Competitiveness factors influencing tourists' intention to return and recommend: evidence from a distressed destination

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ABSTRACT

Assessing destination competitiveness from a tourist perspective has been limited, especially for distressed destinations such as Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe has been facing ongoing political and economic challenges for more than two decades which puts pressure on the growth of the tourism industry. However, all destinations compete in the same space for tourists' attention, forcing marketers to continuously develop strategies to enhance competitiveness and increase tourist returns and recommendations. This paper focuses on identifying competitiveness factors that influence tourists' intention to return and recommend. Based on a sample of 450 international tourists to Zimbabwe, results show that unique to a distressed destination, the residents' hospitality and friendliness is the most important predictor for the intention to return. This emphasises the role of residents in making the destination more competitive and attractive. General amenities, attractions and destination management are also significant predictors of return intentions. Tourists' intentions to recommend are largely predicted by the destination's resources. Encouraging visitors to revisit and recommend can assist a distressed destination in increasing visitor numbers on a limited marketing budget. Understanding these factors could also help managers to improve the negative image of the destination.

KEYWORDS

Destination competitiveness; tourist destination; intention to return; intention to recommend; distressed destination; Zimbabwe

1. Introduction

Studies investigating destination competitiveness using demand data are limited (Pabel & Coghlan, 2011; Andreas-Caldito et al., 2014; Cronjé & Du Plessis, 2020; Neto et al., 2020). Though measuring destination competitiveness from a supply perspective has been more popular (Michael et al., 2019; Neto et al., 2020; Woyo & Slabbert, 2021), there is a need for demand studies on destination competitiveness. These studies are needed because 'tourists' perceptions play a vital role in tourism planning, participation' and formulation of marketing messages (Cronjé & Du Plessis, 2020:2). Past studies noted that such research is imperative in helping practitioners and policymakers gauge the destination's

performance compared to the competition (Ritchie & Crouch, 2000; Kozak, 2003). Furthermore, a continuous understanding of competitiveness from the demand perspective is critical because competitiveness factors are not static (Cronjé & Du Plessis, 2020; Woyo, 2022a). Based on this, 'investigating how tourists view the ability of destinations to compete within the global marketplace helps understand what attracts tourists and what is important for them when choosing a specific destination' (Reisinger et al., 2019:263).

Many studies on destination competitiveness have focused on mature tourist destinations, including Australia (Abreu-Novais et al., 2018), Canada (Dodds & Holmes, 2020), Spain and Turkey (Vinyals-Mirabent, 2019). While studies have investigated competitiveness globally, recent research focusing on destination competitiveness from a developing country perspective is limited (Du Plessis et al., 2015; Du Plessis & Saayman, 2017; Michael et al., 2019; Woyo & Slabbert, 2021). This is specifically so in the African context (Woyo, 2018; Cronjé & Du Plessis, 2020), especially for destinations with perpetual cycles of political and economic challenges like Zimbabwe (Woyo & Slabbert, 2020). As argued earlier, supplier perspectives have also dominated studies on competitiveness in Zimbabwe (see Woyo & Slabbert, 2021; Woyo, 2018, 2021). Thus, the research gap in the literature and practice is evident. Using a quantitative methodology, this study aims to determine Zimbabwe's tourism competitiveness factors and identify which factors influence tourists' intentions to return and recommend the destination.

2. A distressed destination in context

Tourism has long been recognised as the fastest-growing economic sector based on pre-COVID-19 figures (Bazargani & Kiliç, 2021). Pre-COVID-19 figures showed that it accounted for 10,4% of the world gross domestic product (GDP), created 319 million jobs in 2018, and generated US1,65 trillion (UNWTO, 2019). In Zimbabwe, tourism's contribution to the economy has long been identified and affirmed in past studies (Woyo, 2018; Zhou, 2018). Though tourism remains a key sector for Zimbabwe (Zhou, 2018), the destination has been experiencing political and economic challenges for more than two decades (Woyo & Slabbert, 2020; Musavengane & Zhou, 2021). These challenges were caused largely by the violent land reform programme pursued in 2000 by the Mugabe administration (Mkono, 2012; Woyo & Woyo, 2019). Since 2000, the country has experienced economic decline defined by hyperinflation, deflation, liquidity crisis, and cash shortages (Brett, 2008). While a reprieve was realised through the formation of the government of National Unity in 2009, the political problems continued due to the coup-d'État of 2017 (Musavengane & Zhou, 2021) that was fuelled by factions in ZANU PF and the continued grip on power by Robert Mugabe. This was compounded by the political violence instigated by the Zimbabwean soldiers to protesting citizens after the 2018 presidential elections (Woyo & Slabbert, 2020). Regardless of these challenges, Zimbabwean tourism remains a key economic sector (Zhou, 2018). This is highlighted by the number of arrivals (1.7 million tourists) and revenue generated (approx. US$1.24 billion) in 2019 (ZTA, 2019). Furthermore, tourism contributed 3,5% in 2018 and 6,5% to GDP in 2019 (WTTC, 2019).

