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CITIES OF SUN AFTER 2100 THE WORLD WILL BE RULED FROM THE EQUATOR

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Abstract: The world's major demographic areas also become economic, cultural and decision-making centers over time. These centers were characterized in the mid-20th century by Christian cities, populated by European-Caucasians from the temperate-cold zone, where snow heralded the spirit of Christmas. Before this period, in the years 0 or 1000, the major centers were much further south, in the subtropical zone, a phenomenon that seems to be returning in this 21st century, when the cities of the world will be Buddhist, Confucian, Hindu or Muslim, populated by yellows, Indians, mestizos or Africans, creating the new world axis, tropical.

Key words: Snow Cities, demographic centers, development, decline, economic axis, new dominant routes

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INTRODUCTION

In the northern half of the planet's land, there was the world that matters, in the last 500 years, here were the powers: Europe, Russia and the Ottoman Empire, the USA and Canada, China, Japan and Korea, all the other territories in the south being their colonists and economic subjects. This is how it was understood that civilization, the way of life and inventions were meant to expand, capturing the market only horizontally, along the parallels where the same temperate climate met, on this route there being all the major industrial, cultural, financial and decision-making centers. After 1850, mainly, some development of the southern axis begins, composed of states developed according to the model of the north, taking over the way of life and technical equipment in cities that imitated the developed world, prospering also thanks to the temperate climate, when: Argentina, Uruguay, South Africa, Australia or New Zealand, held among the leading places among the states of the world, with the highest standards of living.

But after 1950, the central, equatorial-tropical and sub-tropical zones began to take shape, tending to become more populated than the temperate and

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cold zones. Independent states emerged, increasingly populated cities developed, and new trade routes were established in the east-west direction.

After 1970 it seems that East Asia, with its Japanese, Korean and more recently Chinese cities, with yellow populations and oriental religions, but still in the temperate zone, tends to dominate the world ranking. This fact, which has caused the great world centers to be in cool areas where snow falls, seems to change after 2050 when Hindu and Islamic cities, with white or yellow populations from the southern, tropical half of Asia, will take their place, and after 2100, cities located on either side of the equator, populated by black Islamists and Christians in Africa, which was at the end of the demographic explosion at that time, will become the new holders of the economic and decision-making centers of the world.

It is obvious that after the year 2000 the entire temperate zone is in an increasingly severe process of demographic decline, both in the north and in the south, and the maintenance of the number of inhabitants is ensured by the reception of ethnic emigrants from the warm area. The continuous trend is for the states in the tropics to approach and surpass the states in the temperate zone demographically and subsequently economically, while the tropical cities will occupy the first places among the most populated agglomerations in the world, by the year 2050. This is how new top ports and airports will appear, new cultural and decision-making centers and new land or maritime routes, located between the old axes in the north and south, other crowded maritime straits and other strategically positioned states than they were 2-3 centuries ago or even as we know them today. The USA will Latinize, becoming more and more Spanish, Europe will Islamize, becoming more and more Arabized and Africanized ethnically and Asianized economically and civilizationally, the same path being followed by Russia, and Japan, Korea and China, already suffering from demographic decline, will be drawn into the cultural-religious life of Southeast and South Asia, while the southern axis will be deprived of the Western model, Oceania becoming Asianized, Argentina or Chile becoming Latinized in the old style, and South Africa becoming Africanized similar to the sub-Saharan model. Just as the English city of Singapore is dominated by Chinese, Islamists, Malays and Indians, Miami or Los Angeles is becoming Latin, Marseille or Malaga are becoming Islamized and Rotterdam is currently becoming Asianized. The great world centers will be at the equator, and the old centers in the north and south will be assimilated to the new model dictated from the tropics.

METHODS

The demographic and economic evolution of the world's states and cities was the basis of the information, and the comparison and example of history are the basic methodology exposed in the article. The purpose of the work is to demonstrate the perpetual shift of world power manifested in the most imposing demographic centers, having as a result, the chance of rotation of this benefit for all the great civilizations, racial groups and world religions, located in areas with cold or warm climates.

