

## COVID-19: An unexpected catalyst for innovation in the Zimbabwean cultural heritage matrix

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### Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has drastically affected the cultural heritage industry in the World and Zimbabwe is no exception. Traditional heritage destinations in Zimbabwe mainly rely on the physical appearance of visitors who ordinarily buy a ticket, walk around the heritage site, consume refreshments and browse through the destination's curio shops. However, all these activities now present risks of infection and amidst a stay-at-home call, has become impossible as most countries worldwide have imposed strict travel bans and lockdowns. This paper explores the impact that COVID-19 has had on heritage tourism in Zimbabwe and argues that despite these challenges, the Zimbabwe heritage sector is facing an opportunity to reinvent and diversify itself by launching innovative ways of presenting heritage in a more contactless form through the use of new technology and media.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Zimbabwean cultural heritage matrix, new technology and media

### Introduction

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced that the world was confronted with a new global pandemic – COVID-19 virus (coronavirus disease 2019; coronavirus). The pandemic has indiscriminately impacted social, cultural and economic activities worldwide and Zimbabwe has not been spared. The pandemic caused by COVID-19 has become the biggest health crisis of the century, forcing the vast majority of countries in the world to take drastic measures against it (social distancing, quarantine, social isolation, curfews, restrictions of public meetings, suspension of mass performances, restraint of local and international travel, and closure of borders, among others). These measures have caused serious disruptions globally and in all human activities, many of which are widely narrated by mass media and social media. Moreover, the resolution of this unprecedented health challenge does not seem to be in the short-term horizon but rather something the globe has to live with.

The heritage sector world over has not been spared the impacts of this COVID-19 pandemic, with museums, cultural institutions, heritage Sites, and other historic monuments closed during strict lockdowns or activities slowing down as tourists are reluctant to travel for leisure while risking exposure to the deadly virus. Mitigation measures to reduce and slow down the spread of the virus have resulted in a significant reduction in demand and supply in the heritage tourism sector (WHO 2020; Dube 2020) <sup>[16, 21]</sup>.

In Zimbabwe, tourism ranks fourth in its contribution towards the country's earnings and 10% to Gross Domestic Product (Mzembe 2014) <sup>[7]</sup>. Cultural heritage tourism has tangible outcomes such as job creation, tax revenues, economic regeneration, inward investments and improved quality of life (Macheka, 2016; Liu and Lin, 2011; UNWTO, 2007; Richards, 2002) <sup>[5, 3, 15, 10]</sup>. Cultural heritage tourism development is a critical aspect for economic development of tourism destinations (Liu and Lin, 2011) <sup>[3]</sup>. This is attributable to the fact that cultural heritage tourism has the ability to stimulate more tourism arrivals from outside the

community (Rogerson and Visser, 2004; Snowball and Courtney, 2010; Rogerson, 2015) <sup>[12, 11, 14]</sup>, who are motivated wholly or in part by interest in the history, arts, lifestyle of the community etc. (Silberberg, 1995) <sup>[13]</sup>.

However, in the wake of COVID-19, cultural heritage tourism in Zimbabwe has slowed down and in some instances, come to a complete halt amidst lockdown measures to try and control the pandemic. This has had a direct impact on tax revenue and economic regeneration as people have either temporarily lost their jobs or lost their market which was mainly based on the arrival of tourists to these destinations.

This paper argues that despite challenges presented by the pandemic, this crisis presents an unexpected catalyst for innovation in the Zimbabwean cultural heritage matrix. It is a chance for the heritage industry to innovatively reinvent and diversify itself, attract new audiences, develop new skills and support the world's transition to the new conditions imposed by COVID-19. It argues that Zimbabwe's heritage industry needs to transform in order to survive the pandemic and that this survival highly depends on innovation and the use of new media technology to create heritage experiences that are more contactless.