Tourism is one of the sectors that can improve the current economic conditions of Zimbabwe. Based on the potential of tourism, there is a growing academic interest in

tourism competitiveness and the industry's performance (Crouch, 2011; Cronjé & Du Plessis, 2020; Neto et al., 2020; Bazargani & Kiliç, 2021). Despite this, evaluation of competitiveness factors in distressed destinations are yet to emerge. Distressed destinations are characterised by ongoing political and economic challenges, like Zimbabwe (Woyo & Slabbert, 2020, 2021). Woyo (2022b:1) defines a distressed destination as a destination that experiences 'lower per capita income, inability to pay lenders, and creditors, high levels of unemployment and industry closure.' In Zimbabwe, distress has largely been caused by political violence, contested elections, partisan politics (Woyo & Slabbert, 2020, Woyo, 2022b) and coups (Musavengane & Zhou, 2021). Thus, affecting the tourism industry's competitiveness and performance because such destinations struggle to attract tourists (Woyo, 2022b:1). Zimbabwe competes with 140 destinations globally (WEF, 2020), including regional peers such as Botswana, South Africa, and Namibia (Woyo, 2018). Understanding Zimbabwe's competitiveness factors requires constant investigation. Such knowledge contributes to stimulating return and recommendation intentions among travellers. Additionally, being a destination in distress already makes the Zimbabwe unattractive and less competitive. Thus, the tourists' opinion is therefore even more important for these types of destinations.

3. Destination competitiveness factors – a demand view

The term 'competitiveness' is multidimensional and complex in a tourism context since competition levels vary (Dodds & Holmes, 2020; Woyo & Slabbert, 2021). Though its definition could be problematic and lacking in universality, it is generally defined as 'the ability of the place to optimise its attractiveness for residents and non-residents, to deliver quality, innovative and attractive (offering good value for money) tourism services to consumers and to gain market shares on the domestic and global market places, while ensuring that the available resources supporting tourism are used efficiently and in a sustainable way' (Dupeyras & MacCallum, 2013:7). Though there are many tourism/destination competitiveness definitions, the focus is to be the destination of choice, increasing attractiveness, income, and market share. These aspects also underscore the importance of tourism to the economy.

The proliferation of studies on destination competitiveness is based on tourism's role in the global economy (Bazargani & Kiliç 2021; Woyo, 2022a). However, most of the studies on competitiveness investigated the determinants of tourism competitiveness (Crouch, 2011; Mazanec & Ring, 2011; Fernández et al., 2020). Furthermore, prior destination competitiveness studies were informed largely from an economics perspective and the thinking advanced by Michael Porter (Crouch & Ritchie, 1999; D'Hauteserre, 2000; Dwyer et al., 2000; Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Heath, 2003; Enright & Newton, 2004; Gooroochurn & Sugiyarto, 2005). However, Bazargani & Kiliç (2021) argue that there has been a drastic shift in the measurement of competitiveness, especially with the emergence of demand studies on destination competitiveness (see references in Table 1).

The investigation of demand perspectives is currently motivated by the fact that if destinations are to be competitive, they need to meet the needs of travellers better than the competition (Reisinger et al., 2019; Cronjé & Du Plessis, 2020; Neto et al., 2020). Thus, Neto et al. (2020:1674) argue that investigating the tourists' perception of competitiveness is imperative in helping the destination understand its competitive strengths.'

Table 1. A summary of recent studies on destination competitiveness using demand data.

