists (n=400)

Length of stay	%	Accommodation used	%
1-3 nights	40	Accommodated by friends and/or relatives	66
4-6 nights	13	Sleep at bus terminus	12
7-10 nights	35	Sleep at the flea markets	11
11 nights or more	7	Utilise formal accommodation	6
Other	5	Sleep at truck stops	3
		Other	2

Source: authors' elaboration

Table 3 provides the findings concerning length of stay and type of accommodation used by participants during Harare visits. The variability in typical length of stay is clear. Although the largest proportion of visitors are on short stays of between one and three nights, more than 40% of travellers are staying in Harare for at least 7 nights and some visitors for more than two weeks. Shorter stays were mainly from participants originating in the peri-urban areas or Harare or nearby settlements such as Ruwa or Beatrice (Figure 2). In addition, farmers and hunters who are business tourists in Harare indicated short stay periods as their fresh produce sells quickly such that they return home for additional supplies. Further insight into the rhythm of stays emerged from the interviews. The following responses were revealing of the different influences upon business length of stay.

*"5 days maximum because I travel to Harare to buy fresh produce so I spend that time travelling around then leave immediately once I have got enough to take back home"* (Female shopper [Ruwa] 34yrs).

*"Normally two weeks, depending on the work. Sometimes it takes a bit of time for our stock to finish. Sometimes I stay longer here because there will be a lot of roadblocks in the highway, so I have to wait a bit until the road blocks are not many"* (Female trader [Gweru] 30yrs).

*"I stay as long as my products are still available. I only leave Harare to go and restock once my products are finished"* (Male farmer [Murewa] 36yrs).

The issue of accommodation of informal domestic business tourists in Harare was found a crucial aspect of organising the mobilities of traders. The types of accommodation used by domestic informal business tourists in Harare are recorded on Table 3. This pattern reinforces the dramatically different character of informal business tourists as compared to the formal economy of business tourism which is structured around Harare's network of upmarket hotels and convention centres (Makoni & Rogerson, 2023). Barely 6% of respondents make use of formal accommodation services and even these are budget forms of accommodation. Overwhelmingly, the most common pattern of accommodation is that these unconventional tourists stay at the homes of friends and relatives (VFR) in Harare. It was revealed that 66% of domestic informal business tourists use VFR accommodation. As articulated by the following responses:

*"When I visit Harare, my boyfriend who stays there accommodates me. He has been supportive since I started*

*this business and he is always fetching me from the bus station when I have a lot of stock, and he drops me off again when I am leaving Harare"* (Female fisherwoman [Norton] 32yrs) and *"A friend of mine offers me a place to sleep at her pharmacy. I have to get up very early before the business of the day starts so I can prepare and leave before my friend starts work"* (Female trader [Muzarabani] 32yrs).

Beyond VFR accommodation, over a quarter of respondents indicated they mainly sleep at bus terminals, flea markets or truck stops. The reasons for choosing such locations varied but mostly concerned cost and safety considerations.

*"I sleep at the flea market because it is accessible to everything. My customers come to me, and my goods are safe because I am close to the bus station and it is easier to carry my products when I am here when the police come"* (Male vendor [Gweru] 33yrs).

*"We spend the day in the city going around selling our products, then in the evening we ask the bus drivers of the parked buses to let us sleep in the buses. We normally buy them food or pay them small money to allow us to stay there. It is a very cheap way to get accommodation"* (Female trader [Gweru] 31yrs).

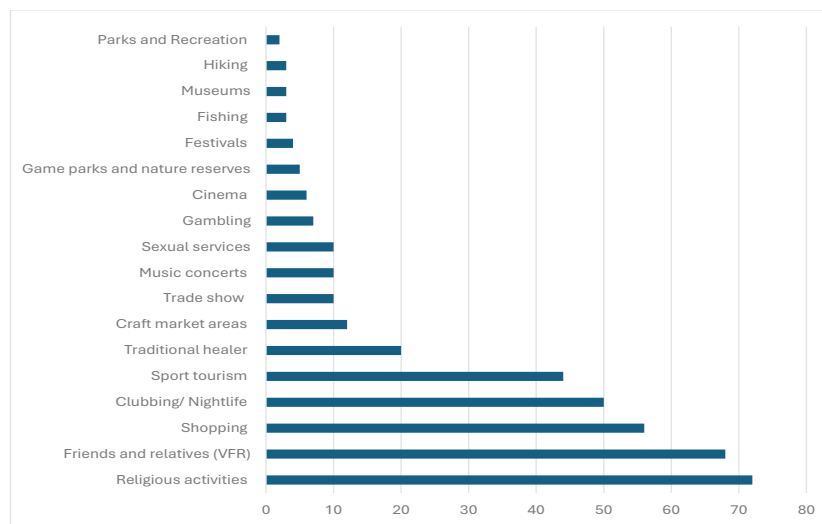
*"My accommodation is at the market where I conduct my business, it is cheap and I get to stay with my goods"* (Male builder [Epworth] 40yrs).