To facilitate the understanding of the information, the names of current states were often used to identify ancient cities, even though that world was dominated by tribes and a few extensive peoples, with uncertain territorial boundaries, sparsely populated, and poorly represented administratively.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Civilization emerged at the Equator

The first major centers of civilization were developed in the warm regions of the planet, at a time when dwellings were unable to provide a living environment suitable for the temperate zone, with its cold winters. From Italy to India, Indochina and southern China, settlements became increasingly extensive until they became large metropolises that fascinated visitors and the remaining nomadic tribes in the peripheral areas (Frankopan, 2025). Here, education, craftsmanship, administration and decision-making power began to flourish, attracting wealth and developing the first luxury.

These cities were very small in number of inhabitants, having less than half a million people (currently there are over 70 urban agglomerations with more than 10 million), but for that period, they were considered mega-cities, being territorially extensive. Although it was a long period, between the years 0 and 1000 the cities only changed in the ranking, but they continued to remain with less than 500,000 inhabitants. In the year 0, 6 of the 10 most populated cities were around the Mediterranean or near it, with two cities in present-day Turkey and one each in Italy, Tunisia, Egypt and Iraq, while China had two of the centers, also in subtropical areas, and one each in Sri Lanka and Pakistan (Haywood, 2012). That is, the Roman civilization and its conquests, the extensive Indian civilization and the Chinese civilization dominated the ranking, the latter two still being in the most populated areas of the planet today.

After 500 years, although a very long period, 5 of the ten cities still remain in the ranking, being unchanged around the Mediterranean, thanks to the administration that established the exact decision-making centers, but the South Asian cities disappear, the cities in China change and multiply to three while, across the Atlantic, the first city in what would later be the New World appears. Teotihuacan with 125,000 inhabitants was the pride of America, although in the history known today, there are no very clear commercial links between this continent and the Island of the World (Europe, Asia and Africa) (Constable, 1999).

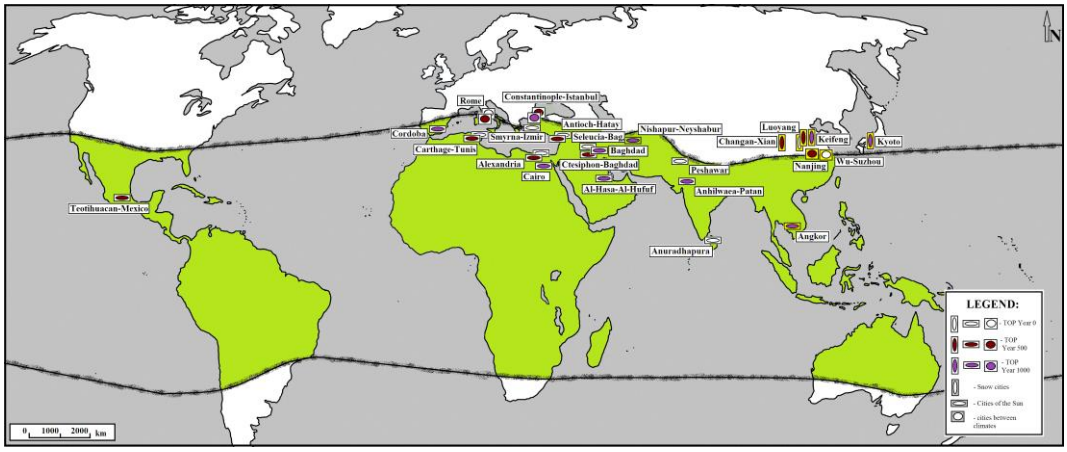

Figure 1. Top 10 cities in the world, by population, in the years: 0, 500 and 1000 (and current name)
Source: map made by the author, with information from: Braunschweig, 1997; Constable, 1999; Haywood, 2012; Frankopan, 2025