Authors	Journal	Research objective	Methodology	Data analysis	Destination	Major competitiveness factors identified
Neto et al. (2020)	Current Issues in Tourism	Investigate to what extent the level of travel experience influences the importance of travellers to give attention to factors affecting destination competitiveness of a successful SCUBA diving destination.	Quantitative data collected from SCUBA diving tourists who travelled to domestic and international destinations.	Descriptive analysis, principal component analysis, K-means cluster analysis, cross-tabulation, and ANOVAs with post hoc.	Australia	Diving operations; risk perception; diving conditions; destination management; price; big wildlife encounters; diving training; general tourist attractions; technical diving; visa policy.
Cronjé & Du Plessis (2020)	Development Southern Africa	What makes South Africa competitive from a tourist point of view?	Quantitative data collected from outbound tourists to South Africa.	Descriptive analysis and exploratory factor analysis.	South Africa	Tourism services; risk and quality; unique tourism attributes; locality; entertainment and amenities.
Dodds & Holmes (2020)	Ocean & Coastal Management	Examining consumer satisfaction of beach characteristics and tourist preferences for beach selection.	Quantitative data collected from beachgoers.	T-test, multivariate regression, reliability analysis, Pearson's correlation.	Canada	Facilities; environmental education; designated swimming areas; garbage/recycling containers availability; washroom/change room offerings; beach water quality; water cleanliness; water clarity and algae presence; dog-friendly beach area; access for persons with disabilities.
Campon-Cerro et al. (2017)	Journal of Destination Marketing & Management	Understand better how rural destination loyalty functions by identifying the factors that generate loyalty.	Quantitative data collected from tourists.	Descriptive analysis and Structural Equation Modelling	Spain	Destination image, quality, value, attribute, satisfaction and loyalty.
Lee et al. (2016)	Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research	Examine key attributes that make a convention destination competitive from the convention attendees' perspective.	Quantitative data collected from conventions attendees.	Importance Performance Analysis and MANOVA.	Orlando, Columbus, Birmingham, USA	Accessibility; availability of facilities; affordability; appropriate service; agreeable environment; attractions and appealing image.
Jin & Weber (2016)	International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management	Examine perceptions of two of the three key stakeholders (exhibition organisers and visitors) and compare them with exhibitors.	Mixed-methods approach, collecting data from visitors attending nine business-to-business exhibitions.	Exploratory factor analysis, independent sample t-test; confirmatory analysis; content analysis.	China	Economic and physical environment; leisure opportunities; accessibility; leadership of the host city and the host city itself; venue facilities.
Chen et al. (2016)	Ocean & Coastal Management	Exploring the notion of destination resources and competitiveness through comparative analyses of tourists' perceptions and satisfaction.	Quantitative data collected from Taiwanese and Chinese tourists.	Descriptive statistics, t-tests, ANOVA.	Kinmen, Taiwan	Supporting factors; inherited factors, created resources, and accessory resources.

Furthermore, destinations are cautioned not to overly rely on supply views when determining their competitiveness, as tourists' perceptions could differ (Cronjé & Du Plessis, 2020). This implies that tourist perceptions are critical in informing the supply side to manage the destination's competitiveness factors (Heath, 2003; Cronjé & Du Plessis, 2020).

In a study conducted in Thailand and Australia that focused on destination competitiveness among SCUBA divers, ten destination competitiveness factors were important in influencing destination choice (Neto et al., 2020). These factors were identified as 'diving operations, risk perception, diving conditions, destination management, price, big wildlife encounters, diving training, general tourist attractions, tech diving and visa policy.' In Canada, Dodds & Holmes (2020) also identified a different set of competitiveness factors that influence beach selection, including facilities, water cleanliness, water clarity, dog-friendly beach area, and ease of access for people living with a disability. In Spain, it was concluded that destination image, quality, and value are critical for enhancing the competitiveness of rural destinations (Campon-Cerro et al., 2017). Using convention attendees in the USA, Lee et al. (2016) concluded that accessibility, facilities, affordability, attractions, and appealing image are important competitiveness factors. The competitiveness factors of China as an exhibition destination were assessed by Jin & Weber (2016) using data from exhibition organisers and visitors. This study found that the business environment, leisure opportunities, accessibility, the leadership of the host city, and venue facilities are important competitiveness factors. Cronjé & Du Plessis (2020), in their South African study, identified tourism service, risk and quality, unique tourism attributes, locality, entertainment and amenities as critical competitiveness factors. A review of past studies shows four significant factors influencing a tourist destination's competitiveness: destination resources, destination infrastructure, support services, human resources, and the business environment (see Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Enright & Newton, 2004). Most of these studies were done for large, already successful tourist destinations, with no study focusing on destinations with ongoing political and economic challenges, such as Zimbabwe.

