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Reframing Destination Infrastructure as a Strategic Destination Marketing Asset in Southern Africa

Abstract. Despite its acknowledged importance, destination infrastructure has traditionally been conceptualised as a supportive condition rather than a strategic marketing asset. This study addresses this perception by examining the way destination infrastructure shapes destination image, visitor satisfaction, and competitiveness in southern Africa, particularly in Zimbabwe and South Africa. The purpose of the study is to reconceptualise destination infrastructure as a core component of destination marketing using evidence and insights from the literature, policy documents, and industry reports published between 2018 and 2025. The authors identified five critical infrastructure attributes (accessibility, accommodation, attractions, amenities, and technology) that directly influence destination perception and market positioning. While the study contributes to the refinement of existing competitiveness theories, it also proposes an integrated conceptual framework that positions infrastructure as a core marketing asset and provides actionable implications for policymakers and marketers seeking sustainable tourism growth in southern Africa.

Keywords: destination marketing, destination infrastructure, destination image, destination competitiveness, southern Africa

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1. Introduction

Tourism destinations operate in an increasingly competitive global environment, where travellers evaluate not only attractions but also the quality, reliability, and seamlessness of the destination experience (Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Wang et al., 2023). As destinations compete for market share, creating favourable perceptions in the minds of potential tourists has become a central task of destination marketers. This is particularly critical in regions where multiple destinations offer comparable natural and cultural experiences, making differentiation more challenging (Munluneh et al., 2022; Dimanche & Andrades, 2024). In such contexts, the attributes that enable smooth access, comfort, safety, and digital engagement increasingly shape destination choice and competitiveness.

The abundance of natural, historical, cultural and wildlife experiences in southern Africa (Freemantle, 2021), represents a compelling context for examining these dynamics. While tourism is a major economic pillar in the region, contributing significantly to employment and gross domestic product (Li et al., 2018; Naseem, 2021; Zhou, 2022; Ilo et al., 2024), many destinations struggle to fully capitalise on their rich tourism resources due to infrastructural deficiencies (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2019; Zhou, 2022). Countries such as Zimbabwe and South Africa possess globally recognised attractions and favourable climatic conditions, but their ability to translate these assets into sustained tourism competitiveness varies considerably (Freemantle, 2021). These variations raise an important question: why do destinations with similar natural attractions perform differently in the tourism marketplace?

The tourism literature has long acknowledged destination infrastructure as an important component of destination competitiveness. Influential models on destination competitiveness, such as those proposed by Ritchie and Crouch (2003) and Dwyer and Kim (2003), conceptualise infrastructure as a supporting or enabling resource that facilitates accessibility and service delivery. While these frameworks remain foundational and crucial in the understanding of the role of destination infrastructure in the tourism industry, they were developed prior to major shifts in tourism driven by digitalisation, smart tourism technologies, and behavioural changes induced by crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Zhang et al., 2023). Consequently, infrastructure is still largely viewed as a backstage condition rather than as an active determinant of destination image, marketing effectiveness, and visitor loyalty.

Recent studies suggest that this conceptualisation may be insufficient. For example, Zhou (2022, p. 12460) bemoans that “very little is known with regard to the critical shifts in the global tourism sector” with respect to southern Africa. Scholars increasingly argue that physical, organisational, and technological infrastructures

directly influence destination perceptions, trust, and revisit intentions (Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019; Wang et al., 2023; Zunic et al., 2023). However, the literature remains fragmented, and few studies explicitly reposition destination infrastructure as a strategic marketing asset, particularly within developing regions such as southern Africa. This represents a significant theoretical gap, as destinations facing infrastructural constraints require marketing frameworks that recognise infrastructure not merely as support, but as a core value-creating mechanism.

Against this background, the purpose of this study is to reconceptualise destination infrastructure as a strategic destination marketing asset by synthesising insights from the relevant literature and applying it to the southern African context, with specific reference to Zimbabwe and South Africa. In other words, the study is an attempt to answer the following research question: How does destination infrastructure affect destination image, marketing effectiveness, and competitiveness in southern Africa?

The study contributes to the tourism literature in three ways. Firstly, it advances destination marketing and competitiveness theory by repositioning infrastructure from a supportive element to a central marketing determinant. Secondly, it offers a contextualised comparative synthesis of tourism in Zimbabwe and South Africa, illustrating how infrastructural configurations shape tourism outcomes. Lastly, it proposes an integrated conceptual framework that links infrastructure quality to destination image formation, visitor satisfaction, loyalty, and competitiveness. By doing so, the study provides theoretical insights and practical guidance for destination marketers and policymakers seeking to enhance tourism performance in infrastructure-constrained environments.

