Unpacking the Drivers of Gentrification: A Systematic Review of Selected African Countries

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1 ABSTRACT

Gentrification is a globally urban phenomenon that has relatively been researched. However, the drivers of gentrification remain a subject of ongoing enquiry. Consequently, this literature review examines the core drivers of gentrification within Africa, offering a comprehensive synthesis of key findings across disciplines to deepen our understanding of this complex process. The investigation employs bibliometric analysis and the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) protocol to examine the literature on the drivers of gentrification in African cities. Using VOSviewer version 1.6.20 software, the study analyses trends, citations and authorship patterns to identify dominant themes and scholarly networks. Drawing from a comprehensive dataset of articles published in the Scopus database, the paper clearly highlights the drivers of gentrification scholarship in the region through an analysis of relevant keywords, co-occurrences, and co-citation patterns. Findings reveal economic, socio-cultural shift, political and institutional factors emerge as critical drivers in directing gentrification trajectories. By synthesizing fragmented insights from existing literature, this review addresses key research gaps, particularly the lack of integrated analyses bridging economic, social and political dimensions of gentrification. In addition to advancing theoretical understanding, this review offers practical insights for urban policy. It emphasizes the need for context-sensitive urban planning strategies, inclusive housing policies, and institutional mechanisms that prioritize social equity and minimize displacement risks. This review contributes to the broader discourse of urban change and inequality, providing both scholarly clarity and actionable recommendations for fostering more equitable and sustainable urban development in gentrifying cities.

Keywords: Gentrification, Urban transformation, Global Capital, Housing policies, Systematic Review

2 INTRODUCTION

Gentrification, a process involving the transformation of urban spaces through economic and demographic shifts, has become a salient topic of inquiry in the global South. While much of the scholarship on gentrification originates from the global North, the African setting presents unique socio-economic, political, and spatial dynamics that warrant dedicated examination. Africa, characterized by rapid urbanization, persistent inequality, and diverse cultural landscapes, offers a rich yet underexplored field for understanding the drivers and implications of gentrification (Frenzel et al., 2022; Ntakana et al., 2023). Urban centers across the continent are undergoing significant transformations influenced by global capital flows, local governance policies, and the aspirations of a growing middle class. These changes often result in the displacement of marginalised communities, reshaping the socio-spatial fabric of cities. For instance, proactive upzoning policies aimed at economic development frequently exacerbate displacement pressures on low-income residents (Denoon-Stevens & Nel, 2020). Similarly, the commodification of cultural and historical urban spaces through tourism and digital technologies has intensified gentrification processes in cities such as Cape Town and Johannesburg (Frenzel et al., 2022). These trends illustrate the intersection of global market forces and local urban governance in driving urban transformation. Despite these developments, the discourse on gentrification in Africa remains fragmented. The majority of studies focus on isolated case studies, lacking a systematic synthesis that consolidates diverse insights into a cohesive narrative. Furthermore, existing research often neglects the broader socio-political and economic conditions unique to African urban settings. Critical questions remain unanswered: How do informal settlement dynamics influence gentrification? What role do international aid and development agencies play in shaping urban spaces? How can governance frameworks better address the displacement of vulnerable communities?

This gap in the literature highlights the need for a comprehensive review of the drivers of gentrification across African cities. While scholars, including Ntakana et al. (2023) advocate for inclusive urban space production models, practical implementation remains limited, particularly in addressing the socio-economic disparities exacerbated by gentrification. Similarly, Breetzke et al. (2018) highlight the disproportionate impacts of urban transformation on historically disadvantaged groups, yet policies to mitigate these effects remain underdeveloped. This research addresses these gaps by synthesizing existing studies to provide a systematic understanding of the drivers of gentrification in Africa. Through integrating insights from diverse sources, it aims to identify region-specific factors influencing gentrification and propose pathways for more equitable urban development. This effort not only contributes to the academic discourse but also offers practical guidance for urban planners navigating the challenges of urban transformation.

This paper provides a systematic review of the key drivers of gentrification in African cities, synthesizing fragmented insights from existing literature to bridge economic, social and political dimensions of urban transformation. It begins by outlining the methodological framwork, which includes bibliometric analysis and the PRISMA protocol, before presenting an overview of publication trends, co-citation networks, and thematic clusters emerging in gentrification research. The paper then explores the dominant drivers of gentrification – economic shifts, socio-cultural changes, political and institutional influences – highlighting their interplay in different urban contexts. Through an in-depth discussion of keyword co-occurences and case studies from cities such as Johannesburg, Cape Town, Accra, and Lagos, the paper critically examines how gentrification unfolds across diverse African landscapes. The findings underscore the need for inclusive urban policies, equitable housing strategies, and governance frameworks that mitigate displacement risks. By integrating bibliometric insights with broader theoretical debates, this review contributes to the discourse on urban change and offers practical recommendations for fostering socially just and sustainable urban development in Africa.