In the year 1000, that is, after another 500 years, the city of Constantinople in present-day Turkey remains, but the other cities in the ranking change, leaving America without any representation, China with one city, in Egypt the castling is made between Alexandria and Cairo and a city in Mesopotamia (present-day Iraq) is maintained, while India also returns with one city. However, the largest city becomes Cordoba in present-day Spain, with cities also appearing in the middle of the desert, in Saudi Arabia and Iran, but also the famous Angkor in the jungle of Indochina. Slightly to the north, the city of Kyoto in Japan appears in the ranking, but also in a warmer area of this archipelago (Braunschweig, 1997).

Snow cities

After 1500 and especially after 1800, more cities develop in the temperate zone, in the great empires of the world. Spain, Portugal, England, France, Austria-Hungary, Russia, Turkey (Ottoman Empire) and so on, bring Europe to the forefront of the great world cities, while on the Atlantic coast of North America modern and free cities develop. On the other side of the northern land, in Asia-Pacific, Japan and the coast of China begin, taking shape the world that matters. During this time, the warm zone becomes a colony and agricultural space for the temperate zone, supplying the latter with raw materials and workers (slaves). It inevitably comes to an outclassing of the Cities of the Sun, developing large centers consuming wood, coal and later oil and natural gas, all of which define the industrial revolution.

With the exception of Calcutta in India, most agglomerations with over 4 million inhabitants in 1950 were concentrated in the northern temperate zone, with the exception of the city of Buenos Aires in the southern temperate zone, where the lack of land greatly hindered the development of economic societies that could rival those of the north, although there were extended periods when people in Argentina or Uruguay lived as well as in France or the United States (Neguț, 2003).

The axis of the warm zone that included the Cities of the Sun, had at the level of the year 1950, a number of 13 cities with over one million inhabitants, with two cities in America, two in Africa and nine cities in South and Southeast Asia. Ten cities were populated with the white/European/Caucasian race and three cities populated with Asian yellows, with three Christian cities and three Islamic cities, two cities with East Asian religions and five Hindu cities.

During this time, the axis of the Southern Snow Cities, spread across the temperate, slightly cool zones, comprised six cities, all Christian with a white population. If we compare it with the current situation, in which only Nigeria, or Pakistan, Bangladesh, part of Indonesia or Ethiopia and the Democratic Republic of Congo combined each currently have more population than the entire populated south, we realize that it was a period of maximum success for this area. New Zealand, the extreme south of Australia, South Africa, Uruguay, Argentina, Chile or the extreme south of Brazil. This space currently has only 200 million people, with fewer percentages of the 8.2 billion people recorded on a planetary level.

But by far the most important economic and civilizational axis developed to the north, in the temperate zone of: Europe, the USA, China and Japan but also Russia between them. It soon became the dominant world, the axis of the world in true power, with centers that held the function of capital in the great world powers, such as Paris, London, Tokyo or New York. With 58 cities with

over a million inhabitants, of which 11 with over 4 million inhabitants, cities where winter brings snow and frost, the leaves of the trees are falling and the consumption of coal defined the industrialization and heating of the cities alongside wood. Furthermore, 47 of these were cities with a white population, which together with the southern axis and the tropical axis, gathered 63 cities with a white-European population, out of a total of 77 cities. Of the cities of the Northern Axis, 46 were Christian, which, together with the other cities of the Sun in the tropics and the Snow in the south, brought together a total of 55 Christian cities. The world was dominated by cities with white, Christian populations and snowy winters. Hence the racial beliefs that white populations are superior to other races, that the Christian way of praying to God is superior to the Islamic or Buddhist way of praying to the same God, and industry developed technologies that helped and were useful for the cold-temperate zone. This extended period of the World seemed to define civilization for millennia, but we realize that it was fleeting, and the Cities of the Sun are waiting to return to world domination.