2. Literature Review

The tourism sector has long been recognised as a significant driver of economic growth, employment creation, and regional development (Li et al., 2018; Naseem, 2021; Zhou, 2022). Despite its resilience to external shocks such as political instability, economic downturns, and global health crises (Aramberri, 2012; Toksoz & Dalgic, 2023), tourism destinations now operate in an environment characterised by intensified global competition (Ilo et al., 2024). Post-COVID-19 recovery has further heightened this competition, as destinations must simultaneously rebuild trust, ensure safety, and deliver seamless visitor experiences (Ilo et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2023). In this context, infrastructure has emerged as a decisive factor influencing destination image, perceived risk, and competitiveness.

Southern Africa has increasingly positioned itself as a destination of choice for international tourists seeking authentic wildlife, cultural, and nature-based experiences (Zhou, 2022; Reinstein, 2023). However, most destinations within the Southern African Development Community (SADC) offer broadly similar tourism products due to shared climatic conditions, ecosystems, and cultural heritage (Woyo & Slabbert, 2021). This similarity limits differentiation based solely on attractions, suggesting that competitive advantage increasingly lies in how destinations organise, deliver, and market their tourism experiences. Infrastructure, therefore, represents a critical yet under-theorised mechanism through which destinations convert tourism resources into marketable and competitive tourism products.

2.1. Conceptualising Destination Infrastructure

Destination infrastructure is a multifaceted and foundational component of tourism systems, playing a critical role in enabling destinations to function, compete, and deliver value to visitors (Zunic et al., 2023). While some scholars conceptualise destination infrastructure broadly from social, economic, and environmental perspectives (Dalimunthe et al., 2020), others (see for example, Buhalis, 2000; Camilleri, 2018; Jangra et al., 2023; Zunic et al., 2023) define it as a combination of physical, organisational, and technological elements that collectively support the production, delivery, and consumption of tourism experiences. These perspectives converge on the understanding that infrastructure is not a unidimensional asset, but an interconnected system that shapes both destination performance and visitor perceptions.

From a physical perspective, destination infrastructure includes tangible elements, such as transport networks, accommodation facilities, attractions, signage, and visitor amenities (World Economic Forum, 2024). These components enable access to tourism products and directly influence tourists' first impressions, mobility, comfort, and functional evaluations of a destination (Zhang et al., 2020). Poorly developed physical infrastructure can limit accessibility, reduce dwell time, and increase perceived risk, thereby constraining destination competitiveness regardless of the quality of attractions available (Negm et al., 2025). Conversely, well-maintained physical infrastructure enhances the ease of consumption of tourism products and strengthens the cognitive dimension of destination image (Rheeders, 2022; Negm et al., 2025).

Apart from the physical infrastructure, organisational or institutional infrastructure plays a critical coordinating and governance role within tourism systems (Karsokiene et al., 2025). This dimension includes destination management organisations (DMOs), tourism authorities, policy frameworks, stakeholder partnerships, and community involvement structures (Bornhorst et al., 2010; Novotny

et al., 2024). Organisational infrastructure ensures quality assurance, facilitates stakeholder coordination, and aligns marketing communications with service delivery (Bornhorst et al., 2010; Karsokiene et al., 2025). Adherents of this school of thought (Karsokiene et al., 2025) further argue that in the absence of strong institutional coordination, destinations often experience fragmented branding, inconsistent service standards, and weakened trust among tourists and investors. Thus, organisational infrastructure contributes not only to operational efficiency but also to destination credibility and long-term competitiveness.

Technological infrastructure has emerged as an increasingly decisive dimension of destination infrastructure, particularly in the context of digital transformation and post-pandemic tourism (Zhang et al., 2023). This dimension includes online booking systems, electronic payment platforms, internet connectivity, social media engagement, and safety technologies (Susanto et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2022). Technological infrastructure enhances destination visibility, supports real-time interaction with tourists, and facilitates seamless travel experiences before, during, and after visitation. According to Sustacha et al. (2023), it plays a critical role in shaping destination image through online reviews, digital marketing, and virtual engagement, thereby strengthening both cognitive and affective evaluations of the destination.

Table 1. Key categories and strategic roles of destination infrastructure.

Infrastructure category	Core elements	Strategic role in destination marketing
Physical	Accommodation. Transport networks. Attractions. Signage. Visitor facilities.	Enables access and consumption of tourism products; shapes first impressions and functional image.
Organisational/ Institutional	Tourism authorities. DMOs. Policy frameworks. Stakeholder coordination. Community. Partnerships.	Ensures quality assurance, governance, and coordination of marketing communications; fosters trust and sustainability.
Technological	Online booking systems. e-payments. Wi-Fi coverage. Social media engagement. Safety technologies.	Enhances visibility, convenience, and real-time interaction; co-creates digital experiences and strengthens brand engagement.

Source: Compiled from Zhang et al. (2020); Susanto et al. (2022); Zhang et al. (2022); Herasimovich et al. (2024); Novotny et al. (2024); Sánchez-Rivero et al. (2024)

Table 1 summarises the key categories of destination infrastructure and their strategic roles in destination marketing. Instead of presenting these infrastructure elements in isolation, the table illustrates how physical, organisational, and

technological infrastructure jointly contribute to destination image formation, satisfaction, and competitiveness.