For other informal business tourists in Harare the accommodation challenge was addressed in different ways. Some male traders indicated that prostitutes accommodate them when they travel to Harare. For other individuals, different channels of accommodation were pursued:

*"I do not worry about accommodation, just a place to sleep during my days here. In most times I sleep here at the open spaces because it is the only place safe and available and where everyone can see"* (Male craftsman [Gweru] 35yrs).

*"It is difficult to find accommodation, I sleep in queues at Makombe [the passport office in Harare] so that the police will think I am just coming to do passport"* [Translated from Ndebele language] (Female shopper [Gweru] 30yrs).

Finally, the study explored the non-business activities undertaken by these unconventional tourists outside of their work commitments. The findings on Figure 3 therefore provide a first insight into the 'bleisure' experience from the perspective of informal domestic business travellers operating in the urban



**Fig. 4.** Non-business activities undertaken in Harare  
Source: author, n=400

Global South. These results are dramatically different to those recorded concerning the typical leisure pursuits of affluent Northern business travellers (cf. Batala & Slevitch, 2024; Makoni & Rogerson, 2024).

The findings on Figure 4 reflect that most participants engaged in multiple 'non-business' activities whilst in Harare. The most common related to religion and either going to local churches or visiting prophets or pastors. Overall, 72% of informal business tourists to the city engaged in some form of religious activities in Harare. The issue of spirituality marks out another dimension of the distinctive character of these unconventional tourists in the African city. Religious visits often were linked to the fact that many travellers engaged in some form of spiritual consultation prior to undertaking their journeys to Harare. As indicated on Figure 4 other sizeable activities (involving at least 40% of informal business tourists) were visits to friends and relatives, personal shopping, attending sports events, and enjoying Harare's night-time economy. The list of other 'bleisure' activities recorded is highly varied and includes visits to traditional healers, craft markets, attending music concerts, cinema, gambling, and visiting prostitutes. Of note is that trips to leisure parks, nature reserves and city tours involved less than 5% of the sample of 400 respondents.

#### 4. Conclusion

In extending the frontiers of tourism scholarship Timothy (2025) stresses the imperative to think differently and move beyond traditional perspectives and embrace atypical, unconventional or non-traditional forms of tourism. Arguably, tourism researchers have not moved far enough to understand the experiences of the makers and sellers of tourism, and not least of informal business tourists in the Global South. It is evident therefore that unconventional tourism mobilities merit greater attention in international tourism scholarship (Timothy et al., 2022; Irimiás et al., 2023; Timothy et al., 2023). In cities of the Global South where informality is the dominant feature of urbanization the knowledge gap is most apparent (Dovey, 2025; Finn, 2025; Azunre & Cobbinah, 2026).

This exploratory study casts new light on the mobilities of informal business travellers operating in one African business city. Across much of urban sub-Saharan Africa with informality the norm, the activities and mobilities of these unconventional tourists represent the predominant form of business travel. Put simply, informal business travel is the 'conventional' form of business tourism occurring in Africa's rapidly growing and informalizing cities. Although some scholarly attention has been given to mapping the mobilities and dynamics of cross-border traders, which constitute the international component of informal business tourism in Africa, as yet the flows and character of domestic informal

business tourists remain only poorly documented in urban tourism literature. The study was designed to address this lacuna concerning domestic business tourism (cf. Kifworo & Dube, 2023). Its novel contribution is to open a window on the characteristics and mobilities of informal business tourism in African cities. The value of collecting extended personal narratives of the mobilities and daily experiences of traders was demonstrated to provide insight into the everyday experiences of domestic informal business tourists. In final comment, this study seeks to be positioned as a catalyst for further research in urban Africa into the organisation and impacts of informal domestic business tourism and more generally into greater understanding of unconventional tourism mobilities as a whole.

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