3 METHODS

This study employed Scopus as its primary data source because of its comprehensive coverage and high reliability within the academic community. Scopus offers a broad spectrum of scholarly outputs, indexing approximately 25,000 journals from over 5000 international publishers. This extensive database facilitates a robust analysis of scholarly trends, particularly for research pushed from 1996 onward (Magadán Díaz & Rivas García, 2022). While other databases, such as Web of Science (WOS), were considered for this study, Scopus was ultimately chosen because it provided more accurate and comprehensive results. Unlike WOS, which leans more towards scientific disciplines, Scopus offers a broader range of coverages, making it better suited for the study's objectives.

A bibliometric analysis and systematic review were conducted using Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta Analysis (PRISMA) protocol to trace the evolution of research on the causes of gentrification, particularly in African cities. This methodological approach provided a rigorous framework for assessing the impact of key studies and sources, identifying dominant themes, and understanding the development of gentrification scholarship within the global and African contexts.

3.1 Bibliometric Analysis

The bibliometric dataset was retrieved on January 25, 2025, using the Scopus database with the keyword search "Causes AND of AND Gentrification[1]", which inititially yielded 5,853 documents. After removing 10 duplicates, 5,843 documents remained. Titles, abstracts, and keywords were screened and refined, leading to the exclusion of 26 documents that did not meet the inclusion criteria. To narrow the focus to Africa, the keyword "Africa" was added, limiting the study to English-language documents. This resulted in 1,082 documents and after removing 10 duplicates, 1,072 documents remained. A detailed review revealed that gentrification studies were concentrated in 15 African countries: South Africa, Ghana, Nigeria, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Tanzania, Rwanda, Morocco, Ethiopia, Egypt, Cameroon, Burkina Faso, Benin and Algeria. These countries are likely studied more frequently due to better data availability, academic interest,

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[1] While this paper identifies the drivers of gentrification, it is important to note that the bibliometric review used the search terms "Causes AND of AND Gentrification" instead of " Drivers of Gentrification" because it yileded better results. In this study, the terms drivers and causes of gentrification are used interchangeably and hold the same meaning.

urbanisation patterns, and socio-economic development trends. Following further screening, 1,023 documents were excluded for not meeting eligibility criteria, leaving 49 documents for final analysis.
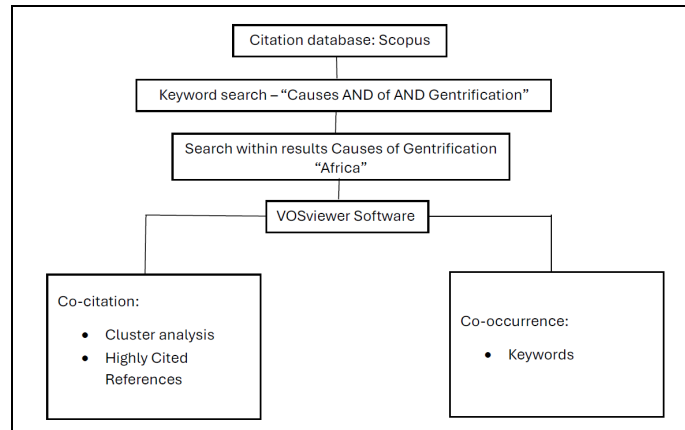

Fig. 1: Bibliometric review used for this study.

The retrieved data were saved and exported as a CSV file in Excel, illustrating publication trends and citation patterns over time. For further analysis and visualisation, the data were converted into plain text format and imported into Vosviewer, a tool that enabled an in-depth exploration of the dataset. Vosviewer was used to map citation networks and author collaborations, helping to identify dominant themes and emerging trends in the literature (see Fig. 1). This systematic bibliometric approach provided valuable insights into the development of gentrification studies in Africa within the broader global academic discourse.