### COVID-19 in Zimbabwe and its impact of heritage destinations

Coronavirus is a generic name for various flu like viruses including SARS. When the specific virus is detected, a name is given for example COVID-19. The spread of COVID-19 globally has had detrimental impacts on the social, political and economic structures of the world at large (Boldog *et al.* 2020). Since its emergence in Wuhan, China, COVID-19 has killed thousands of people, many in large urban centres worldwide with the United States being one of the most affected countries (Null and Smith 2020) <sup>[9]</sup>.

According to Zimbabwe's Ministry of health and childcare, Zimbabwe confirmed its first case of COVID-19 on 20 March 2020. The case was a 38-year-old male resident of Victoria Falls. He had travelled to the United Kingdom on 7 March

2020 and returned to the country on 15 March 2020. The Ministry of health and childcare also reported that a British tourist who had visited Victoria Falls earlier that week had tested positive for COVID-19 upon returning to the United Kingdom. Zimbabwe declared a 21-day national lockdown starting on 30 March 2020 and this marked the beginning of a series of lockdowns in the country. Despite these measures, there has been a steady increase of the virus to date.

In response to COVID-19, most countries at one point or another imposed travel restrictions, closing their aerial, maritime and terrestrial borders for several weeks and months. This led to a major decrease in international tourist travel and directly meant no international tourist coming to Zimbabwe's cultural heritage destinations. Social distance and accessibility restrictions also resulted in cultural heritage destinations like Great Zimbabwe World Heritage site either being closed for visitors or operating at limited capacity.

These COVID-19 restrictions have had their manifold social and economic effects related to the decrease in tourists. There has been a loss of income from ticket sales, Souvenir shops and other services provided at cultural heritage destinations. Graham *et al* (2000) argues that heritage is created in the present to service contemporary needs and in Zimbabwe, heritage communities derive economic empowerment from heritage sites. However, the closure of heritage tourist destinations meant all public and cultural activities had to cease and this in turn caused a significant loss of revenue and income not only for the country but for heritage communities. In light of these challenges, this paper argues that heritage practitioners and communities in Zimbabwe need to be forward thinking as the survival of the industry seems to depend its ability to innovatively reinvent itself. There is need for heritage operators to find innovative ways to attract new audiences, develop new skills and support the world's transition to its 'new normal'.

### **Potential innovative ways for Zimbabwean Heritage destinations to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 on its operations**

Urde *et al* (2007) argues that in order for heritage to be economically sustainable, it must remain relevant to its audience hence practitioners should ensure that heritage significance does not fade with time. The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a shift in public perceptions and created new consumption patterns and value system hence the need for heritage to innovate so as to meet changing demand for a contactless heritage experience in order to remain relevant for socio-economic sustainability.

Schumpeter (1883-1950) argues that innovation is the ability to encompass new products, new production processes or new markets while Livingston (2000) defines it as the process whereby new ideas are transformed, through economic activity, into a sustainable value-creating outcome. This emphasis on value creation suggests that innovation is a dual process, a combination on an invention process and an entrepreneurial process to create new economic value for stakeholders.

Although innovation has mostly been defined for the commercial industry, this paper argues that it is equally important for the heritage industry especially now, in the face of the World's new normal under the fury of a pandemic. COVID-19 has resulted in new heritage consumption patterns which are more technologically oriented hence putting pressure of heritage managers to think of innovative ways of

packaging heritage services and products in an innovative way in order to be more accessible to consumers without necessarily relying on physical visits to heritage destinations. Camarero and Garrido (2010) have argued that innovative has an important role in the heritage sector as it aims not only to create value in a new and differentiated form but also promotes an important social reaction, which goes beyond the fulfilment of visitor needs and extends to all communities in a broader sense by acting as a driver for economic change.

If Mulgan *et al* (2007) suggestion that innovation in heritage organisation is shaped by the continuous and rapidly changing requests of everyday visitors is anything to go by, heritage institutions today cannot avoid the use of new media technologies considering the strain of COVID-19 which puts restrictions on travelling and physical appearances and promotes a new norm of conducting both business and leisure online. Since its inception, the internet has revolutionised communication and hence can be used for effective and efficient cultural communication. Amid stay-at-home orders around the World and the need for social distancing to reduce the spread of COVID-19, digital adoption and consumption are on the rise, with consumers now expecting contactless technologies, among others, as a basic prerequisite for a safe heritage experience.