Recent studies, for example, Pillai et al. (2021) as well as Zhang et al. (2023), suggest that destination infrastructure performs distinct marketing-related functions. Zunic et al. (2023) argue that infrastructure facilitates effective communication of destination attributes, shapes visitor satisfaction by enabling smooth service delivery, and acts as a competitive differentiator. It can therefore be concluded that infrastructure actively participates in value creation rather than merely supporting other tourism components. This view challenges earlier destination competitiveness frameworks, such as those proposed by Ritchie and Crouch (2003) and Dwyer and Kim (2003), which positioned infrastructure largely as an enabling resource. As of these classical models were developed prior to widespread digitalisation and global disruptions, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, their limitations have become increasingly evident. They do not adequately account for the broader role of technological readiness, institutional coordination, and infrastructural reliability in shaping destination image, perceived safety, and tourist loyalty (Zhang et al., 2023). As tourist expectations evolve, infrastructure now influences not only accessibility and service provision but also brand credibility, emotional engagement, and repeat visitation (Munir et al., 2025).

Drawing from the reviewed literature, this study adopts the position that destination infrastructure should be conceptualised as a strategic marketing asset rather than a peripheral support mechanism. Physical, organisational, and technological infrastructure collectively shape destination image, mediate tourist experiences, and determine the extent to which destinations can convert their resource endowments into competitive advantage. By advancing this integrated conceptualisation, the study addresses a key gap in destination marketing and competitiveness literature and provides a foundation for re-examining infrastructure's role within developing tourism contexts such as southern Africa.

2.2. The Impact of Infrastructure on Destination Marketing, Image and Competitiveness

Destination marketing is a complex and multi-dimensional process that seeks to create, communicate, and deliver value propositions capable of influencing tourists' destination choice, experience, and post-visit behaviour (Pike & Page, 2014; Sotiriadis, 2020). Unlike traditional product marketing, destination marketing operates within a fragmented supply environment, requiring the coordination of multiple stakeholders while simultaneously addressing both demand-side expectations and supply-side capabilities (Bastiaansen et al., 2018). As such, the effectiveness of des-

tion marketing is inherently dependent on the quality and coherence of the underlying destination attributes that marketers seek to promote (Zhou et al., 2024).

Central to destination marketing is the concept of destination image, which has been widely recognised as a key determinant of destination choice, satisfaction, and loyalty (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007; Sotiriadis, 2020; Chettiar et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2023; Zunic et al., 2023). Destination image comprises two interrelated dimensions: the cognitive image, reflecting tourists' rational evaluation of tangible attributes, such as infrastructure quality, accessibility, safety, and service provision; and the affective image, reflecting emotional responses and overall feelings toward the destination (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Styliadis, 2022). Together, these dimensions form an overall image that guides tourists' expectations prior to visitation and shapes satisfaction and behavioural intentions after the visit.

From a marketing perspective, destination infrastructure plays a critical role in shaping both dimensions of destination image (Apriyanti et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2024). The cognitive image is strongly influenced by tourists' assessment of infrastructural attributes, such as transport efficiency, accommodation standards, technological connectivity, and the availability of amenities (Rajesh, 2023; Wang et al., 2023). At the same time, infrastructure contributes to the affective image by enabling comfort, security, convenience, and emotional engagement during the tourist experience (Styliadis, 2022). Consequently, infrastructure functions not merely as a support mechanism but as a core element that mediates how marketing messages are perceived and evaluated by tourists.

The link between destination image and destination competitiveness is well established in the tourism literature (Wang et al., 2024). Competitiveness refers to a destination's ability to attract and satisfy tourists while maintaining or improving its market position relative to competing destinations (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003; Dwyer & Kim, 2003). Classical competitiveness frameworks conceptualise destinations as systems of interrelated resources and capabilities that together form a saleable tourism product. Within these models, infrastructure is classified as a supporting or enabling resource that facilitates access and service delivery. However, such treatment understates the strategic role infrastructure plays in shaping image, perceived value, and destination differentiation. This is why recent scholarship has challenged this traditional positioning by demonstrating that infrastructure directly influences perceived competitiveness and revisit intention (Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019; Chan et al., 2022; Chan et al., 2023). In destinations offering similar attractions and climatic conditions, such as many within southern Africa, tourists increasingly differentiate destinations based on functional reliability, technological readiness, and service consistency rather than attractions alone (Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2015; Coldrey & Turpie, 2020). This suggests that infrastructure has

become a key competitive component through which destinations communicate credibility, reduce perceived risk, and reinforce brand promises.

In this context, destination marketing, image, and competitiveness should be understood as mutually reinforcing constructs, with infrastructure acting as the connecting mechanism between them. It can be deduced from the literature that while marketing efforts create expectations, infrastructure determines whether or not those expectations can be fulfilled, while the extent to which expectations are met shapes image, satisfaction, and loyalty of the destination (Bornhorst et al., 2010; Zunic et al., 2023). When infrastructure quality aligns with marketing messages, destinations strengthen their competitive position. Conversely, misalignment between promotional narratives and infrastructural realities erodes trust and undermines destination competitiveness.

