UniverCity: The Vicious Cycle of Studentification in a Peripheral City

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Research on studentification has unpacked the spatial, economic, and social impacts that are associated with the growing presence of students in cities. Nonetheless, considerably less attention has been paid to the broader regional and national contexts that shape studentification. Using the case study of Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Beersheba, we argue that the studentification of the city should be understood within its context as the periphery of the country. Despite the university’s central location and its involvement in revitalization efforts in the region, Ben-Gurion University is surrounded by marginalized neighborhoods which have turned into a “student bubble”. We show that the segregation between the campus and the city results from a vicious cycle that reproduces the city’s poor image and disrupts the university’s attempts to advance the city and region. Although overlooked by policy-makers, the implications of this cycle reach far beyond the campus’ surrounding and affect the city and to some extent the whole region.

INTRODUCTION

As cities around the world take pride in their academic institutions, the spatial, economic, and social implications of these institutions on their immediate environment are not unanimous (Robinson and Adams 2008). A key concept in this context is the term Studentification, coined by the geographer Smith (2002, 2005). Building on gentrification, studentification is a process in which the student population becomes a significant proportion of an area, affecting its environment in distinct ways, including housing, leisure, and recreation patterns. In the last two decades, the sociospatial relations mediated through studentification have been documented in the United Kingdom and, more recently, internationally. It is outside the United Kingdom and the United States, however, that researchers look at the impacts of studentification in a wider social and urban context, and particularly with respect to issues of segregation and center-periphery dynamics (see Fabula et al. 2015; Fincher and Shaw 2009; He 2015; Tomaney and Wray 2011).

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The present study is situated in the burgeoning and increasingly diverse body of research that examines patterns of student clustering in urban areas (Allinson 2006). We apply the studentification framework to examine the university-city interface—which we term UniverCity—of Ben-Gurion University of the Negev and the southern city of Beer-sheba, Israel. We focus on the exclusionary geography created around Ben-Gurion campus and refer to it as a “student bubble” due to its impermeable and cohesive nature. We also analyze the role of the university, the students, and the city in creating and perpetuating this distinct space. The concept of UniverCity conveys the idea that the campus is an integral part of the city of Beersheba, although, as we argue, the current campus-city relationship is not beneficial for all.

Ben-Gurion University of the Negev (henceforth Ben-Gurion University) is one of Israel’s leading academic institutions, founded in 1969 with an explicit goal to develop the Negev area (Ben-Gurion University website), which occupies the social, economic, and political periphery of Israel (Lithwick et al. 1996). Since then, the university has gained a considerable academic reputation: The number of students doubled in the last two decades, and the campus has become known for its vibrant student life. However, the success of the university has also led to changes in the campus’ vicinity, home to the city’s most socioeconomically deprived neighborhoods. This juxtaposition has produced a sensitive and ambivalent interaction between the benefits associated with a successful academic institution on the one hand, and the social and spatial tensions that have simultaneously emerged from an increased student presence on the other hand.

In some respects, Beersheba follows global trends of studentification; the students live in a segregated area—the “student bubble”—engage very little with city life, and are quick to leave upon graduation (Hartal et al. 2017). However, the Beersheba case also exhibits exceptional features. These are manifested in the relationship between students and long-time residents, which exhibits different power relations than typically portrayed in the literature, as well as in the role assigned to the students by the university, the city, and the state. While research shows that residents tend to suffer from increased student presence (Allinson 2006; He 2015; Hubbard 2008; Kenyon 1997; Munro et al. 2009; Tomaney and Wray 2011), our findings indicate that the presence of students in Beersheba is not only tolerated by local residents but encouraged by institutional stakeholders, who fail to recognize the problematic implications. Moreover, the specific environment where studentification takes place—a low-income area with a history of deprivation—also shapes patterns of studentification in distinct ways.

The main goals of this paper are, thus, twofold. First, the paper examines how despite the social engagement of the university and its contribution to the city and region, the “student bubble” is trapped in a vicious cycle that deepens the segregation between the student and nonstudent populations and affects the city’s image among students. Second, and with respect to the ethos of the Israeli periphery and the Negev region in particular, and to the high expectations from students to fulfill a national vision of “bringing the desert to bloom,” we claim that this vicious cycle plays a crucial role in students’ decision to leave the city and the region upon graduation. The specific circumstances in which studentification occurs, then, impact the social interaction and affect the dynamics of these engagements.

The paper contains five sections. After presenting the literature on studentification and the research methods, we describe the Beersheba case and the specific circumstances that typify studentification there. We include both students’ and residents’ perspectives
on studentification. We then turn to describe the vicious cycle affecting the UniverCity, that is, the sociospatial relationship between the city and its university. We discuss the theoretical implications of this cycle and conclude with possible ways to turn the vicious cycle into a positive one.

**STUDENTIFICATION: “STUDENT BUBBLES” AND THEIR URBAN IMPLICATIONS**

Higher-education institutions have played, and continue to play, a key role in shaping society (Meir and Duenias 2008). All around the world, universities influence, and are influenced by, the economic, social, and demographic patterns in the local environment (see Archer et al. 2005; Chatterton and Goddard 2000; Elliott et al. 1988; Schofer and Meyer 2005; Slaughter and Leslie 1997; Tomaney and Wray 2011). While the role of academic institutions in promoting regional economic growth has been explored, the spatial impacts of academic institutions on their cities have not been studied widely until recently (Munro et al. 2009). This began to change, however, with the introduction of the studentification concept by Smith (2005). In the last decade, various case studies in the United Kingdom and the United States, and to a lesser extent globally, focusing on the complex relationship between students and the urban environment, have been explored.