3.2 PRISMA Framework for Systematic review

To ensure rigor and transparancy, this study followed the PRISMA protocol, consisting of a 27-item checklist and a four-phase flow diagram (see Fig. 2), which offered a systematic framework for accurately selecting the sample database and critically assessing systematic reviews (Maier et al., 2020). The PRISMA methodology was applied to identify, screen, and assess relevant studies on the causes of gentrification in Africa. The initial Scopus search using the keywords "Causes AND of AND Gentrification" and "Africa" yielded 5,853 documents. After removing duplicates, 5,843 records were screened based on titles, abstracts, and keywords. Studies that did not align with the research objectives were excluded, refining the dataset to 5,817 documents. Notably, no prior bibliometric studies specifically examining gentrification in Africa were identified.
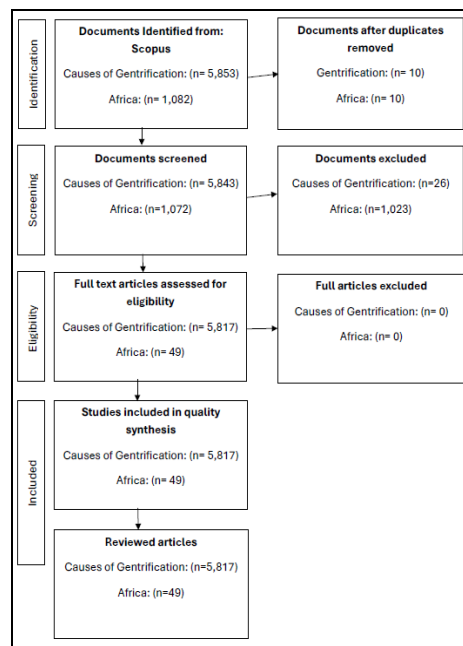

Fig. 2: The PRISMA flow diagram used to identify, screen and include papers for the bibliometric review.

A final eligibility assessment was conducted to ensure that selected studies directly addressed gentrification in African cities. After applying strict inclusion and exclusion criteria, 49 documents were retained for the systematic review. The PRISMA approach ensured that only the most relevant, high-quality studies were included, contributing to a structured synthesis of existing knowledge on the drivers of gentrification. This methodology provides a solid foundation for further research and policy discussions on the impact of urban transformation processes in Africa.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Distribution of Gentrification Drivers Research in Africa

Fig. 3 illustrates the annual publication and citations on gentrification drivers in Africa from 2011 to 2025. The first significant work in this area, by Cumming in 2011, explored spatial resilience and how factors such as location and connectivity influence the resilience of complex systems, using diverse case studies to highlight the importance of spatial variation in addressing ecological and social issues (Cumming, 2011). Between 2011 and 2015, publications were minimal, with only three recorded, and citations peaked in 2011 (206 citations) but dropped sharply afterward. This suggests limited engagement with the topic, reflecting the underexplored nature of gentrification drivers in Africa during this period, aligning with Loretta Lees' 2011 call to broaden gentrification studies beyond the Global North's perspectives (Lees, 2012, cited in Ah Goo, 2018).
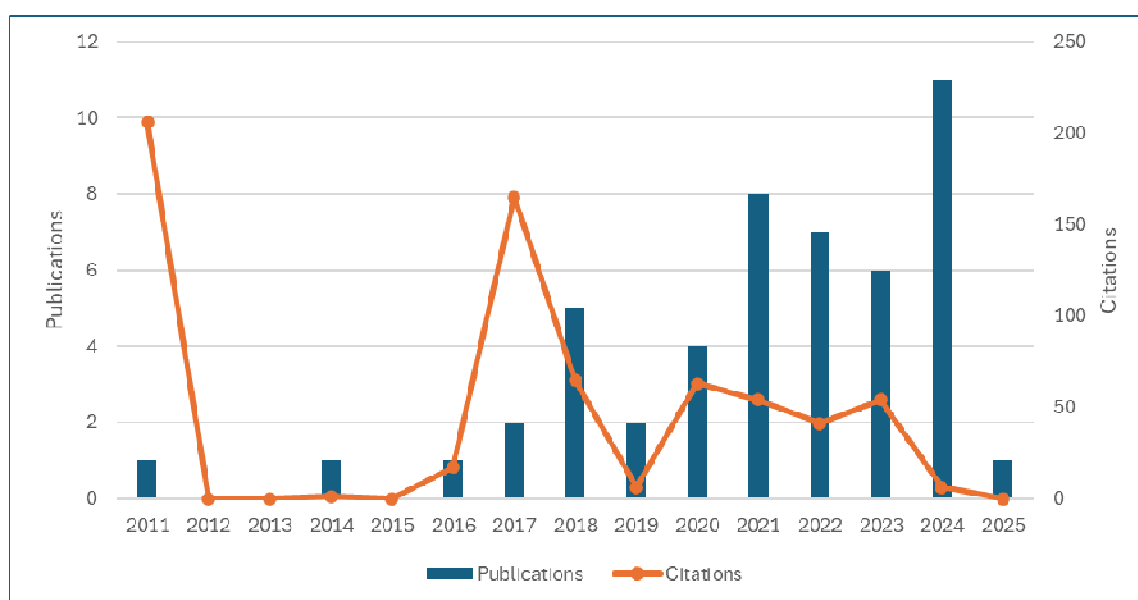
Fig. 3: The annual number of publications and citations on drivers of Gentrification in Africa from 2011 to 2025.