In synthesising and conceptualising the investigated phenomenon, this study adopts the position that destination infrastructure is a central determinant of destination marketing effectiveness and competitiveness through its influence on destination image formation. Infrastructure shapes cognitive and affective evaluations that underpin tourist decision-making and mediates the relationship between marketing communication and visitor experience. By integrating destination marketing, image, and competitiveness through an infrastructural lens, this study addresses a key gap in existing frameworks and provides a conceptual foundation for repositioning infrastructure as a strategic marketing asset particularly in developing tourism contexts, such as southern Africa.

2.3. Southern Africa's Tourism Landscape (Zimbabwe and South Africa)

The preceding discussion demonstrates that destination marketing effectiveness and competitiveness are inseparably linked to the quality of destination infrastructure through its influence on destination image formation. While this relationship has been established conceptually, its implications are best understood when examined within specific regional contexts where infrastructural conditions vary significantly. In regions characterised by similar natural endowments but uneven infrastructural development, infrastructure becomes a decisive factor explaining divergent destination performance (Lu & Wilson, 2024). This perspective provides a critical foundation for examining the southern African tourism landscape, with particular emphasis on Zimbabwe and South Africa.

Southern Africa represents a compelling context for examining the strategic role of destination infrastructure in marketing and competitiveness. The region, comprising sixteen member states of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), is endowed with diverse natural and cultural tourism resources,

including globally recognised attractions such as Victoria Falls and Table Mountain (Arrington, 2010; George, 2010; SADC, 2022). Despite this abundance, tourism performance across the region remains uneven, suggesting that competitiveness is influenced by factors beyond attraction endowment alone (Zhou, 2022).

Both Zimbabwe and South Africa are prominent tourism destinations within southern Africa, offering wildlife-based, cultural, and nature-driven experiences under relatively similar climatic conditions (Makuzva & Ntloko, 2018; Mashapa et al., 2019; Freemantle, 2021). However, their ability to translate these resources into sustained competitive advantage differs markedly. This divergence underscores the relevance of infrastructure as a critical mediating factor between destination potential and market performance (Woyo & Slabbert, 2021).

In addition to infrastructural conditions, international tourists' perceptions of destination competitiveness in southern Africa are also shaped by broader economic and political contexts that influence perceived risk and confidence in the destination (Mandina & Du Preez, 2022). Wang et al. (2023) agree with Styliadis (2022) that destination image formation is partly cognitive, grounded in assessments of reliability, safety, and functional performance, and partly affective, reflecting tourists' feelings and comfort during the experience. In this regard, South Africa is generally positioned in international markets as having comparatively stronger institutional capacity and destination management structures, which can reinforce confidence in service delivery and destination credibility (Woyo & Slabbert, 2021; South Africa Department of Tourism, 2024). Zimbabwe, on the other hand, despite introducing the Zimbabwe Gold (ZiG) currency in 2024 in a bid to stabilise the economy (Nyoka, 2024), has faced persistent macroeconomic volatility and policy uncertainty, which may shape external perceptions of economic risk and travel reliability even where tourism products are strong (Zhou, 2022; Denedza et al., 2025). Such perceptions are significant because the broader environment in which tourism operates, especially governance responsiveness, trust, and policy coherence can influence tourists' destination evaluations and behavioural intentions (Han et al., 2024). Furthermore, regional infrastructure investment and corridor development, such as the construction of the Kazungula bridge, which directly links Zambia and Botswana, can indirectly reshape patterns of accessibility and competitiveness, reinforcing the need to interpret destination performance within a wider political economy setting (Lu & Wilson, 2024).

From an infrastructural perspective, both destinations possess strong physical attractions (Freemantle, 2021), yet differences emerge most clearly in organisational and technological dimensions (Woyo & Slabbert, 2021). South Africa has invested more extensively in transport connectivity, accommodation standards, and digital infrastructure, enabling more integrated destination marketing and ser-

vice delivery (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2019). These infrastructural strengths support coherent branding, facilitate accessibility, and enhance visitor confidence. Zimbabwe, by contrast, continues to face infrastructural fragmentation, particularly in domestic connectivity, technological readiness, and policy implementation, which constrains the effective marketing and utilisation of its tourism products (Zhou, 2022; Woyo & Slabbert, 2021). Most significantly, these disparities are not merely operational but have direct marketing implications. Infrastructure influences how destinations are perceived, the risks tourists associate with travel, and the extent to which marketing messages align with actual visitor experiences (Bornhorst et al., 2010). In this sense, the southern African context illustrates how destinations with comparable attractions can experience divergent competitiveness outcomes due to differences in infrastructural capacity rather than differences in tourism resources themselves. This then signals the critical role of destination infrastructure as a core marketing attribute rather than merely as a support structure.