Originally, Smith (2005) identified four elements of studentification: (a) the *Economic* aspect, associated with changes in the real-estate market due to an increased demand for student housing. Consequently, more investors seek to buy properties and rent them to students. (b) The *Cultural* element refers to the concentration of a young population with similar lifestyles that affects the cultural and commercial services offered in the area. Typically, services for families decline while there is a growth in leisure and cultural activities. (c) The *Social* element is characterized by long-time residents who are pushed out as students move in. New patterns of spatial segregation emerge, often with tension between the two groups. Even when no substantial conflicts arise, a clear division exists between the long-time residents and the students. Finally, the *Physical* element (d) shows that the environment might be upgraded by owners in order to make it attractive for students. Yet, more commonly, research in the United Kingdom and North America shows that the physical environment, in fact, tends to deteriorate, as the students are temporary residents with minimal commitment to the area.

Studentification has been, therefore, examined with regards to changes in place (Munro et al. 2009; Smith et al. 2014; Smith and Hubbard 2014), including aspects of housing (Frierson 2004; Hubbard 2009; Kinton et al. 2016), impacts on community cohesion and lifestyles (Chatterton 1999; Duke-Williams 2009; Holton and Riley 2013; Kenyon 1997; Sage et al. 2012), and processes of gentrification and revitalization (Melfi 2008; Smith and Holt 2007). Hubbard (2009, p. 1903) notes that only recently have geographers begun to scrutinize the ways in which city-campus relationships tie in to wider “social, economic, and cultural geographies of urban transformation,” implying that students are agents of social and spatial change. Although individual students are temporary residents, their presence as a group in a city is, in fact, long-term (Munro and Livingston 2012). Specifically, the framework in which the students interact with the city is relatively stable, and so are the sociospatial relationships that they create.
The impacts of studentification on neighborhoods and cities have been examined in the United Kingdom and elsewhere. Allinson (2006) studied patterns of student “clustering” in Birmingham, noting both the negative and positive implications of student living in the community. Among the negative factors, interviewees mentioned issues with lifestyle (e.g., noise and late nights), displacement of nonstudents, rising housing prices, deterioration of the physical environment, and litter. Positive impacts included spending power to local shops and pubs, regenerating areas, injecting value to the housing market, and creating a sense of “buzz.” The ambivalent contribution of students to cities is thus a common thread in the literature (Melfi 2008; Schofer and Meyer 2005; Smith et al. 2014).

Several scholars have linked studentification to gentrification, noting that, similarly to gentrifiers, students in higher-education institutions tend to come from upper- and middle-class backgrounds and are drawn to live in areas with significant numbers of other students (Chatterton 2010; Smith and Holt 2007). While studentification does resemble gentrification in some ways, including the transition from long-time residents to newcomers, there are also substantial differences between these two processes of urban change. In particular, students select their neighborhoods based on proximity and access to the university campus and tend to converge in student enclaves (Fincher and Shaw 2009; Smith 2008). Moreover, unlike gentrifiers, students lack long-term commitment to the neighborhood and typically possess limited economic capital (He 2015). The relationship between students and their “host community” is complex, and it is increasingly recognized that studentification may take different forms depending on various factors (Munro and Livingston 2012; Nakazawa 2017; Sage et al. 2012).

And yet, even with the rise of studentification studies, there has been an overwhelming focus on student accommodation. In particular, scholars from Britain, which has been the leader in studentification studies, are concerned with different forms of off-campus housing for students and its impact on neighborhoods. More recently, British scholars have studied the growing transition from “houses in multiple occupation” to “purpose-built off-campus accommodation” (see Hubbard 2009; Kinton et al. 2016), which denotes the proliferating interest of the private sector in studentified neighborhoods. Notwithstanding the importance of these trends, in this paper we extend our focus beyond housing forms to the larger implications of Beersheba’s growing student population on the city.

**METHODS**

Ben-Gurion University and the city of Beersheba present a relevant case for studying aspects of studentification and tying them to wider sociospatial issues. Ben-Gurion University’s campus stands out with its lively atmosphere and social activity compared to other universities in Israel: The university consistently ranks high in the annual surveys conducted by the National Union of Israeli Students. Unlike other large academic centers, Ben-Gurion University has a remote and peripheral location. Nevertheless, it attracts a growing number of students every year, who gather in the neighborhoods around the university, forming a segregated “bubble” (see also Avni et al. 2016). We therefore center this paper on the “student bubble” and its sociospatial relationship with the city.

We base this paper on a wider study that was conducted in the Department of Geography and Environmental Development at Ben-Gurion University in 2010 (see Alfasi et al.
Eight graduate students, who lived in the “student bubble” area at the time, examined multiple aspects of studentification, such as transportation and mobility, social life, residents’ perspectives, and patterns of recreation. This research started with 28 in-depth interviews. Participants were selected through purposeful sampling combined with the “snowball method.” We ensured that there is a representation of students from different faculties and from different areas of the “student bubble.” Twenty interviews were conducted with students at various stages of study, and another eight with long-time residents living in the “student bubble” area. The analysis of the transcribed interviews was based on thematic coding; we searched for dominant patterns and discourse. An example of such a pattern was the framing of students’ rental apartments in terms of “time-distance”: many of the students we interviewed described their places by the time it takes them to get to the university. “Minutes walking” is a typical rhetoric evident also in online rental boards and on the university’s website. Defining this as a relevant pattern provided means for understanding issues of location and accessibility. Another example was the tendency of long-time residents to see the students as a solid impersonal entity. Students were not referred to by their names and personal attributes but encapsulated into a general frame: “the students.”

The study was complemented by a survey that Ben-Gurion University Student Union conducted in 2013 with 535 students, regarding their satisfaction with Beersheba and their plans to stay in the region after graduation. We also relied on secondary sources, such as the university’s official website, the Student Union’s journal, blog posts, and other forms of social media for additional and updated data.

**HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE CONTEXT OF NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT: BEN-GURION UNIVERSITY, BEERSHEBA**

Ben-Gurion University of the Negev was founded in 1969 with a mission to develop the Negev desert. The establishment of the university should be understood in the context of the Zionist project, which aimed to strengthen the Negev and establish Beersheba as its regional capital (Gradus 1978; Gradus and Lazin 1988). Since the foundation of the state of Israel in 1948, Beersheba has been subjected to substantial governmental interventions in the forms of funding, public agencies, settlement, and planning. Populating the large Negev region was declared a national project that could help maximize the Jewish presence in an area previously occupied by Bedouins. As a peripheral area, the Negev has been deemed in need of strong governmental guidance “from above” and the university was a means to implement the pioneering vision of the founders of the country to “bring the desert to bloom.” In accordance with its designated role, the university grew from a small research institute to a major university with 20,000 students and five campuses. The university has played an important role in delivering employment and education to its host city and the region at large.4

Today, Beersheba is a midsized city of about 200,000 residents, referred to in national plans and policy papers as Israel’s fourth metropolis.5 Nevertheless, Beersheba and the Negev are characterized by a relatively poor and profoundly polarized population. The city is “surrounded by a wide periphery of Bedouin-Muslim settlements, among the poorest population in Israel” (Dahan 2016, p. 192), and by development towns built by the state in the 1950s and early 1960s, which are inhabited by mostly aging, low-and
middle-class populations. A few, yet very affluent, suburbs form an exception to this overall poor region. This socioeconomic polarization typifies the city of Beersheba, too, as the inner neighborhoods include dilapidated housing and the outer urban rings host newer and better forms of housing (Avni et al. 2016). As a result, in the media and the public opinion, Beersheba has been associated with poverty and an overall image of neglect. In 2012, the city launched a campaign to improve its image, branding itself the “Capital of Opportunities of Israel” (Beersheba Municipality website).

Since its foundation, the role of the university has extended beyond research and education. The Community Action Program, a flagship project launched in the 1970s, serves to promote the Negev and its diverse populations through supporting education and well-being. The main areas of intervention concern narrowing educational gaps between various populations, assisting new immigrants and other groups in need and engaging the students with the city and its populations (Dahan 2016). Many projects are conducted by the university staff: The Ilan Ramon Center operating at the university runs the Scientific Leadership Program, supporting local high-school students who wish to study science; the Department of Social Work and the Department of Sociology and Anthropology manage the Rothschild Cube in collaboration with the MBA program, for advancing social leadership and creativity; the School of Medicine is conducting several health programs in the city and region, and so on. Many programs, though, involve Ben-Gurion students. One project, operating successfully for more than 30 years, offers students the opportunity to live rent-free in an apartment in exchange for community engagement. In other programs, students serve as mentors for children with disabilities or assist high-school students with math.

The university is also an important stakeholder in the current national effort to develop the Negev through relocating large military bases there. The project was launched in the last decade and is accompanied by local and governmental actions for improving infrastructures, enhancing services, and attracting investments to the region. The university is working closely with the municipal government and the Israel Defense Force (IDF) to attract the young and educated to the city and region (Ben-Gurion University website). Yet, despite the wide geographical scope of Ben-Gurion University’s social and economic involvement, evident in this myriad of academic and community programs, in the next section we will show that these efforts do not always bear fruit in the immediate surroundings of the university campus. To further explore this argument, we now turn to a discussion on Beersheba’s studentification patterns.

**STUDENTIFICATION IN BEERSHEBA**

Ben-Gurion’s main campus is located in the north part of Beersheba, amidst an area that was built by the State in the 1950s and early 1960s and has since witnessed acute disinvestment (Figure 1). Dalet Neighborhood (Neighborhood D in Hebrew) was for many years synonymous with poverty and a national symbol of neglect, drug addiction, and crime. While over the years many governmental plans have attempted to “rehabilitate” these neighborhoods, no significant progress has been made in that respect. As the city of Beersheba continued to grow outward, residents who could afford it moved to new neighborhoods. Between 1983 and 1995, neighborhoods Gimel (Neighborhood C, in Hebrew) and Dalet lost nearly 30 percent of their population, along with a drop in the
socioeconomic level of the neighborhoods and their physical condition (Levinson 1996). In the following years, students of the growing university entered these neighborhoods as renters (data provided below), thus turning it into a student stronghold and stabilizing it.

Israel’s major universities, located in Jerusalem, Haifa, and Tel Aviv, did not trigger processes of studentification due to the absence of distinct studentified areas. Only recently has studentification begun to appear around remote colleges in the periphery (see Meir and Duenias 2008; Naor 2016). The studentification of Beersheba has been a recent and gradual process as well. In the late 1990s, following the election of a new university president who succeeded in raising considerable funds and support for the university, the campus grew in popularity and expanded in size. In contrast to the United Kingdom (Nakazawa 2017), studentification in Beersheba did not follow national higher education policies but emerged from the local conditions of a reviving campus. University dorms are offered only to a small number of students and in most Israeli campuses, including Beersheba—unlike some campuses in North America—students tend to live off-campus. The growth of Ben-Gurion University, coupled with a limited supply of student housing and the deterioration of the veteran neighborhoods surrounding campus, led to the formation of a “student bubble” around it.
THE TOWN AND THE GOWN

Ben-Gurion University stands in contradiction to its surrounding derelict neighborhoods. The campus is dotted with distinct buildings and greenery, which provide for an agreeable and aesthetically pleasing environment (Figure 2). Like many other institutions in the city and country, the university is fenced off and secured around the clock; in general, entrance to public institutions throughout the country is secured. However, the sense of segregation is especially strong there, due to the contrast between the attractive campus and its dilapidated environment, as well as the physical salience and visibility of the fence. The numerous grassy areas, coffee shops, and services offered on campus, such as music events, public seminars, and movie nights, are practically out of reach for nearby non-student residents. While in principle anyone can walk through the gates and enjoy these facilities, in practice the entrance is monitored by security guards, whose authority hinders accessibility. Figure 3A presents a typical university square—with a coffee shop and a book store, and views to the well-kept lawn—separated from the nearby Dalet neighborhood by a fenced embankment; the neighboring buildings are in sight, close and distant at the same time.