Between 2016 and 2021, there was a significant increase in both publications and citations, with a peak of eight publications in 2021. This growth was likely driven by increasing scholarly interest in urbanisation and socio-spatial transformations in African cities, linked to rising urbanisation and economic development on the continent (Lees et al., 2008). Gentrification in the Global South became associated with industrialization, modernization, and suburbanization (Lees, 2014). From 2022 to 2025, publication numbers fluctuated, with a decrease in 2023 (six publications) followed by a sharp increase in 2024 (11 publications). However, 2025 saw only one publication, possibly due to incomplete data or declining interest, while citations decreased significantly after 2021, possibly reflecting the academic lifecycle and factors such as funding, shifting academic priorities, and evolving research methodologies.

4.2 Keyword co-occurrence analysis

We conducted a co-occurrence analysis of author keywords related to studies on gentrification drivers in Africa, using bibliographic data from 49 publications indexed in the Scopus database (see Fig. 4). Four distinct thematic clusters emerged, represented by red, green, blue, and yellow. Each cluster highlights key themes, offering insights into urban transformation and gentrification in the region. The red cluster is characterized by keywords such as adaptive management, climate change, environmental justice, equality

and equity. The green cluster, closely linked to the red, focuses on democracy, development, displacement, gentrification and metropolitan transformation. Empirical studies illustrate how these themes have played out in African cities. In Johannesburg's inner city, Ah Goo (2018) examines how post-apartheid migration patterns contributed to urban overcrowding, rising crime, and the out-migration of the white middle class. In response government-led regenerative initiatives, such as City Improvement Districts (CIDs) and the Johannesburg Development Agency (JDA), sought to revitalize the area through property-led urban renewal. However, programs like the Better Buildings Programme (BBP), which aimed to restore deteriorated structures, often resulted in the displacement of low-income residents. Similarly, in Kumasi, Ghana, urban transformation displaced low-income residents to the city's outskirts. Rather than being restored or repurposed, traditional buildings were demolished, erasing architectural heritage and reshaping the social fabric (Khambule et al., 2023). Sutton (2020, p.89) describes gentrification as a visible expression of economic inequality, where rising costs – whether for housing or everyday goods – push out marginalised communities, deepening social exclusion and limiting access to essential urban spaces. Environmental justice concerns also interact with gentrification. Reckien et al. (2017) argue that anti-sprawl policies, while aimed at controlling urban expansion, often exacerbate housing affordability issues, displacing low-income populations in a process known as environmental gentrification. These dynamics reveal how gentrification in African cities is shaped not only by economic and social factors but also by environmental and governance-related processes.
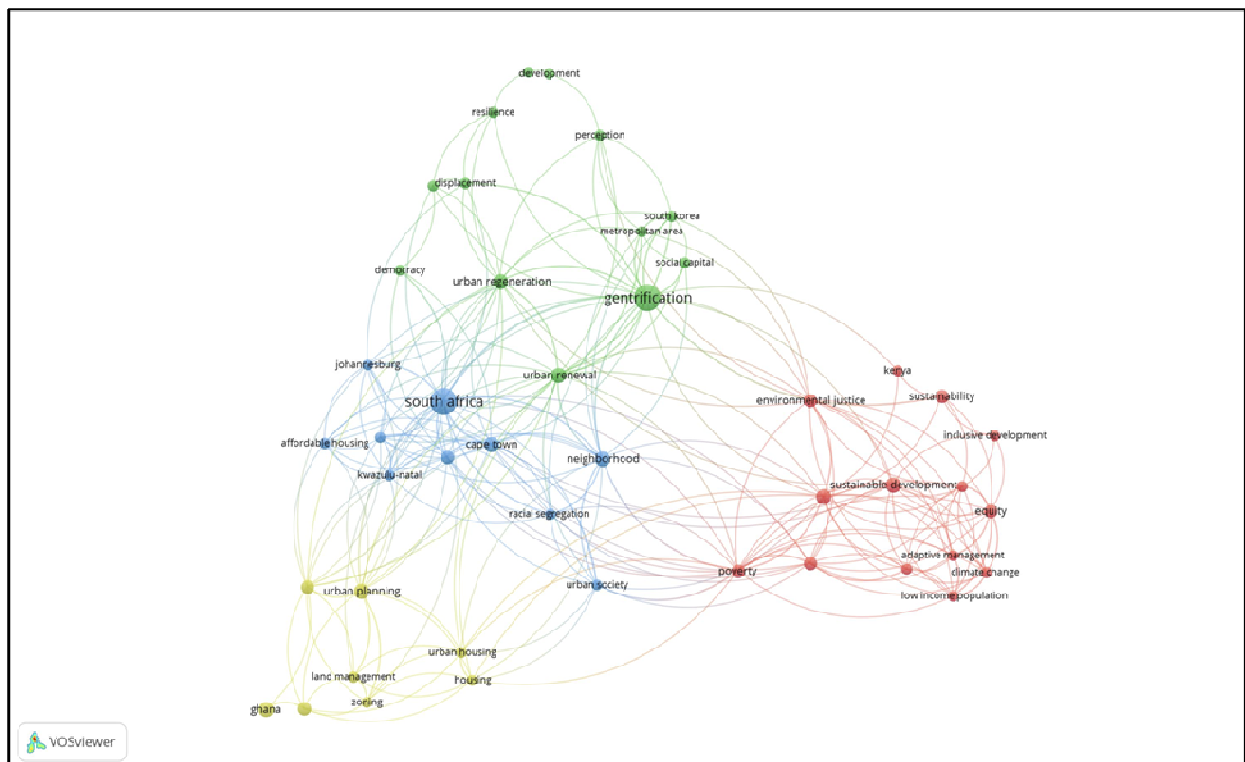