A comparison between Zimbabwe and South Africa, therefore, serves a dual analytical purpose. Firstly, it provides a contextual lens through which the role of infrastructure in shaping destination image and competitiveness can be examined within a developing regional setting. Secondly, it illustrates why reconceptualising infrastructure as a strategic marketing asset is particularly relevant for southern African destinations seeking to strengthen their global positioning amid intensifying competition (Zhou, 2022). By situating the analysis within this regional context, the study constitutes a direct response to calls for deeper understanding of tourism dynamics in southern Africa and sets the stage for the comparative findings discussed in Section 4.

3. Method

This study adopted a narrative literature review approach to synthesise fragmented evidence on destination infrastructure and its marketing implications in southern Africa. As pointed out by several scholars (Green et al., 2006; Snyder, 2019; Sukhera, 2022), a narrative literature review is well suited to conceptual studies that integrate heterogeneous findings to derive theoretical insights.

In completing the above and to ensure comprehensive coverage, selected reputable scientific databases were accessed for relevant information, including Scopus, Web of Science as well as Google scholar. While Scopus and Web of Science provided high-quality peer-reviewed studies relevant to the study, Google Scholar was used to capture grey literature and regional publications relevant to southern

Africa that are related to the study phenomenon. The analysis focuses on the period between 2018 and 2025 to track changes in the role of destination infrastructure before, during and after the catastrophic Covid-19 pandemic, which triggered a series of events prompting adjustments in the tourism landscape. It was assumed that a review of the literature from this period would help to capture the paradigm shift in the conceptualisation of destination infrastructure.

The search for information was conducted between July and November 2025 using combinations of the following keywords: “destination infrastructure”, “destination marketing”, “destination image”, “destination competitiveness”, “southern Africa”, “Zimbabwe”, and “South Africa”. The search was refined by means of Boolean operators, which were used to connect categories or keywords (e.g. destination infrastructure AND destination competitiveness), to include synonyms (e.g. infrastructure OR support systems) and to exclude unrelated fields (e.g. NOT construction industry). The initial search from the three databases yielded 432 sources. After screening the titles and abstracts for relevance in relation to the role of destination infrastructure in the marketing of a destination, 152 sources remained. However, after checking whether the selected sources included an explicit discussion of infrastructure (physical, technological, or institutional) in relation to tourism marketing, competitiveness, or image, the final collection was reduced to 94 sources: 77 peer-reviewed articles, 6 policy documents, and 11 industry reports. Studies focusing solely on engineering, construction, or unrelated regional planning were excluded.

The extracted data were then grouped into five infrastructure categories: accommodation, attractions, accessibility, amenities, and technology and institutions. A comparative analysis was conducted for Zimbabwe and South Africa to contextualise regional disparities.

4. Findings and Discussion

The findings of this narrative literature review demonstrate that destination infrastructure plays a decisive role in shaping destination image, marketing effectiveness, and competitiveness in southern Africa. The comparative analysis of Zimbabwe and South Africa reveals that disparities across these dimensions largely explain differences in destination competitiveness, despite similar natural resource endowments. The findings, which are summarised in Table 2, indicate that while both countries share several similar natural and cultural attractions, they diverge significantly in how infrastructure underpins their brand narratives and visitor

experiences. South Africa exhibits a more mature and integrated destination marketing infrastructure, whereas Zimbabwe's potential remains constrained by underinvestment, fragmentation, and inconsistent policy execution.

Table 2. A summary of the findings and marketing implications of destination infrastructure.

Infrastructure Element	Zimbabwe	South Africa	Marketing Implication	Key sources
Accessibility & Connectivity	Limited international routes beyond Harare & Victoria Falls. Inconsistent domestic connectivity. Strong regional KAZA visa facilitation.	Extensive international connectivity; integrated air-land systems.	Accessibility shapes initial cognitive image and reduces perceived travel risk	Mukoroverwa & Chiutsi, (2018); Woyo & Slabbert (2021); Lopez-Gamara et al. (2025); Chettiar et al., (2022); Airports Company South Africa, (2024); Muleya, (2025).
Accommodation	High-quality options concentrated in Victoria Falls; inconsistent grading elsewhere.	Diverse, graded, nationally standardised accommodation mix.	Quality accommodation enhances satisfaction and repeat visitation	Bornhorst et al. (2010); Shereni et al. (2022).
Attractions & Amenities	Strong natural attractions. Limited complementary amenities to support natural attractions.	Natural and cultural attractions supported by robust amenities and interpretation systems	Amenities serve as experience multipliers	Musavengane, (2018); Chipunza (2020); Rheeders (2022); Zhou, (2022).
Technology	Limited broadband, fragmented digital payments, weak online integration.	Strong digital infrastructure; widespread e-payments and mobile connectivity.	Technology influences booking conversion, trust, and digital visibility.	Khan et al. (2017) Zhang et al. (2023); Chen et al. (2024); World Economic Forum (2024).
Institutional Frameworks	Fragmented policy implementation; political-economic instability.	Stronger alignment of policy and infrastructure development; safety challenges remain.	Institutional coherence affects brand credibility and investor confidence.	Michael et al. (2019); UNWTO (2019); Higuera et al. (2023); Linda & Nzama (2020); Han et al. (2024); South Africa. Department of Tourism. (2024).