The separation between the university and the city is evident through various elements. For example, the university’s train station, which serves other parts of the city, is connected to the university by a bridge that leads directly to campus. The students and staff who arrive from outside of Beersheba do not at all interact with the city as they cross the bridge into the university gate. Since the bridge locks down at night and on weekends, at
certain times residents are prohibited from using this useful shortcut to the train station area. Another example is the student dormitories across the road from the university, which were recently fenced off, thus making part of the neighborhood inaccessible for nonstudent pedestrians since entrance requires a valid student card (see Figure 3B). This has intensified the disconnection of the university from the rest of the city.
THE “STUDENT BUBBLE”

We refer to the area around Ben-Gurion University as the “student bubble” (see Figure 4 for more precise boundaries). This term is both descriptive and analytic. In the figurative sense, the area is termed “bubble” due to the high concentration of students, which creates a spatially distinct area. But the term also connotes a sense of detachment and seclusion from other parts of the city. In this section, we will offer insights into the spatial and social dynamic of Beersheba’s “student bubble.”

The area around Ben-Gurion University offers favorable conditions for a large concentration of students: Cheap rent, combined with a short walking or biking distance to campus, attracts thousands of students every year. Neighborhoods Beit (B, in Hebrew), Gimel, and Dalet in particular (Figure 4) are home to a significant student population: In some areas, students outnumber other residents. While there are no data on the exact number of students living in these neighborhoods, their presence is omnipresent and is exemplified in Figure 4, which shows the percentage of rental apartments in Beersheba according to statistical areas. The data do not distinguish between student and nonstudent housing; however, the proximity to the university campus indicates that the majority of renters are students. Interviews with students have confirmed this trend. From 1995 to 2008, the number of rented properties in these areas has increased, from 16,000 to 23,000, as the “student bubble” has expanded east and west. In some areas, the rental percentage is as high as 70–90 percent. The student presence is particularly felt in the streets bordering the university campus, with a 3- to 10-minute walking distance to its gates.

FIG. 4. A map of Ben-Gurion University and the surrounding area. The tentative boundaries of the “student bubble” are marked by a red line. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]
In terms of student housing, students typically rent apartments in apartment blocks. Some of these blocks are shared with long-time residents and others occupied only by students. Since the “student bubble” area has become more in-demand, many apartments have been purchased as an investment by landlords from either Beersheba or other parts of the country, and these apartments are rented out for students. While some landlords renovate the old apartments, for the most part, the common areas of the buildings and streets remain untouched and so the overall appearance of the neighborhood is still poor (see Figure 1). With a few exceptions, the students themselves generally do not attend to their environment or make significant improvements. Over time, as the neighborhoods have studentified, services that cater to the student population have emerged in these areas, such as laundromats, print shops, and pubs.

“LIVING IN A BUBBLE”

The “student bubble” is, in fact, one of Ben-Gurion University’s main attractions. In interviews conducted with students, they emphasized the appeal of living close to campus, surrounded by like-minded peers. Students organize dinners together, attend music shows, and frequent the bars around campus. While the physical environment of some of the student areas is poor, students are nevertheless attracted to them; in fact, the “student bubble” has produced such a reputation for its vibrant student life that newcomers barely look for housing options elsewhere. Consequently, students live close to one another and interact among themselves. Since most of the social activities take place on or around campus, there is little need to reach out to other areas of the city. The physical closeness is valuable to the students, and the time-distance pattern recurs in students’ descriptions of the place. As one interviewee recounted:

I wanted a ‘college experience’. It seemed that only in Beersheba I would get this experience...in Beersheba everyone lives ten minutes away from the university. A lot of the social life revolves around campus... This is what I was looking for. People don’t just come and go, they stay in the university and around it, and the interaction continues in the hours after school, including evenings and nights. You are always surrounded by other students because you live in neighborhoods occupied mostly by students, and your friends live two-ten minutes’ walk from the apartment. [interview with an undergraduate student in psychology, March, 2010]

Interviews revealed that the proximity to campus and to other students has become so important that students who live in other areas of the city risk exclusion from the social life associated with the university. Some of the interviewees were students whose families live in Beersheba and yet decided to move out of their parents’ home and rent an apartment in the “student bubble,” for this reason.

The intensity of the “student bubble” is in direct relation to the marginality of the host city, Beersheba, which suffers from a negative image due to its peripheral status and lack of attractions (see Avni et al. 2016 for more background on Beersheba). From the students’ perspective, the vibrant “student bubble” compensates for the unattractive city:

In Beersheba, unlike other cities, when you go to Ben-Gurion University you are there. Whereas in Tel-Aviv University, everyone does their own thing after class... because there
is so much to do. In Beersheba there isn’t much to do. [interview with an undergraduate engineering student, April, 2010]

Other students also highlighted the perception that the lack of activities in Beersheba forces the students together and encourages them to create strong social ties. Thus, the students perceive the “bubble” positively; they are attracted to Ben-Gurion University due to the promise of an active social life, a relaxed student atmosphere, and a shared sense of community. Interviewees have confirmed that these promises are generally delivered, and students are satisfied with the richness of the social life in the bubble.