Fig. 4: Co-occuring keywords on drivers of gentrification in Africa on the Scopus.

The third, blue cluster, is primarily centered on the following keywords: affordable housing, Cape Town, Johannesburg, KwaZulu-Natal, and neighbourhood dynamics. Gentrification in Cape Town's Bo-Kaap area has been driven by increasing demand, limited development and escalating property costs, all of which place pressure on long-term residents. Despite efforts by the community to resist large-scale change, grassroots improvements are slowly reshaping the neighbourhood (Michell & Le Roux, 2023). In a similar manner, Neluheni & Boshoff (2022) analyse the transformation of a once-abandoned industrial district into the Maboneng Precinct, a mixed-use area that began its regeneration in 2008. The process was led by private developers, while the middle class played a pivotal role in fostering a 'creative class economy,' which was expected to drive economic growth and urban revitalization. Connected to the blue cluster is the yellow cluster. The yellow cluster's prominent keywords are Ghana, urban planning, zoning, land management and housing – are intrinsically connected. In Appolonia, a rural community in Ghana, the commodification of land in a rapidly urbanizing context has disrupted social ties and access rights, leading to increased economic and social inequalities. Gentrification has intensified dispossession, as urban pressures reshape land use in a

previously rural community, deepening the divide between long-time and newer residents (Ablo & Bertelsen, 2022). Geyer (2024) further examines the impact of government-led initiatives, such as upzoning in two case studies: in Eveline Street, Namibia, the formalization of business rights and municipal support drove investment, transforming residential properties into commercial spaces. Similarly, in the Eastern Cape, public-led industrial development, including industrial estates and the Coega Special Economic Zone, incentives private investment through affordable land, infrastructure, and tax rebates, fostering industrial grow and job creation.

4.3 Co-citation of gentrification research

The scope of drivers of gentrification research in Africa appear through four distinct focal areas. The primary focus, in red, is followed by additional focal points in green, blue, and lime. To ensure accurate classification of each cluster, a detailed review and analysis of the original papers within each group were conducted. The primary cluster (red) includes research subfields focused on spatial planning, urban policy, government regulations, inclusive and equitable development, sustainable urban development and urban tissue. The secondary cluster (green) represents subfields associated with climate change, environment and urbanisation, adaptation and mitigation policies and urban development processes. The blue cluster represents research focused on zoning guidelines, redevelopment plans, urban planning and transformation. Lastly, the lime cluster land conversion, conservation and development, subdivision and biodiversity.