Added to the competitiveness factors, several destination competitiveness models to investigate competitiveness in a tourism context have been proposed in the literature (Crouch & Ritchie, 1999; Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Heath, 2003; Crouch, 2011). Most of the models were derived using suppliers' perspectives (Neto et al., 2020). These models were influenced by comparative advantage and competitive advantage perspectives (Crouch & Ritchie, 1999; Woyo, 2018). Dwyer & Kim's (2003) model is perhaps one of the few models informed by demand views, borrowing much of its thinking from national and firm competitiveness. Though the tourism product is delivered through suppliers, destination attributes are co-created by travellers during use. Consequently, Crouch & Ritchie (1999) say that the attributes of a competitive and successful destination need to come from the demand side compared to the supply side.

The growing literature on competitiveness in a tourism context is evident, but its measurement's general lack of standardisation was noted. This can be attributed to the idea that no one destination is the same (Crouch, 2011; Du Plessis et al., 2015; Cronjé & Du Plessis, 2020; Woyo, 2022a), making competitiveness measurement in tourism an elusive process (Mazanec & Ring, 2011; Abreu-Novais et al., 2018). Researchers have demonstrated this by using inputs, outcomes, and different instruments to measure the

same construct. This has been exacerbated by the comparative and multidimensional character of the construct (Crouch & Ritchie, 1999). Given the lack of consensus on the most effective way to measure and identify competitiveness dimensions (Abreu-Novais et al., 2016), there is a continual need for research in this field, specifically for destinations operating in distress (Woyo & Slabbert, 2020, 2021). Understanding the competitiveness factors of Zimbabwe from a demand point of view will assist in re-establishing its position in a competitive market and grow tourist arrivals (Leung & Baloglu, 2013). Demand-specific research is also required for destinations in distress, because of the absence of a single and universally agreed set of factors for destination competitiveness which applies to all destinations (Goffi, 2013) and more so for a distressed destination.

Much of the competitiveness research has focused on prominent destinations and regions with higher political and economic stability, such as Australia, North America, Korea, and South Africa (Azzopardi & Nash, 2017). Based on this, such destinations' identified competitiveness factors may not apply to small developing economies with ongoing political and economic challenges, like Zimbabwe. Therefore, Rogerson & Baum (2020) urge researchers in Africa to consider building literature on African tourism, focusing on market confidence and the sector's performance, using context-specific data. Therefore, this study aims to determine Zimbabwe's tourism competitiveness factors and identify which factors influence tourists' intentions to return to and recommend the destination using demand data.

4. Return and recommend intentions

Loyalty is often explained as a behavioural aspect that indicates how an individual is likely to engage in a specific behaviour (Oliver, 1997). In the tourism context, behavioural loyalty has been measured using the willingness of tourists to revisit and recommend the destination (Gohary et al., 2020; Woyo & Slabbert, 2020). Behavioural loyalty is a key instrument in strengthening tourism income, profitability, and long-term success (Kim et al., 2016; Chua et al., 2017), especially for destinations that overly dependent on tourism. The intention to return generally measures the intention of travellers to re-experience the same tourism product in the same destination (Gohary et al., 2020; Woyo & Slabbert, 2020). Given the increase in competition among destinations, there is a need to attract visitors or encourage revisits. However, it is more expensive to find new travellers when compared to returning tourists. Furthermore, first-time visitors might be unsure of revisiting, while repeat tourists are easier to retain if their experiences were good (Woyo & Slabbert, 2020).

Tavitiyaman et al. (2021) argue that the increase in perceptions about the destination's image, due to enhanced travel experiences, drives tourists' intentions to recommend the destination. In a study done in China, Chen et al. (2010) argue that the quality of the destination's resources can increase the probability of tourist revisitation and recommendation. However, most of the existing studies have been concerned with measuring the role of destination image on behavioural loyalty (Chen et al., 2010), suggesting that empirical examination into the association between intention to return and recommend with competitiveness remains meagre, especially in distressed destination contexts. For many tourism destinations, repeat visitors are a desired market segment, because such tourists have a higher propensity to stay longer in the destination. Furthermore, repeat

tourists, given their level of satisfaction could help the destination with spreading positive word-of-mouth messages. Understanding this market is critical for destination managers in an economy with economic challenges, which could help them build more long-term success and revenue. Therefore, the value of revisits and recommendations should not be underestimated.