Two more interesting motifs were evident in the interviews. The first is the strong feeling of an army-base experience (military service is mandatory in Israel, thus most students served in the army before attending university). Students referred to their apartments and to the whole “student bubble” experience using the jargon of Israeli soldiers. Military expressions regarding staying “on base” for weekends, having a Friday night meal together,12 and going back home to do laundry—a necessary task shared by soldiers and present in Israeli culture—recurred in the interviews. This jargon reflected the strong feeling of togetherness and the poor attachment to the city. Moreover, the jargon hinted at the temporality of the student experience in Beersheba in their eyes, and the fact that the neighborhoods they lived in resembled their army bases more than they resembled a home.

The second theme was the image attached to the residents of Beersheba. While most of the students were sympathetic, willing to help supposedly “needy” and lonely locals, they all had a less than favorable image of Beersheba’s inhabitants. The sense of estrangement is linked in part to the poor conditions in some neighborhoods. In these areas, the students were appalled by the poverty and lack of care: Some students shared stories of encounters with drug dealers and addicts, homeless, and other marginalized populations. They mentioned violent behavior of children, the dilapidated appearance of grownups, noisy music played from balconies, and more. A group of female students launched an interactive map indicating places where threatening locals approached them in an intimidating manner, insulted and even attacked them.13 Even students who did not encounter any troubling interactions were affected by the general atmosphere toward the locals, the habit of showing their student cards for entering pubs at night, and the sheer spatial separation.

Against this background, and despite occasional unpleasant interactions, the “student bubble” creates an “alternative city” for the students, where they barely engage with non-students. For example, until recently, some bars in the vicinity of the university required a valid student card to enter, a condition unheard of in other campuses. Following protests of local residents, this is no longer permitted, although not always enforced. In addition, according to the Ben-Gurion University Student Union’s survey, 60 percent of the students declared that they have never or rarely visited the old city of Beersheba. Most of the students have not been to other neighborhoods further away from campus, which are considerably wealthier. The “student bubble,” while providing the students with a desired experience, is contributing to social and spatial segregation in the city at the same time.

Unlike the typical stidentification processes described in the literature, where residents perceive the new coming students as “intruders,” in Beersheba we found that students were occasionally the ones to feel hostile or dismissive toward the long-time residents. Especially in Dalet neighborhood, students complained about noise, violence, and
overall neglect, which they partly attributed to the residents. The fact that the university is adjacent to some of the most marginalized neighborhoods of the city certainly does not help the city to project a positive image to the students. Yet even students who reside in neighborhoods that are considered better socioeconomically display the same poor image of the local population and a general disappointment with the city.

LONG-TIME RESIDENTS’ PERSPECTIVES

Interviews with long-time residents who live in the “student bubble” also paint a picture of polarization between the campus and the surrounding areas. In fact, long-time residents are ambivalent about the presence of students. They recognize the advantages of having young educated people as neighbors and share the common notion regarding the university as an important asset to the city. The student population is overall perceived as a pleasant and educated group: “people from a good home that came from afar” (interview with a resident, April 2010). Another resident said that he “doesn’t see anything wrong” with the presence of students in the neighborhood (interview with a resident, April 2010). At the same time, however, some are disappointed with the students’ lack of effort to engage with their neighbors and neighborhood. One senior citizen commented:

[The students] can do a bit more… maybe they can initiate more, for example, a few students can take care of the neighborhood, paint where needed…get some plants and benches… make things better for [the students] and [their] environment. [interview, month, March, 2010]

Other respondents explicitly said that there is “alienation and a conscious distance between the students and the local population” (interview, March 2010).

The segregation between the students and the resident population was apparent when the residents spoke of the students. The “students” were perceived as one homogenized group, rather than individuals. In contrast to other cases from the literature (Hubbard 2008; Sage et al. 2012), however, the long-term residents have not formed a united front against the students, nor have they publicly expressed their concerns. We suggest that the relationship between residents and students in Beersheba is different than what is usually reported in the literature due to the disadvantaged status of these neighborhoods. While residents may not necessarily benefit from the increased student presence, they do not seem to contest it either, as these areas were neglected long before the students arrived. To a certain extent, the students, with their middle-upper class backgrounds and good reputation, are considered a welcome addition to the neighborhoods—despite the fenced-off dorms they occupy. Though some residents raised issues such as noise, lack of services, and neglect of public space, and even complained about the lack of access to the university, they did not blame the students for these problems but placed the responsibility on the municipality. In Beersheba’s poor neighborhoods, the students are occasionally the ones to contest the presence of residents.

Sage et al. (2012) studied studentification in a deprived, former social-rented housing estate in the United Kingdom. Their findings suggest that the friction between students and long-time residents, and the anxieties that studentification produces, may even intensify under circumstances of social marginalization. However, our understanding of the situation in the inner neighborhoods of Beersheba is different. We suggest that the
positive image of the university in the local discourse and media, the university’s evident commitment to the city and its residents, and the fact that it brings so many young people to the city, are perceived positively by the city’s marginalized communities.

“SHOULD I STAY OR SHOULD I GO?”