Author	Documents	Citations	Total link strength
Reckien, D	2	195	0
Tyrrell, P	2	6	0
Takyi, S	2	9	0
Ntakana, K	2	2	0

Table. 1: Co-citation of authors

In the analysis of the co-citation of authors (Table 1), we found that certain authors showed no links to one another. This lack of connections suggests that their work is independent, with no clear overlap or intersection in their research topics within the existing literature (Mas-Tur et al., 2021). This could point to a gap in the connection between these fields or indicate the development of distinct, separate areas of research. The authors in each cluster play an important role in shaping the research trajectory of their respective subfields. For example, Reckien, D (195 citations) in the green cluster, Tyrrell, P (with 6 citations) in the lime cluster, Takyi, S (with 9 citations) in the blue cluster and Ntakana, K (with 2 citations) in the red cluster. Tyrrell et al., (2021)examines how land transformation in southern Kenya, driven by high land prices, reduces biodiversity and regional sustainability, while highlighting the challenges of maintaining conservation areas due to land speculation. Ntakana (2024) explores the need for inclusive urban real estate development in South Africa, presenting innovative strategies to promote equity, accessibility, and sustainability in urban environments, based on a study of built environment professionals and statistical analysis. Anaafo et al., (2021)[2] explores how the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the link between urban planning and public health, proposing an agenda for transforming urban planning in Ghana to create more just, healthier, and inclusive cities. Reckien et al., (2017) examines how climate change events, such as heatwaves, flooding and landslides, amplify urban inequality, with socioeconomic status and gender as key factors, and offers solutions to address equity concerns in urban climate adaptation and mitigation efforts.

4.4 Institutions publishing on drivers of gentrification

Identifying the most active institutions in a field can provide valuable insights into the origins of influential research, reveal potential biases or gaps in the existing literature, and inform strategic decisions regarding future funding allocations and collaborative partnerships. Table 2 presents the institutions that have contributed the most to gentrification research in Africa between 2011 and 2025. A minimum requirement of two documents per organization was established and out of a total of 137 organisations, four met this threshold. None of the four items in the network were connected to each other (see Table 2), suggesting that

the institutions publishing on gentrification drivers in Africa could be working independently rather than collaborating. Institutions could also be focusing on different aspects of gentrification, leading to a lack of overlap in citations and co-authorship networks.

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[2] Please note that Takyi, S is a co-author of Anaafo et al. (2021), which is why Takyi, S appears in the co-citation instead of Anaafo et al.

Organisation	Documents	Citations	Total link strength
Chungnam National University, Daejeon, South Korea	2	18	0
Department of Estate Management, Kumasi Technical University, Kumasi, Ghana	2	23	0
Department of Wildland Resources, Utah State University, Logan, Ut, United States	2	6	0
University of Johannesburg, South Africa	2	0	0

Table. 2: Most productive institutions publishing on drivers of gentrification in Africa.

The Department of Estate Management at Kumasi Technical University, Ghana ranks first, having produced two documents with 23 citations. Chungnam National University in Daejeon, South Korea, ranks second, with two documents and 18 citations. The Department of Wildland Resources at Utah State University, United States has published two documents with six citations, while the University of Johannesburg, South Africa produced 2 documents with no citations. The ranking order remains unchanged, as none of the four institutions exhibit any co-authorship network.

4.5 Full text analysis

Gentrification in African cities is influenced by a range of socio-economic, political, and cultural factors that vary across regions. Asante and Helbrecht, (2018) highlight the role of urban redevelopment policies in Ghana, particularly in Accra, where housing renewal projects have been instrumental in driving gentrification. Their study stresses that while these initiatives aim to modernize urban infrastructure, they often result in the displacement of low-income communities, highlighting the tension between development and equity. Similarly, Afolayan (2024) explores gentrification dynamics in Lagos, Nigeria, focusing on the intersection of property market liberalization and urban renewal. The research reveals that the influx of private capital into real estate markets has led to significant spatial transformations, with wealthier populations occupying formerly low-income neighbourhoods. This trend has exacerbated socio-economic inequalities, highlighting the need for regulatory frameworks to balance private interests with social goals. In East Africa, Tyrrell et al. (2021) examine the impacts of infrastructure development on urban transformation in Nairobi. They note that projects such as new highway constructions and commuter rail systems have catalysed gentrification, particularly in neighbourhoods previously occupied by lower-income groups. While these developments improve connectivity and economic opportunities, they often marginalize vulnerable populations who are priced out of upgraded areas.