5. Methodology

5.1. Sample and procedures

A quantitative method was employed to collect data from international tourists focusing on competitiveness and intentions to return and recommend between November 2016 and January 2017. Zimbabwe receives around 2 million international tourists per year (ZIMSTAT, 2016). A minimum sample size of 384 – arrived at using Krejcie & Morgan (1970) guidelines, was deemed representative for the current study. Consequently, 500 questionnaires that were developed by the researchers (in English) were administered by fieldworkers. Before distributing the questionnaires, fieldworkers were trained by one of the researchers on how to administer the survey. Questionnaires were administered to a convenient sample of tourists when leaving attractions and returning to airports when leaving the country. This was done in Victoria Falls, Great Zimbabwe, Eastern Highlands, and Harare. 450 participants completed the survey with responses that were considered valid for further analysis.

5.2. Questionnaire and measures

The study adopted all measures from previous literature. The first part of the questionnaire first requested general information from international tourists, such as age, sex, educational level, income, the continent of origin and visit frequency. The second section collected information on the perceived destination competitiveness of Zimbabwe as a tourist destination using 37 5-point Likert scale items (1= strongly disagree; 5= strongly agree). These scales were derived from previous studies (Crouch, 2011; Chen et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2016; Jin & Weber, 2016; Campon-Cerro et al., 2017). The last section collected information about tourists' return and recommendation intentions based on their assessment of Zimbabwe's competitiveness factors. Return and recommend intentions were measured using items derived from past studies (Chen et al., 2010; Gohary et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2016). A 5-point Likert Scale measured all indicators in section 3. A pilot study with 15 academics in tourism marketing was conducted to determine the instrument's content validity. The instrument's reliability was tested through the Cronbach alpha coefficient, which was above the minimum threshold of >0.70. The university's ethics committee approved the questionnaire and method of research, and the following number was issued EMS15/10/15-02/03.

5.3. Data analysis

Data were analysed using SPSS 26.0 software. Descriptive analysis using means, frequencies and percentages were used to describe sample characteristics. Exploratory factor

analysis was conducted to identify a smaller set of competitiveness variables that can be used for further multivariate analysis. Multiple linear regression analyses were used to determine which competitiveness factors predict return and recommend intentions to a destination under distress.

6. Results

6.1. Summary of the profile

Most of the participants were female travellers between 56 and 79 years of age (see Table 2). This was followed by those who indicated the age range of 36–55 years. Most of the respondents originated from Africa (32,9%) and Europe (29,8%), and in terms of their educational qualifications 51,1 per cent of participants indicated that they were holders of a diploma/degree. Most of the respondents were married and earned on average between US$1 000 and $3 000 per month. This appears to be consistent with a recent study conducted in Zimbabwe (Mutanga et al., 2017).

6.2. Determining the competitiveness factors

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was performed to test the dataset's construct validity and identify competitiveness factors of Zimbabwe as a distressed destination (Table 3). Factors with eigenvalues greater than one were retained for further analysis because 'a significant amount of variation in the data could be explained this way' (Field, 2018:992). Factor item loadings of 0,5 were included, while those of 0,49 were excluded as they were not correlating with the factor (Field, 2018). Items that overlapped were resolved by the researchers and categorised where they are best interpreted.

The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) was used as criteria of sampling adequacy to assess the sample's suitability for EFA. The KMO value (0,789) exceeded the acceptable threshold of

Table 2. Visitors' profile.

Sex	N	%	Travel Group size	N	%
Female	252	56%	Travel alone	28	6%
Male	198	44%	2 people	231	51%
Age			3–5 people	85	19%
17–25 years	36	8%	More than 6 in a group	106	24%
26–35 years	100	22%		450	100%
36–55 years	147	33%	**Income**		
56–79 years	153	34%	<US$4500	8	1,8%
>80 years	14	3%	501–1 000	36	8,0%
	450	100%	1001–3 000	229	50,9%
Source markets			3001–5 000	128	28,4%
Asia	61	13,6%	>$5 000	49	10,9%
Africa	148	32,9%		450	
North America	81	18,0%	**Frequency of visit**		
South America	14	3,1%	First time	328	72,9%
Europe	134	29,8%	2–3 times	98	21,8%
Oceania	12	2,7%	More than 3 times	24	5,3%
Education					
No school	9	2,0%			
Non-degree	30	6,7%			
Diploma/degree	230	51,1%			
Postgraduate	181	40,2%			

Table 3. Destination competitiveness factors.