Further to Ben-Gurion University’s significant contribution to developing the Negev, the university is concerned with encouraging students to stay in Beersheba and the Negev area following graduation. In recent years, the university’s Student Union has employed a special coordinator who is specifically responsible for encouraging students to settle in the Negev. One example of a recent initiative is a Negev alumni card, which in addition to providing benefits to graduates who stay in Beersheba, also enables the university to track the number of alumni who apply for it. The hope to attract students to Beersheba is also shared by the city leadership. The student population, while it may not be wealthy at present, is an educated, young class of people and thus a desired population for the city. Moreover, Beersheba—like other development towns and peripheral areas in Israel—was populated throughout the years through waves of immigration to Israel that were directed to these areas by the state (Khazzoom 2005; Peled 1990; Tzfadia 2016). Though the immigrants were generally poor, the desire to settle the city and region and see its population growing was deeply embedded in the national discourse. Thus, the question of “staying” or settling in the Negev is an inseparable part of the student experience at Ben-Gurion University. In reality, however, the task of recruiting students to relocate to the Negev for the long term has proven hard to accomplish.

A recent initiative attempts to challenge the routine where graduate students leave the city by forming a network of alumni. According to the organizers, about 500 students are associated with “the Net,” as they name the initiative. Alas, the description of their approach in the online journal Beersheba Times (2016) replicates the problematic discourse that traps the city-students relations. The post describes “two young people from Beersheba who decided to do something in order to revive the city, instead of abandoning to Tel Aviv,” and mentions “cool cultural events that could attract young people to the neighborhoods, instead of fleeing to the central areas of the country.” These words—specifically “abandoning” and “fleeing”—connote a sense of disappointment about the failure to prevent students from leaving the city. A similar idea of creating a network of graduate students that will encourage them to stay in the city is offered by Hartal et al. (2017).

Despite the hope of attracting students to stay in Beersheba and the Negev, some factors hinder this goal. The Student Union’s Survey from 2013 reveals that while the majority of students are satisfied with the social life associated with the university, they are largely displeased with employment opportunities, municipal services, and their sense of security, which relate to life in the city. On a scale of 1–7, with 1 = the least satisfied and 7 = most satisfied, 78 percent ranked their satisfaction with cultural and entertainment activities in the city as 5–7, and 51 percent selected 5–7 regarding their satisfaction with the cost of living in Beersheba. At the same time, only 17 percent chose 5–7 as representing their satisfaction with the employment opportunities offered in the city and region, and only 29 percent ranked their satisfaction from the personal safety experienced in the city as 5–7.
Furthermore, the survey found that the longer the students live in Beersheba, the less optimistic they feel about the prospects of finding a job and feeling safe in the city. Overall, the survey reveals the students’ weak ties to Beersheba. Particularly, students living in the hub of the “student bubble,” neighborhoods Gimel and Dalet, were the most reluctant when asked to evaluate their tendency to live in Beersheba in the future. The students were asked to comment freely on the city, and their remarks express discontent with the physical and social conditions in the “student bubble,” for instance:

In order for us to consider staying, a community of adults needs to be created, in a good area of Beersheba. We are fed up with the poor neighborhoods around the university and it’s not a place to raise children either. The municipal services are shocking, the sewage has been left open for months. . . . How are we expected to want to stay in Beersheba when these are the conditions?

First the city should take care of cleaning thousands of tons of garbage scattered in every garden and open space, and then we’ll talk about wanting to stay here. [Free translation by the authors]

These quotations convey the prevalent state of mind, as also reflected by the students interviewed for our research. The quotations confirm the gap that exists between enjoying student life in Beersheba on the one hand, and the detachment from the city on the other. Surely, the issues that are mentioned in these quotations hint at the role that the municipality plays in the spatial reality of the “bubble.” The segregated and degraded environment around the university thus contributes to the poor perceptions of the city and disrupts the sought-after integration of students in the UniverCity.

A recent Facebook post of a local Beersheba page, which received wide support, reveals that the encouraging and welcoming approach to Ben-Gurion students is not shared by all city residents. An abbreviated and milder version of the original text, which uses offensive language, goes:

[Facebook page’s name] is proud to present: Exam period is over—now we can start living!

You [students] ruined our city, a bunch of poor xxx, you took over our institutions and hangout places and filled them with smells of bikes and sandals. . . . Our mothers tell us that we should be like you, but neglect to see that you spend 12 years in academia while we purchase a house, raise kids and finish paying off our mortgage.

We are sick of the good reputation that Ben-Gurion University enjoys in the center of the country. Wealthy parents send their kids for a “mission” in the Negev. Who are you anyway? Beersheba residents: go out, enjoy, blossom: this period happens only twice a year. Only us and our places, only us and our city, without the xxx from Ben-Gurion University. [xxx stand for omitted swear words. Free translation by the authors.]

This sarcastic text, while taking a strong stand against the presence of students in Beersheba, also confirms their elitist status in the city. Perhaps it also signals a shift from the long-held belief that students are “good” for the city. It certainly illustrates the tensions between the “outsiders”—students—and the locals in a powerful way. So far, the students continue to enjoy their privileged status in the “student bubble.”
THE VICIOUS CYCLE OF STUDENTIFICATION IN BEERSHEBA

There is a city here, and you [the students] likely don’t know it. You live in those neighbour-
hoods around the university and avoid taking the city bus. You prevent the local youths from
entering pubs and call them natives behind their backs. You don’t live in Beersheba, but rent
an apartment there. (Ben-Simchon, 2014, p. 3, free translation by the authors)

Despite the university’s good will, reflected in the variety of activities in the community,
even with the positive image of the university and its students among local residents,
our research reveals that student-city relations in Beersheba are trapped in a vicious cy-
cle (Figure 5). In other words, the more student-oriented, vibrant, and attractive the
“bubble” grows, the poorer the students’ image of the city becomes, the less they wish to
integrate as graduates in the city, and the less likely the university will be able to fulfill its
social mandate. Thus, upon leaving the city, instead of the ambassadors they are expected
to become, alumni spread the notion of Beersheba as a “cool” place for students yet inap-
propriate for other, long-term, purposes. The Beersheba case is an example of the ways
in which studentification diminishes the mutual efforts of the university leaders and the
local government to gain from the presence of an academic institution, and hinders the
constitution of a beneficial UniverCity relationship: between the students, the residents,
and the city.