From a cultural perspective, Tyrrell et al. (2021) analyse the role of heritage preservation in gentrification processes in Mombasa. They observe that efforts to restore and commercialize historical sites have attracted tourism and investment but have also led to the displacement of local communities. This dual impact shows the need for inclusive strategies that integrate cultural preservation with social equity. Across these studies, a recurring theme is the tension between development objectives and social equity. The literature highlights the need for inclusive planning approaches that consider the socio-economic impacts of gentrification on vulnerable communities. Through synthesizing these diverse perspectives, this review provides a comprehensive understanding of the drivers of gentrification in Africa and highlights the importance of equity-focused urban policies.

5 EMERGING TRENDS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Fig. 5 provides an overview of research findings on the evolving drivers of gentrification, highlighting existing patterns, current dynamics, and emerging trends between 2018 and 2021. The timeline is divided into four distinct clusters, each represented by a different colour: navy blue, turquoise blue, green and yellow. The navy-blue cluster reflects the dominant themes in gentrification research from 2018 to 2019, while the turquoise-blue cluster represents the key themes emerging between 2019 to 2020. The green cluster captures the prevailing themes from 2020 to 2021, and the yellow cluster signifies the research focus from 2021 to 2023. Between 2018 and 2019, research primarily centered on themes such as urbanisation, housing, neighbourhood dynamics, urban population growth, and affordable housing. The period from 2019 to 2020 saw a shift in focus towards studies based in South Africa, particularly in KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape, with urban renewal and sustainable development emerging as key concerns. Between 2020 and 2021, research expanded to include Kenya while also addressing themes of gentrifhlation, urban regeneration, and Cape Town.
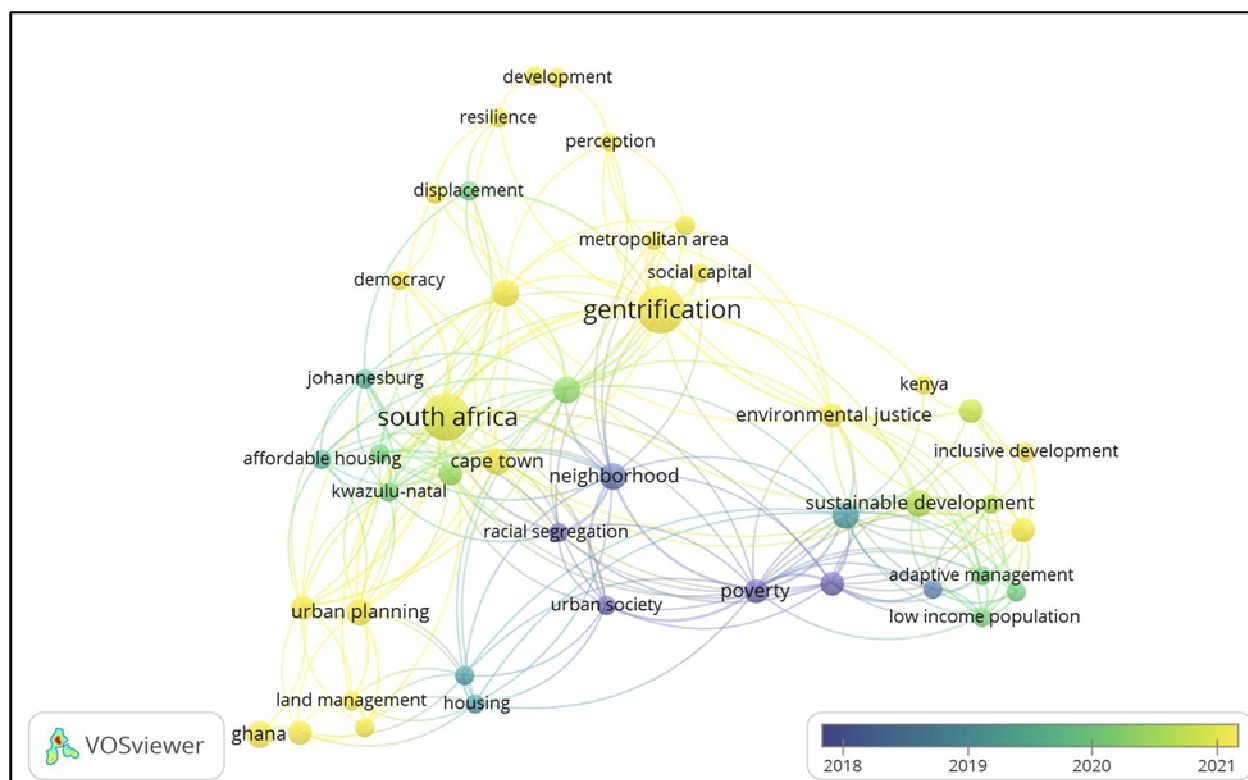
Fig. 5: Emerging trends in research on drivers of gentrification in Africa.