Factor	Loading	Mean	Eigenvalue	% of variance explained	Cronbach alpha
Hospitality and friendliness		4,217	3,49	30,71	0,891
Hospitality and friendliness of local people	0,582				
Friendly staff	0,775				
Courtesy in delivery of tourism services	0,773				
True African experience	0,689				
Friendliness of residents	0,596				
Destination attractions		3,745	3,263	10,43	0,934
Unique built attractions	0,803				
Unique archaeological and cultural attractions	0,715				
Unique historical attractions	0,701				
Unique cultural festivals	0,620				
Unique handicrafts/souvenirs	0,631				
Iconic attractions	0,789				
General amenities		3,461	3,059	8,08	0,768
Communication facilities	0,826				
Excellent retail outlets	0,728				
Destination transport facilities	0,574				
Entertainment	0,555				
Tourism amenities		3,289	2,789	6,96	0,749
Destination food and beverage facilities	0,744				
Destination accommodation	0,647				
Destination entertainment	0,635				
Tourism support services	0,623				
Friendly destination image	0,547				
Risk perception		3,125	1,798	4,32	0,876
Political stability	0,776				
Destination image	0,728				
The destination offers good security to travellers	0,712				
Destination management		3,096	2,107	3,98	0,737
Sanitation, hygiene, and cleanliness	0,763				
Safety and security	0,603				
Health and medical facilities	0,532				
Easy access to the tourist information	0,512				
Destination airport quality	0,501				
Commitment towards safety and security of tourists	0,500				
Price		2,678	3,423	3,91	0,712
The prices of tourism services are competitive					
The price of hospitality services is competitive					
Prices of accommodation services are competitive	0,547				
Tax policies on tourist services	0,672				
Prices of restaurants are competitive	0,534				
Conversion of home currency to USD makes it cheaper	0,654				
Prices of airport amenities are competitive	0,554				

0,5 (Hair et al., 2015). Bartlett's test of sphericity was statistically significant ($p < 0{,}001$; Chi-square = 1 943,76, df 21) and provided the support and justification of the EFA. The seven-factor EFA solution explained 67,39% of the total variance. The internal consistency of each factor's scale is confirmed by the Cronbach's alpha coefficient (>0,70), computed for each factor. The coefficients ranged from 0,712–0,934, suggesting a high consistency level (Hair et al., 2015). Thus, seven competitiveness factors were identified for a distressed destination and labelled: hospitality and friendliness ($\alpha = 0{,}891$), destination resources ($\alpha = 0{,}934$); general amenities ($\alpha = 0{,}768$); tourism amenities ($\alpha = 0{,}749$); risk perception ($\alpha = 0{,}876$); destination management ($\alpha = 0{,}737$) and price (0,712).

6.3. Intention to return and recommend a distressed destination

A multiple regression analysis was done to predict intention to return and recommend the destination using destination attractions, hospitality and friendliness, general amenities, tourism amenities, destination management, risk perceptions and politics, and price (Tables 3 and 4). The analysis of the results shows that normality of residuals, multicollinearity, and homoscedasticity assumptions were satisfied, given that no outliers were identified. In both models, the seven independent variables, statistically significantly, predicted the intention to return (F-test = 58,32, $p < 0{,}001$, $R^2 = 0{,}47$) and recommend (F = 67,56; $p < 0{,}001$, $R^2 = 0{,}391$). The multiple regression analysis shows that 47,3% of the variation in intention to return can be explained by the seven variables tested. The individual predictors of intention to return were further analysed and firstly show that hospitality and friendliness of the Zimbabwean people have a significant association with the intention to return ($\beta = 0{,}866$, $p = <0{,}032$), followed by general amenities ($\beta = 0{,}345$, $p = <0{,}000$), destination attractions ($\beta = 0{,}195$, $p = <0{,}041$) and destination management ($\beta = 0{,}187$, $p = <0{,}000$).