On the surface, the current situation serves Ben-Gurion University and the students
well enough; to begin with, the “student bubble” has been created in response to Beer-
sheba’s perceived lack of vibrant urban life, and it provides a valued space for students. To
a certain extent, long-time residents also benefit from the replacement of less-welcomed
neighbors by students. However, the “bubble” also leads to undesirable outcomes as
the studentification process continues to unfold. As the student population becomes
the main agent that shapes urban space, the temporality element that characterizes this
group takes permanent form. Students, for the most part, do not consume certain public
services such as daycares, schools, and clinics, especially as some of these are provided
for them on-campus (see Smith 2005). The city, in turn, has little interest in investing
in areas that are mostly student-dominant, since the students are external, temporary,
and unlikely to invest in long-term projects. Thus, the needs of the nonstudents are

FIG. 5. A schematic representation of the vicious cycle of studentification in Beersheba.
overlooked and the disinvestment in the old neighborhoods continues uninterrupted. While we have not observed critical conflicts between long-time residents and students, we agree with Sage et al. (2012, p. 1074) that especially in deprived areas, studentification “appears to reinforce the marginalisation and residulisation” of these areas.

To be sure, the students are not the cause for the original neglect of the neighborhoods around Ben-Gurion University. In this regard, Beersheba is an exception to the typical studentification process where students are seen as the cause for deterioration. In fact, some areas of the “student bubble” have been somewhat revived due to the presence of students. Yet, these areas have transformed in ways that suit the lifestyles of young students, rather than long-time residents. Ironically, even when the students gain a deeper familiarity with the local population through various volunteer projects, this interaction might reinforce the students’ already poor judgment of the city, as once again they are only being exposed to the city’s more marginalized areas. In particular, the urban environment in studentified neighborhoods is extremely deteriorated and most students are unaware of the existence of agreeable living places elsewhere in the city. The longer they stay in the “bubble,” the more they are exposed to abnormal situations, such as violence and neglect, and the deeper they internalize the notion of a temporal stay.

Nonetheless, it is not our intention to argue that the studentification of Beersheba has only negative implications for the various stakeholders. Acknowledging this vicious cycle, though, is essential in order to understand the poor impression of the city in the face of the massive exodus of graduating students. At the same time, the city leaders should not confuse the student population with long-time residents. For instance, the municipality recently initiated rental assistance for students who live in the old city of Beersheba, an area under revitalization. While efforts to “explode” the “student bubble” are necessary in order to stop this endless cycle, this initiative is not likely to deliver substantial outcomes since students lack the capital needed to make such an investment. In order to revitalize, the old city needs residents who are willing to invest in real estate and make long-term commitments. Most students will not undertake such effort.

DISCUSSION

RETHINKING STUDENTIFICATION IN THE PERIPHERAL CONTEXT

This research joins a large body of literature that moves beyond studentification as being a solely housing-related issue, toward the wider implications of the phenomenon. Research on studentification has underpinned the notion that students are a type of social actor that is capable of producing meaningful changes (He 2015; Hubbard 2008; Smith 2005). The Ben-Gurion case illustrates that the behavior of these social actors and the types of change they create is intertwined with the wider regional and national contexts, which are somewhat overlooked in studentification research. While British cases still dominate the discussion on issues of housing, lifestyle conflicts, and economic impacts, in other countries the studentification framework may be linked to a wider scale of sociospatial processes (see, for example, Fabula et al. 2015).

While some aspects of studentification in Beersheba can be found elsewhere, in accordance with Smith’s (2005) conceptualization, we have shown that studentification in Beersheba is profoundly tied to its political and national role as a peripheral city that
has been built “from above.” Its peripheral status stems not only from its relative remoteness from the center, but also from the continuous construction of the city “to-down” for external populations. This has been the case since the city was founded in the early 1900s and particularly since the foundation of the state of Israel in 1948. In this sense, the studentification of Beersheba continues the previous cycles of city-building. Thus, while there has been a growing understanding that studentification is not a homogenized phenomenon but rather context-specific (see Hubbard 2008), the focus on the neighborhood and city-level might still omit other factors. Our interviews with selected students give voice to the student themselves, their opinions and perceptions, which have been underrepresented in the literature on studentification (Nakazawa 2017). Their narratives suggest that the studentification of Beersheba is embedded in a contested social context of center-periphery relations in Israel. To a certain extent, the antagonism toward the city and its residents has developed among the students even before they moved to Beersheba. Due to the vicious cycle of studentification described above, the antagonistic feeling strengthens and affects the image of the city in much larger circles.

The studentification of Beersheba is unique even when compared to other Israeli cities. While students have formed “bubbles” in other places, especially in the north of Israel, the visibility and cohesiveness of the Beersheba “bubble” and the pronounced social gaps between students and residents outweigh other campuses. The students in Beersheba are segregated not only for reasons that have been depicted in the literature such as convenience and accessibility to campus (Holdsworth 2009; Thomsen and Eikemo 2010) but also, to a large extent, the students congregate in the “bubble” since they wish to isolate themselves from the city’s perceived deprived environment. Examining Beersheba with the global framework of studentification would only reveal a partial understanding of the phenomenon, since the national–political context has reproduced power relations in which the students are the powerful actors and the long-time residents are the marginalized ones. Similarly to the immigration waves of the past, the students are expected to “save” the city, revitalize it, and populate it. The fact that they are young and educated makes them ideal candidates to fulfill the historical vision for the Negev area. To some extent, this rhetoric is paternalistic as it overlooks the existing residents and reproduces the hegemony of the national government.