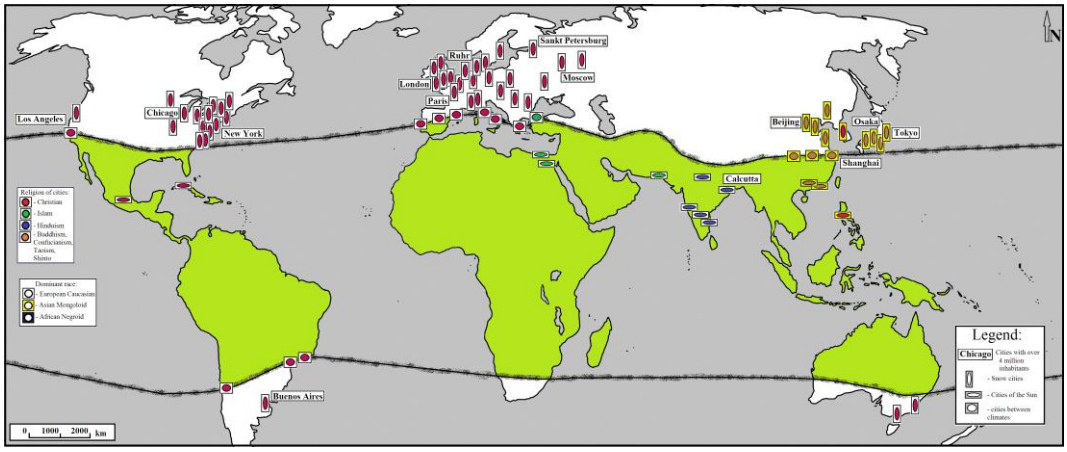

Figure 2. The world's major cities in 1950
Source: map made by the author, with information from: Bertin, 1987; Serryn, 1993

Present

After 1950, the Southern Axis and the Northern Axis are overtaken by the Cities of the Sun, which grow in stages, developing new trade and financial routes and migrations between the center and the north or south, while at the same time the technology that serves the warm zone appears. Thick clothes are reduced, agricultural crops specific to the temperate zone are reduced, and cities with a white, Christian, snowy population become fewer and fewer in the ranking of the most populated cities. In the South, Buenos Aires loses ground to the cities of Sao Paulo or Lima, Cape Town or Durban to Johannesburg and Sydney or Melbourne feel their position threatened by Brisbane.

In the North, Los Angeles is catching up with the famous city of New York, with new dominant centers emerging in the USA such as San Diego, Peoinx, Dallas, Houston, Miami or Atlanta, while Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia or Detroit is becoming increasingly forgotten. In Europe, Lyon, Marseille in France, Barcelona and Madrid in Spain or Milan and Rome in Italy are recovering after a long period in which they were dominated by German, Russian and English

cities. And in East Asia, top cities are emerging, further and further south, on the border with the warm zone, such as Wuhan, Chongqing, Chengdu, Changsha, Guiang, Kunming and especially Taipei and the Guangzhou-Hong Kong agglomeration. These are becoming large tourist cities, where the rich from cold areas move and open their new production centers, being the urban agglomerations where most of the investments in the last two to three decades have been built.

A major change comes from the immensity of the new cities. If in the year 0, 500 or 1000 the most important cities had over 0.1 million inhabitants, after 1950 the cities with over 1 million are the most extensive, reaching over 5 million people. But at the level of the year 2025, the big cities have over 10 million inhabitants, with 20 urban agglomerations exceeding 30 million (Diaconescu and Lung, 2018). If the Snow Cities were the first global mega-centers to form a strong and industrialized axis, the new axis developing from the tropics, which includes colossal and continuously growing urban agglomerations, will provoke other trade exchanges, port sizes or airports, being a model that humanity has never known before, capable of surpassing the old northern, temperate axis several times.