Source: Authors construct, compiled from various literature sources indicated on the table

4.1. Accessibility and Connectivity

Accessibility and connectivity emerged as foundational determinants of destination competitiveness and marketing effectiveness. As established in destination competitiveness theory, ease of access significantly shapes tourists' initial cognitive evaluations of a destination and influences perceived risk, convenience, and reliability (Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Yen et al., 2021; Gonzalez-Rodríguez et al., 2023). South Africa benefits from a well-integrated multi-modal transport system that links international gateways with domestic road and air networks. Major interna-

tional airports, such as O.R. Tambo, Cape Town International, and King Shaka, serve as critical hubs that facilitate tourist mobility, enable multi-destination travel, and support integrated tourism circuits (Airports Company South Africa, 2024; Mokoma & Venter, 2023). This high level of connectivity enhances the country's destination image by signalling efficiency, safety, and reliability, which are essential attributes in competitive destination marketing.

Zimbabwe, while making progress through initiatives such as airport expansions, road rehabilitation, and the modernisation of border infrastructure (Dean, 2025; Muleya, 2025), continues to experience limited domestic connectivity and uneven transport quality beyond major nodes (Matura, 2021). These constraints restrict access to key attractions and introduce uncertainty into travel planning. However, regional initiatives, such as the KAZA Univisa facilitating cross-border travel with Zambia and Botswana, offer strategic marketing potential by positioning Zimbabwe within multi-country tourism circuits (Chingono, 2024; Montewa, 2024). The results indicate that destinations with seamless connectivity are better positioned to convert marketing interest into visitation, while limited access undermines competitiveness regardless of attraction quality.

4.2. Accommodation and Service Quality

Accommodation quality and service consistency play a central role in shaping visitor satisfaction, destination image, and loyalty (Bornhorst et al., 2010). In South Africa, the presence of a nationally coordinated grading system under the Tourism Grading Council ensures standardisation and quality assurance across accommodation types, ranging from budget establishments to international hotel chains. This consistency reinforces brand credibility and strengthens the alignment between marketing messages and on-site experience (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2019).

Zimbabwe's accommodation sector exhibits spatial concentration and varying quality. High-quality facilities are predominantly located in flagship destinations such as Victoria Falls, Hwange, and Kariba, while other regions experience inconsistencies in standards and service provision (Makuzva & Ntloko, 2021; Shereni et al., 2022). The absence of a robust, unified grading system shifts quality assessment to online tourism platforms, such as TripAdvisor and Booking.com, increasing reliance on subjective user-generated content (Basera & Mwenje, 2021). It follows from the above that reliable accommodation standards enhance trust and repeat visitation, whereas service heterogeneity weakens destination brand coherence, amplifies perceived risk and undermines marketing effectiveness.

4.3. Attractions and Amenities

While attractions motivate initial destination choice, amenities sustain and enhance the tourist experience (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). Both Zimbabwe and South Africa possess iconic natural and cultural attractions that serve as primary tourism drawcards (Arrington, 2010; George, 2010; Mashapa et al., 2019). However, competitiveness increasingly depends on the extent to which these attractions are supported by complementary amenities. South Africa demonstrates stronger integration of attractions with amenities such as signage, interpretation centres, accessibility infrastructure, restaurants, and supporting services (Chipunza, 2020; Woyo & Slabbert, 2021). These amenities enhance dwell time, comfort, and experiential depth. In Zimbabwe, despite its globally recognised attractions, limited amenities in some destinations constrain visitor engagement and overall satisfaction (Woyo & Slabbert, 2021). In view of the above it can be argued that amenities act as experience multipliers, which strengthen affective image and encourage longer stays, positive word-of-mouth, and destination loyalty (Rheeders, 2022).

4.4. Technology and Smart Tourism Readiness

Technological infrastructure has emerged as a decisive factor in contemporary destination competitiveness (Abeba, 2024; Chen et al., 2024). South Africa's relatively advanced digital ecosystem including mobile connectivity, electronic payments, destination apps, and online booking systems enhances pre-visit planning, on-site engagement, and post-visit interaction (Arnardu, 2020). These capabilities support smart tourism development and reinforce the destination's modern and reliable image. Zimbabwe's technological readiness remains constrained by inconsistent network coverage, limited digital integration, and uneven access to online payment systems (Mangwanya, 2025). These limitations reduce destination visibility, complicate trip planning, and weaken engagement with digitally oriented travellers. However, national initiatives aligned with Vision 2030¹ signal a strategic commitment to improving digital infrastructure (Gebrehiwot, 2025). The marketing implication for destinations is that technology functions as a reputational amplifier, since digital readiness enhances marketing reach, booking conversion, and trust, while technological deficiencies weaken destination competitiveness in digitally mediated markets (Chernegha et al., 2022; Polukhina et al., 2025).