The adverse effects of studentification have been widely discussed in the literature. Displacement of long-time residents is one such key aspect. He (2015, p. 2851) explains that in the case of studentification, “displacement is more of a process of marginalizing former dominant social groups, while it does not necessarily involve physical uprooting of these groups.” In Beersheba too, while the original residents still live in the neighborhood, they are faced with an environment that caters to the needs of a specific group rather than their own. Moreover, long-time residents in significant parts of the “student bubble” are marginalized and poor, and the studentification continues past patterns of institutional neglect. Thus, even though the studentification of Beersheba is extreme and somewhat exceptional in its socioeconomic status compared to global cases, the end result is similar in some respects.
CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have shown how studentification is shaped not only by daily interaction between students and long-time residents, but also, importantly, by historic and regional circumstances as well as the wider social structure of the country. Ben-Gurion University was established with the vision of developing the Negev region; in line with its original role, the university is an influential stakeholder in the area. However, while it invests considerable resources in reaching out to the city and region, the campus is physically fenced off and segregated, and to some extent forms an exclusionary space in the heart of the city. This physical isolation does not do justice to the residents of the area, who confront physical, social, and symbolic barriers in accessing campus, even if it is officially open for all. We therefore suggest that it is time to reevaluate this UniverCity interaction in order to create a more fruitful relationship between the university campus and the surrounding areas (see Bromley and Kent 2006); in other words, create a true UniverCity.

Our analysis portrays studentification from various perspectives and scales; the most immediate one is the “student bubble,” where students live yet fail to interact with long-time residents. Another level of analysis was the university itself, in terms both of its main campus and of its influence on the city and region. The findings indicate that studentification in Beersheba is trapped in a vicious cycle; the more vibrant and safe the “student bubble” gets, the poorer and more unattractive is the image of the city in the eyes of the students. As the “bubble” excludes the long-time residents and perpetuates the degraded urban environment, the chance for positive contacts between the students and the city is reduced. Particularly, the strong spatial concentration has implications on the tendency of graduate students to leave Beersheba at the end of their studies.

The main lessons from the Ben-Gurion University case study are twofold. First, notwithstanding Ben-Gurion University’s great contribution to the area, the sociospatial order affected by processes of studentification is extreme and powerful. As this research shows, the “student bubble” is both the outcome of the general weakness of the city and one of the reasons for its perpetuated marginality. Second, but related, breaking the cycle demands acknowledging its full scope, including the extreme deterioration of the urban space occurring with the quiet consent of the city, and the establishment of social segregation practices. While attracting students is an understandable policy goal, policymakers need to shift city revitalization efforts away from students and toward the existing residents of the city and their needs. Indeed, by focusing on revitalizing the city for its residents, the city administration may (indirectly) also be making the city more attractive to students and to long-time residents, and in the process changing the vicious cycle to a virtuous one.

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Notes

1http://in.bgu.ac.il/bergmann/Pages/history.aspx (Hebrew).
2David Ben-Gurion (17 January 1955). "Importance of the Negev" (in Hebrew). Archived from the original on 23 February 2007. 213.8.150.43/activities/bengurion/mashmaut1.rtf
3http://www.nuis.co.il/%D7%9E%D7%97%D7%A7%D7%98%D7%99%D7%9D-%D7%95%D7%A0%D7%99%D7%99%D7%A8%D7%95%D7%AA-%D7%A2%D7%9E%D7%93%D7%94/
4David Ben Gurion himself followed this vision, when in 1953, at the age of 63, he retired from his position as the prime minister, left Tel Aviv, and settled in a small Kibbutz in the Negev.
5National Outline Plan (NOP) 31, authorized in 1991, defined Beersheba as Israel’s fourth metropolitan city, after Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, and Haifa. This definition persists formally. See also Avni et al. (2016).
6http://in.bgu.ac.il/cau/Pages/default.aspx
7http://www.bguuf.org.uk/about-the-university/current-research/projects/the-ilan-ramon-centre/
8http://www.rcf.org.il/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=139&Itemid=208&lang=en
9http://in.bgu.ac.il/cau/open/Pages/default.aspx
10See: http://www.negev.mod.gov.il/about/Pages/about-us.aspx.
11In addition to the university, several other academic institutions operate in Beersheba, including The Technological College of Beersheba, SCE – The Sami Shamoon College of Engineering, The Negev and Beersheba College, and Kaye College. Altogether, the city hosts more than 30,000 students.
12Friday night meal is a symbol of the centrality of the family in Israeli society (see Almog 2000). Yet soldiers usually conduct such communal meals when they stay in the base during weekends.
13https://www.google.com/maps/d/viewer?mid=zi3EYq9xGI34.kDhmgD47deJk
14http://beershevatimes.co.il/%D7%9E%D7%93%D7%99%D7%A0%D7%AA-%D7%91%D7%90%D7%A8-%D7%A9%D7%91%D7%A2/%D7%99%D7%95%D7%96%D7%9E%D7%94-%D7%A6%D7%A2%D7%99%D7%A8%D7%94-%D7%97%D7%94-%D7%A9%D7%91%D7%A8-%D7%94-%D7%95%D7%AA-
15Source: Settlement Survey 2013, Ben -Gurion University’s Student Union. Unpublished.
16A comparable survey conducted by “The Net” through their Facebook site on April 2017 encompassed 1,333 people. Thirty-eight percent of the participants mentioned neglect and poor maintenance as Beersheba’s main weakness; 30 percent mentioned the unsafe urban environment as the main problem; the rest mentioned the poor state of residential buildings (8.5 percent), the lack of veterinary services for street dogs and cats (7 percent), the need for more authorized parking areas (6.5 percent), and other issues. See: http://www.b7net.co.il/article/4340.

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