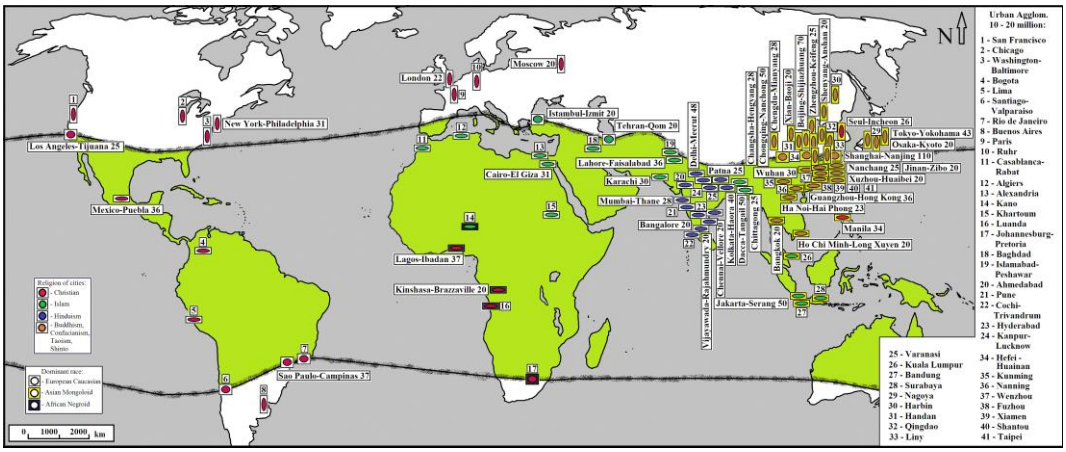

Figure 3. Megacities of the world in 2025 and their population (along with urban agglomeration)
Source: map made by the author, with information from: Pison, 2019; N.U., 2025; Diaconescu and Lung, 2018

But economic development does not keep pace with overpopulation. In general, countries are either experiencing a demographic explosion or are developing. An example is East Asia, but also Latin America and Southeast Asia, which, with the slowdown in demographic growth, have experienced high rates of economic growth, while South Asia with: India, Bangladesh or Pakistan, continues to have serious economic problems. In Africa, although economic growth was around three percent between 2010 and 2020, the higher demographic growth caused the level of per capita income to decrease slightly.

Although they are beginning to accumulate more and more wealth, the Sun Cities are still economically far from the Snow Cities, which dominate the world ranking of nominal GDP. These are great cultural centers and the headquarters of the most important multinationals and organizations. Most of the rich cities of today's world are also great cultural centers and we find them among the great cities of the world on the list of the ranking of 1950.

In 2022, there were 46 cities with a nominal GDP of over $250 billion, like or greater than Romania's GDP at that time (worldpopulationreview.com). Of these, only 10 are in the warm zone, but largely developed with investment and influence from the temperate zone, through migration within the same country, examples being the southern US or China.

If we look at the map below, we see that the warm green area has no developed economic centers, although it dominates the ranking of the most crowded cities. On the other hand, except for Houston in the USA, all the economic centers with over 500 billion US dollars, whose names I have written, are on the Northern Axis, in cold areas such as: Chicago, Boston, Moscow, London, Beijing or Seoul.

29 Christian cities with over $250 billion nominal GDP were identified, 15 cities with East Asian religions (Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Shintoism), one Hindu city and one Islamist, while the white-European-Caucasian race dominates 30 cities, and the yellow race comes with a number of 16 cities, without there being any city with the Negroid-African race in this ranking. This means a clear economic dominance of the Christian and white population, with 36 cities where winter can be frosty and only 10 cities located in a warmer area. If we count the cities with over $500 billion GDP, all are in the north, with three European cities, five East Asian cities and 8 North American cities.

In contrast, the cities that are lagging, with populations of over 10 million in the urban agglomeration, are increasingly concentrated in the warm zone, with religions and races much more diverse than they have been in the last 500 years. There are five cities in the south, 29 in the north and 49 in the warm central zone, even if we count the cities on the demarcation line between warm and temperate, placing them in the temperate zone, these being 10 in number. There are 42 cities with Indo-European-white population and 37 cities with yellow population, with Chinese urbanization being visible, but also the slight Indian comeback that brings most of the new cities to this ranking. The top 5 cities with African population also appear in Africa.