Research on the drivers of gentrification in Africa has expanded beyond traditional urbanisation narratives to focus on localized socio-spatial transformations. Early studies (2018-2019) mainly examined urbanisation, housing affability, and neighborhood dynamics, while later research (2019-2020) emphasized urban renewal, sustainable development, and spatial restructuring particularly in South Africa's KwaZulu-Natal and Western Cape. By 2020-2021, studies extended to Kenya, highlighting the role of urban regeneration and state-led interventions in shaping gentrification. The main emerging trend is the intersection of gentrification with environmental justice and climate change. Policies aimed at controlling urban growth, such as anti-sprawl measures and green infrastructure projects, have contributed to "environmental gentrification," displacing marginalised communities in the name of sustainability (Reckien et al., 2017). Governance and state policies also play an important role in shaping urban development, as seen in Ghana and Namibia, where land commodification and municipal development programs have reinforced economic inequalities (Geyer, 2024; Kambule et al., 2023; Ablo & Bertelsen, 2022). Privatization and the influence of the private sector have also emerged as significant drivers of gentrification. Johannesburg's Maboneng precinct illustrates how development driven by developers and the increase of "creative economy" have transformed urban spaces, while Cape Town's Bo-Kaap reflects the pressures of tourism-driven demand on long-standing communities (Neluheni & Boshoff, 2022; Michell & Le Roux, 2023). These cases highlight the increasing role of market forces in reshaping African cities.

While gentrification has been widely studied in the Global North, there is limited research on how it unfolds in the Global South (Ah Goo, 2018). Notwithstanding these insights, there are gaps in understanding drivers of gentrification across different regions in Africa, where unique socio-political and economic forces shape urban transformation. The findings from this study, based on research in the Scopus database, indicate that much of the existing literature focuses on South Africa, Ghana, Kenya, Zimbabwe, and Namibia, with limited studies on other rapidly urbanizing areas. Comparative studies across diverse urban contexts could offer a broader perspective on drivers of gentrification and processes. Additionally, more attention is needed on how gentrification intersects with informal settlements and rural-to-urban migration. Future research should prioritize longitudinal studies that track long-term socio-economic and spatial impacts of gentrification, as well as community-centered approaches that foreground the experiences of affected populations. The role of digital technologies and "smart city" initiatives in driving urban transformation is also an emerging area that requires further exploration. As the study of drivers of gentrification in Africa continues to evolve, it must adopt a more holistic, multi-scalar, and socially conscious approach, ensuring

that urban change is understood not just as economic restructuring but as a deeply social and political process with lasting implications for urban communities.

6 CONCLUSION

Gentrification in Africa is a multifaceted process shaped by economic, political, and socio-cultural forces that intersect in complex ways. This study has revealed that while global cpaital flows, state-led urban policies, and middle-class aspirations drive urban transformation, these forces often operate in tension with social equity and inclusion. The displacement of marginalised communities, the commodification of cultural heritage, and the expansion of private-sector-led development are persistent themes across African cities, highlighting the uneven consequences of urban change (Frenzel et al., 2022; Ntakana et al., 2023). Moreover, the findings underscore the fragmented nature of gentrification research on the continent, with limited comparitive studies and a predominant focus on a few countries such as South Africa, Ghana, and Kenya. This lack of regional diversity in scholarship limits our ability to generalise findings and calls for a more expansive approach to studing gentrification beyond major urban centers.

Addressing the challenges posed by gentrification requires governance frameworks that are responsive to the socio-spatial dynamics of African cities. The study highlights the need for policies that balance urban development with social justice, ensuring that revitalisation efforts do not come at the cost of displacement and exclusion (Breetzke et al., 2018). Inclusive urban planning, participatory decision-making, and equitable housing strategies must be at the core of future interventions. Furthermore, as gentrification increasingly intersects with environmental sustainability initiatives, critical attention is needed to ensure that "green" urban policies do not disproportionatrly disadvantage low-income populations (Reckien et al., 2017). By synthesizing existing literature, this study not only advances theoretical discussions on gentrification in Africa but also provides a foundation for future research that is context-sensitive, comparative, and policy-oriented. Ultimately, fostering socially just urban transformation requires rethinking gentrification as not merely an economic phenomenon but as a deeply political and contested process with lasting implications for urban communities.

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