As potential tourists increasingly rely on mobile and online platforms as their primary source of information, heritage tourism destinations in Zimbabwe will need to cultivate an active, real and consistent online presence as ICT and social media are active tools that can support innovative cultural consumption during the COVID-19 pandemic and even after. The World health organisation has increasingly urged people to avoid touching surfaces as this could increase the risk of infection and this is breeding a new culture in heritage consumers with a preference to engage with heritage without necessarily coming into physical contact with it. This calls for heritage tourism destinations in Zimbabwe to accelerate the move to 'touch-less' technologies if they are to recover fast during and in the aftermath of COVID-19. With millions of people confined in their homes, Zimbabwe's heritage industry has been presented with an opportunity to develop and promote cultural heritage experiences to a captive audience in an innovative way that supports direct benefits to the involved organisations and practitioners. This is perhaps the opportune time for heritage practitioners in Zimbabwe to think outside the box and launch innovative alliances with tech companies as well as the private sector, to improve access capacity building programs on heritage and sustainable tourism, available online.

There is a need for the Heritage industry in Zimbabwe to facilitate Web-based visitation to their destinations as well as adopt networked interactive multimedia technologies for purposes of promotion, communication, and coordination (Frew, 2000). The COVID-19 pandemic has shifted ways through which tourists want to select and experience destinations and it has become prudent for the heritage industry to transform and reinvent itself to suit these new consumer patterns in order to survive and recover the impacts of the pandemic.

An increased interest in virtual or augmented realities is also taking place around the world in trip planning and to aid businesses in connecting with a wider audience. Heritage tourism destinations in Zimbabwe should also consider riding in the wave and use augmented reality to package their products. Augmented Reality is a technique involving an

interactive computer-based technology (Kleef *et al.* 2010) by integrating the physical and virtual worlds, enhancing user's perception of their real-world environment (Kesim and Ozarslan, 2012) and has been proven to create richer, more immersive content, enhancing visitor interaction with heritage sites without replacing the actual site while limiting physical contact. Augmented reality has been applauded for effectively spreading and enhancing the value of cultural heritage while creating new value and providing a richer experience (Jung *et al.* 2016, Han *et al.* 2014) Heritage practitioners in Zimbabwe should therefore consider this technological innovation in order to increase their competitive edge during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Integrated digital solutions that enable safe and seamless travel have to be fast-tracked to reduce physical touch points across a tourist's heritage site experience.

This however, in not going to be without challenges. Zimbabwean heritage tourism destinations seriously need to think about how they will grapple with these new concepts that they have never dealt with at such a huge magnitude.

Firstly, there are human resource challenges that have to be seriously considered. Digital transformation will place an increased demand for employees with a digital or technical skillset, though people and soft skills will also remain key. Before heritage tourism destination embark on an innovative digital transformation, there will be need for support and training for the capacity building of staff. Workforce at heritage destinations will need reskilling to enable them to deal with the digital move.

Another challenge most likely to be faced is a financial one. An Innovative digital move requires heavy investment in both hardware and software. However, the transformation need not be done overnight as heritage destinations can start by making their online presence felt of platforms that require less investment like social media pages.

### Conclusion

The Zimbabwean heritage tourism industry has vast economic potential to survive the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and this paper recommends for an innovative approach and encourages heritage practitioners and communities alike to go beyond the obvious and explore innovative opportunities to present heritage destinations in a COVID-19 compliant manner.

Although this is not an exhaustive exploratory study of innovative methods that can be used to package heritage destinations and products in the wake of COVID-19, the argument is for a forward thinking approach and for heritage tourism destinations to up their digital game and provide a virtual experience to drive revenue during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

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