Christianity is losing ground, however, with 22 Christian cities, 18 Islamist cities with high growth rates, 13 developed cities in Hindu India, and 31 cities with East Asian religions, more than Christian or Islamist cities.

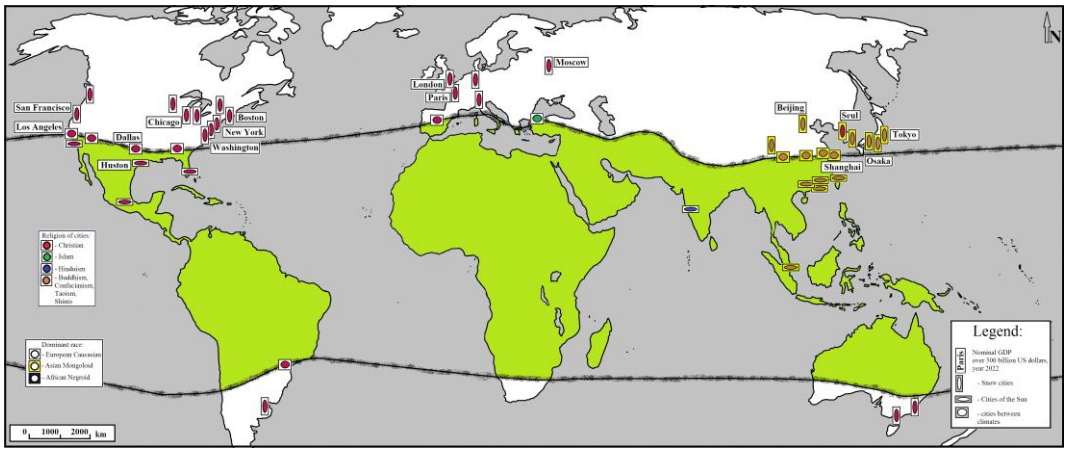

Figure 4. The richest cities in the world in 2022 (with over 250 billion US dollars, Nominal GDP)
Source: map made by the author, with information from: worldpopulationreview.com

Cities of the Sun - year 2050 and year 2100

If the Southern Axis has little land to develop, the Northern Axis is predominantly on land, inland seas, islands and straits. One part is in Eurasia crossing: France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Russia, China or Korea, while the second is in North America crossing the USA and southern Canada, between which there is the Japanese and British archipelago. The seas and rivers being frozen in winter, led to the development of railways and highways and less of the ports serving traffic from the North Pacific and North Atlantic waters.

The Southern Route encompassed Europeanized territories, where trade was south north, while the Northern Route had the great concentration of power for such an extended period that it seemed that it would never be dethroned. The overpopulation of Europe and East Asia where all the great world powers were concentrated, and between them, the USA and the USSR that divided the world after the end of World War II, all defined the wealth.

In contrast to the north, the warm Central Axis will be dominated by maritime trade, overpopulated, space-constrained, and surrounded by ever-thawing waters. Excluding Latin America, a vast but sparsely populated region with few megacities that will be the world's great agricultural and resource area, this axis is much narrower, running from Dakar to Manila, across central Africa and the southern half of Asia, with the main sea route in the Indian Ocean. The areas around this ocean are expected to contain 50% of the world's population by 2100, while the next three populated areas: Central Atlantic Africa, Asia-Pacific, and Europe, are in proximity (Diaconescu, 2020; McRae, 2022).

By 2050, an additional 53 new urban agglomerations with over 10 million inhabitants will appear, including one in the south on the border with the warm zone and 12 in the north, while the warm zone will include 40 cities. Thus, the Sun Cities reach a total of 89, and the Snow Cities will count 44 agglomerations with over 10 million people.