The multiple regression analysis shows that 39,1% of the variation in intention to recommend can be explained by the seven variables tested. The individual predictors of intention to recommend were further analysed and firstly show that destination attractions have a significant association with the intention to recommend ($\beta = 0{,}371$, $p = <0{,}000$), followed by tourism amenities ($\beta = 0{,}323$, $p = <0{,}000$), destination management ($\beta = 0{,}161$, $p = <0{,}000$) and hospitality and friendliness of the destination residents ($\beta = 0{,}159$, $p = <0{,}035$). Furthermore, regardless of what the media say concerning Zimbabwe as a safe destination, risk and perceptions were also identified to have a significant positive relationship with the intention to recommend ($\beta = 0{,}123$, $p = <0{,}0028$). (Table 5).

7. Discussion

The current study revealed the importance of seven competitiveness factors for visitors to Zimbabwe as a distressed destination. These findings contribute to risk theory application, tourism competitiveness and destination loyalty using insights from a unique distressed destination. This understanding is critical for the development of attractive and competitive tourism products. The findings revealed that the hospitality and the friendliness of the Zimbabwean people emerged as the most important dimension ($\bar{x} = 4{,}22$) that

Table 4. Multivariate regression analysis for predicting intention to return.

Dependent variables	Intention to return						
	Unstandardised coefficients		Standardised coefficients			Collinearity statistics	
Predictor variables	B	Std. error	Beta	t	Sig.	Tolerance	VIF
Constant	4,736	0,287		63,009	0,000		1,221
Hospitality and friendliness	0,423	0,047	0,866	19,674	0,032	0,730	1,354
General amenities	0,376	0,046	0,345	8,219	0,000	0,738	1,756
Tourism amenities	0,253	0,039	0,336	8,432	0,711	0,796	1,256
Destination attractions	0,563	0,052	0,195	5,827	0,041	0,819	1,369
Destination management	0,233	0,035	0,187	2,209	0,000	0,663	1,509
Risk perception and politics	0,154	0,038	0,067	2,055	0,548	0,747	1,338
Price	−0,179	0,038	−0,077	4,755	0,160	0,719	1,391
F-ratio	58,32				0,000		
R^2	0,473				0,000		

increases revisiting and recommending intentions. Although not in a distressed context, this dimension has been previously identified in the literature as a critical antecedent of tourism competitiveness in many stable destinations (Reicher & Haber, 2005; Manrai et al., 2020). This finding is quite unexpected given the challenges the Zimbabwean people are facing. Realising the important role of residents, it is important to empower them with skills and knowledge related to the tourism industry and how to react to tourists. Destination managers must emphasise the hospitality of the locals on the importance of growing the tourism industry and this factor should be part of the destination's marketing strategy. This unique finding is of value to a distressed destination as it has not been identified as critical in other competitiveness studies.

Destination attractions, as has been identified in previous studies (Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Crouch, 2011; Michael et al., 2019), emerged as the second most important competitiveness dimension ($\bar{x}$= 3,745). Even for a distressed destination, tourists still view destination attractions as a critical factor of competitiveness, influencing the intention to return and recommend. Showcasing what the destination can offer remains an important element of the marketing strategy. Satisfaction with experiences at the tourism attractions will contribute to marketing efforts, and attention should be given to the well-known and lesser-known attractions. Given the existing image of a distressed destination, it will be of value to include information related to increased security around main attractions through the Zimbabwe Republic Police Tourism Unit.

General amenities ($\bar{x}$= 3,461) and tourism amenities ($\bar{x}$= 3,289) were also identified as important competitiveness factors for Zimbabwe. Past studies in South Africa show that amenities influence destination competitiveness (Heath, 2003; Du Plessis et al., 2015; Cronjé & Du Plessis, 2020) which is a challenge for a distressed destination. Zimbabwe's current economic standing affects its ability to develop and maintain infrastructure regardless of its importance to tourism. A significant financial injection is necessary to improve the current infrastructural development and maintenance, which is not a priority for the Zimbabwean government. While this acts as a competitiveness factor with a significant impact on return and recommendation intentions, it will negatively affect competitiveness if not improved.

Tourists rated risk perception and politics as the fifth most important ($\bar{x}$= 3,125), suggesting that Zimbabwe is a unique destination. Zimbabwe can still attract visitors

Table 5. Multivariate regression analysis for predicting intention to recommend.