¹ Zimbabwe Vision 2030 embodies the aspirations towards a Prosperous Upper Middle-Income Nation by 2030, in line with the Sustainable Development Goals and African Union Agenda 2063 (<https://zimembassydc.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Zimbabwe-Vision-2030.pdf>)

4.5. Institutional and Policy Frameworks

Institutional and policy frameworks represent an intangible yet critical dimension of destination infrastructure, influencing governance, coordination, and destination credibility (Higuera et al., 2023). Strong institutional arrangements facilitate coherent branding, effective policy implementation, and public–private collaboration (UNWTO, 2019; Amani & Chao, 2023). South Africa benefits from relatively structured tourism governance, although challenges such as crime continue to affect perceived safety and destination image (Linda & Nzama, 2020; Thorne, 2024). Zimbabwe faces persistent political and economic instability that complicates policy execution and investment confidence, despite strong safety narratives within tourism zones (Zhou, 2018; Woyo & Slabbert, 2021; Dengedza et al., 2025). From a marketing perspective, institutional coherence reinforces destination trust and investor confidence, while governance fragmentation undermines marketing credibility and long-term competitiveness.

The above findings consistently demonstrate that infrastructure influences destination marketing outcomes by shaping image formation, satisfaction, and loyalty. Accessibility, accommodation, amenities, technology, and institutional frameworks collectively determine whether destinations can fulfil marketing promises and convert resource endowments into competitive advantage. As demonstrated in Section 2.3, these infrastructural disparities explain much of the divergence in competitiveness between Zimbabwe and South Africa. This integrated understanding directly informs the conceptual framework proposed in Section 5, which positions destination infrastructure as a strategic marketing asset rather than a supportive condition

5. The proposed Destination Infrastructure–Driven Marketing Framework

The following framework positions destination infrastructure as a strategic marketing asset shaping destination image and competitiveness. Drawing on the theoretical discussion in Sections 2.1–2.3 and the comparative findings presented in Sections 4.1–4.5, the framework combines physical, technological, and institutional infrastructure as integral elements of the destination marketing process. Destination infrastructure serves as the foundation of the framework and directly influences destination image. Accessibility, accommodation quality, amenities, technological readiness, and institutional coordination shape tourists' cognitive image through evaluations of functionality, safety, and reliability, and their affec-

tive image through comfort, convenience, and emotional engagement (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Styliadis, 2022). Destination image mediates the relationship between destination infrastructure and marketing outcomes. When infrastructural performance aligns with marketing communication, tourists experience satisfaction, leading to loyalty, positive word-of-mouth (advocacy), and repeat visitation (Rajesh, 2023; Wang et al., 2023). These behavioural outcomes reinforce destination reputation and market confidence, resulting in sustained destination competitiveness (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003; Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019). Where such alignment is absent, competitiveness is weakened despite strong attraction endowment. The framework thus conceptualises destination competitiveness as the cumulative outcome of infrastructure-enabled visitor experiences. By integrating infrastructure directly into the relationship between destination marketing, image and competitiveness, the framework advances destination marketing theory and provides a strategic lens for destinations, particularly in developing regions to leverage infrastructure as a core marketing determinant.