Dependent variable	Intention to recommend						
	Unstandardised coefficients		Standardised coefficients			Collinearity statistics	
Predictor Variables	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Tolerance	VIF
Constant	4,856	0,314		8,217	0,000		
Destination attractions	0,568	0,044	0,371	4,267	0,000	0,765	1,307
Tourism amenities	0,374	0,074	0,323	2,566	0,000	0,420	2,382
Price	−0,009	0,063	−0,236	−6,32	0,762	0,677	1,477
Destination management	0,202	0,072	0,161	17,132	0,000	0,369	2,709
Hospitality and friendliness	0,494	0,043	0,159	3,544	0,035	0,695	1,440
General amenities	0,379	0,035	0,115	3,912	0,607	0,818	1,223
Risk perception and politics	0,117	0,067	0,123	8,515	0,028	0,649	1,541
F-ratio	67,56				0,000		
R^2	0,391				0,000		

despite being labelled an unsafe destination by international media (Woyo & Slabbert, 2020; Woyo, 2022b). With most of the participants indicating that they visited Zimbabwe based on positive word-of-mouth (WOM) recommendations, the risk theory, is thus, not universally applicable. Destination marketing communication efforts should not shy away from what is happening in Zimbabwe, but they can showcase how tourists will be taken care of. Furthermore, publicity should also be on how Zimbabwe has increased the security of travellers, thus, enhancing WOM recommendations. This supports the development of a different approach to marketing for a destination in distress.

8. Conclusions and recommendations

Investigating which competitiveness factors can influence tourists' return, and recommendation intentions will be valuable to distressed destinations. This knowledge will strengthen and stretch a limited marketing budget, attract tourists, and enhance the destination's competitive position. Furthermore, such insights are crucial in assisting government and destination managers to appropriately match available resources and marketing strategies (Cronjé & Du Plessis, 2020). This paper sheds light on competitiveness factors influencing tourists' intention to return and recommendations using evidence from a distressed destination.

Even though most of the competitiveness factors identified for a distressed destination agree with those found in previous studies, it contributes to the literature gap on destination competitiveness in distressed contexts using demand data. Furthermore, a few unique findings of the study change the tourism marketing approach of these destinations. The emphasis on including residents in growing the tourism industry was not expected in Zimbabwe's circumstances. Residents have a specific role in the tourist experience as their hospitality and friendliness contribute to return intentions. The upkeep and maintenance of at least the unique destination attractions were highlighted. Even with economic challenges, the government and private sector should realise that tourist numbers will grow if they are satisfied with their experiences – consideration can be given to the marketing of selected destination attractions (well known or less known) where tourists' safety can be guarded. The data show that tourists still visit the destination even in distress, but they view the competitiveness factors differently. This is an opportunity for a destination to compete globally. The marketing strategy should focus on revisit and recommend as this will contribute to the growing visitor numbers and might outplay the negative effect of the media. Competition post-COVID-19 will increase once travel bans are lifted, and destination managers must focus on building competitive destinations, regardless of political and economic challenges.

The current study contributes to the literature by establishing the relationships between competitiveness factors and intentions to return and recommend a distressed destination. This study offers relevant insights into emerging research on travel behaviour in destinations with political instability (Farmaki et al., 2019) and ongoing economic challenges (Woyo & Slabbert, 2020). Hospitality and friendliness of the Zimbabwean people as a critical competitiveness factor, though previously identified (Reicher & Haber, 2005; Manrai et al., 2020), was identified for the first time as a competitiveness factor in a destination where residents are naturally expected to be harsh towards visitors due to the prevailing circumstances. The current study was conducted using a distressed

destination, thus providing significant insights to the literature currently dominated by studies from successful destinations in Europe, Asia and North America. From a practical point of view, these results can give hope to similar destinations that might not consider themselves competitive.

9. Limitations of the study

This current study is not without limitations. The first limitation concerns that all respondents came from the international travel market, which could be limited in terms of travel during this pandemic. The exclusion of domestic tourists can be considered a limitation as their perceptions of destination competitiveness could be different. Tourism is a complex industry, and understanding the perceptions of major stakeholders is critical. These limitations form the basis for further research. Future research could focus on domestic tourists' perceptions of what makes Zimbabwe competitive, given their prominent role in tourism recovery post-pandemic. In addition, it would be important to investigate and compare the views of all role-players. This research's outcomes would help destination managers develop and sell a more satisfying, attractive and competitive tourism product.

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Authors' contributions

Erisher Woyo: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, data analysis, Writing original and review drafts.

Elmarie Slabbert: Supervision, data analysis, writing, reviewing drafts and editing.

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