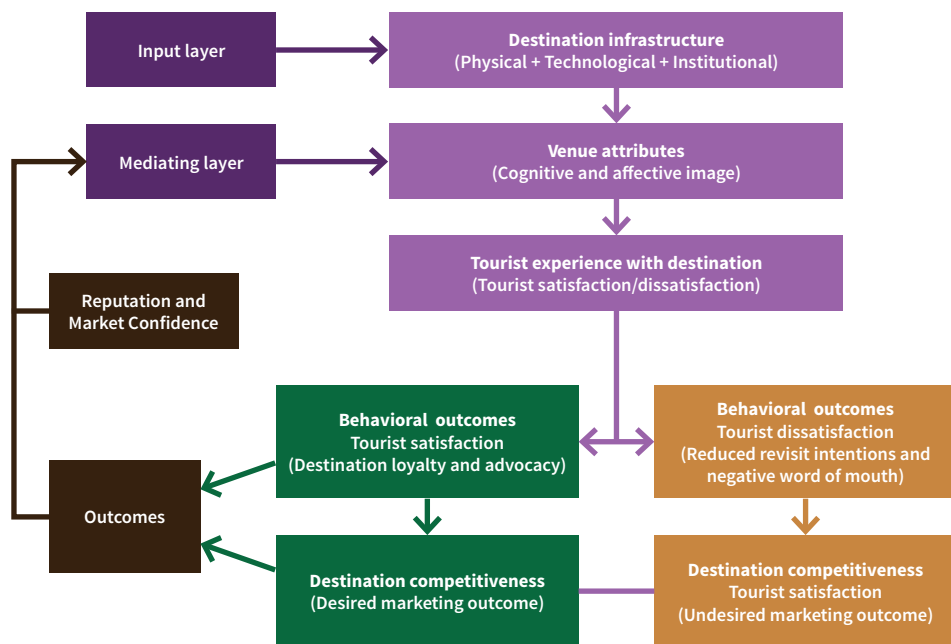


Fig. 1. Destination infrastructure-driven marketing framework

Source: Authors' construct

6. Conclusion and Implications

This study examined the strategic role of destination infrastructure in shaping destination marketing, image, and competitiveness in southern Africa, focusing on Zimbabwe and South Africa. The findings demonstrate that destination infrastructure comprising physical, technological, and institutional dimensions functions as a core marketing asset rather than a peripheral support mechanism. Differences in accessibility, accommodation quality, amenities, technological readiness, and institutional coordination largely explain divergent destination performance between the two countries, despite comparable natural attractions. The study shows that infrastructure directly shapes tourists' cognitive and affective destination images, mediates the alignment between marketing communication and visitor experience, and influences satisfaction, loyalty, and destination competitiveness.

Beyond confirming infrastructure's critical strategic role, the study highlights several conceptual and empirical gaps that should be addressed in future studies. While existing literature acknowledges infrastructure as an element of competitiveness, limited empirical research examines infrastructure as an explicit marketing determinant influencing destination image formation and behavioural outcomes. Future studies could empirically test the relationships proposed in this study using quantitative or mixed method approaches across different destination contexts. Secondly, the interaction between technological infrastructure and destination branding in developing regions remains underexplored, particularly in relation to digital trust, online visibility, and smart tourism readiness. Comparative studies across regions or longitudinal analyses examining infrastructure evolution over time would further advance understanding in this area.

The study advances destination marketing and competitiveness theory by reconceptualising infrastructure as a strategic determinant of destination image and behavioural outcomes. It extends classical competitiveness models by explicitly integrating infrastructure into the destination marketing process, offering a framework that better reflects contemporary tourism dynamics characterised by digitalisation, heightened competition, and changing tourist expectations. By positioning infrastructure as an active value-creating element rather than a background condition, the study contributes to a more nuanced theoretical understanding of destination competitiveness in developing tourism contexts.

From a managerial and policy perspective, the findings offer practical implications. Destination managers should align marketing strategies with infrastructural capacity to ensure consistency between promotional messages and on-site visitor experiences. Investments in transport connectivity, accommodation standards, digital systems, visitor amenities, and institutional coordination should be priori-

tised not only as development initiatives but also as integral components of destination branding and market positioning. Policymakers are encouraged to adopt coordinated infrastructure planning approaches that integrate tourism objectives with broader economic and digital development strategies, thereby enhancing destination credibility, reducing perceived travel risk, and strengthening long-term competitiveness.

Lastly, while the study provides valuable insights on the strategic role of destination infrastructure, it is limited by its reliance on a narrative literature review and secondary data. Future research could address this limitation by incorporating primary data from tourists, destination managers, and policymakers to empirically validate the proposed relationships. Extending the analysis beyond Zimbabwe and South Africa to other developing regions would also enhance the generalisability of the findings.

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CRedit Authorship Contribution Statement

WM: Conceptualisation, Data Curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing — original draft; **CH:** Supervision, Writing — review & editing

Declaration of competing interests

None

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Infrastruktura jako strategiczny walor marketingowy destynacji w Afryce Południowej

Streszczenie. Pomimo swojego uznanego znaczenia, infrastruktura destynacji była tradycyjnie postrzegana jako element wspierający, a nie strategiczny walor marketingowy. Niniejsze badanie stanowi próbę rewizji takiego ujęcia poprzez analizę sposobu, w jaki infrastruktura kształtuje wizerunek, zadowolenie turystów i konkurencyjność destynacji w Afryce Południowej, a szczególnie w Zimbabwe i Republice Południowej Afryki. Celem badania jest przededefiniowanie roli infrastruktury jako kluczowego elementu marketingu destynacji poprzez odwołanie się do literatury przedmiotu, dokumentów strategicznych i raportów branżowych opublikowanych w latach 2018–2025. Autorzy zidentyfikowali pięć kluczowych atrybutów infrastruktury (dostępność, zakwaterowanie, atrakcje, udogodnienia i technologia), które bezpośrednio wpływają na postrzeganie destynacji i jej pozycjonowanie rynkowe. Badanie stanowi nie tylko krok w rozwoju istniejących teorii konkurencyjności, ale zawiera także propozycję zintegrowanych ram koncepcyjnych, w których infrastruktura odgrywa rolę kluczowego waloru marketingowego. Proponowana koncepcja niesie ze sobą praktyczne implikacje dla decydentów i specjalistów od marketingu dążących do zrównoważonego rozwoju turystyki w Afryce Południowej.

Słowa kluczowe: marketing destynacji, infrastruktura destynacji, wizerunek destynacji, konkurencyjność destynacji, Afryka Południowa



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