Religion will gain ground among Christians with 18 new cities in the ranking, East Asian religions will include 13 cities, Islam will include 11 additional cities, Hinduism will come with another 8 cities, and three cities are half Christian and half Islamist. With this addition, by 2050 East Asian religions would dominate in 44 cities followed closely by Christian cities with 42, helped by the Christianization of Sub-Saharan Africa, Islam would accumulate a number of 28 cities, and Hindus with 21. Areas populated by Christians are extensive and sparse, and areas populated by Islamists are deserts and do not allow the growth of too large agglomerations. However, Eastern religions and Hinduism, although territorially restricted, know high population densities, a phenomenon that has led to the growth of urban agglomerations.

The European-Caucasian race adds 24 cities, reaching a total of 66 cities, located all over the world, with a more significant increase among Islamic and Hindu cities. On the other hand, the yellow East Asian race comes with 16 cities, ranking again behind the cities populated by white Europeans, thus reaching a total of 53 mega-cities with over 10 million inhabitants including the suburbs, by 2050. If the Negroid African race was unrepresented until the 2023 ranking when it comes on the list with 5 cities, by 2050 it brings another 13 cities, accumulating a total of 18 cities and thus reducing the difference.

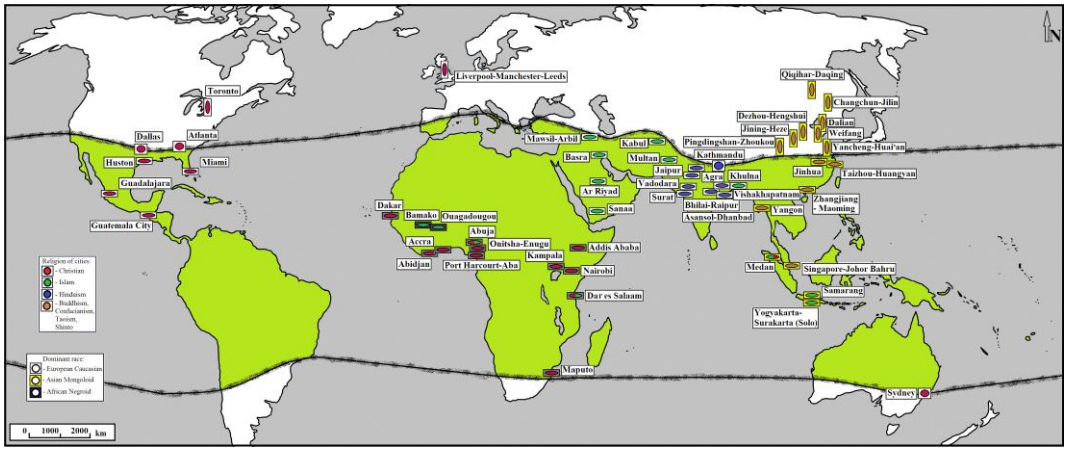

Figure 5. Other new Megacities of the World in 2050, along with urban agglomeration. Only cities exceeding 10 million inhabitants in the period 2025-2050
Source: map created by the author, with own assessments and information from: OntarioTech, 2025; Luminocity3D, 2025

A trend of diversification and growth of the Cities of the Sun to the detriment of the Cities of the Snow will be fully known towards the end of the 21st century. By the year 2100 another 87 cities will exceed 10 million inhabitants together with their suburbs. These will be 8 in America, especially in the USA where they continue to receive emigrants who will head for the big cities, while Europe or East Asia which will experience steep population declines, most likely will no longer have new mega-cities. During this time, South Asia with India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, the Islamic world of the Middle and Near East but especially Sub-Saharan Africa, regions which will exceed 70% of the world's population at that time, will experience continuous urban growth.

The Southern Axis will have one more city (in South Africa) while the Northern Axis will have another 5 cities and two on the border with the warm zone, while the Mega-Cities of the Sun will multiply with 79 new cities that will be included in the ranking.

In the end, the Snow Cities, from being absolute dominators in the period 1500-2000, reach 52 cities (without calculating the population decline in some cities) while the Sun Cities become world leaders with a number of 168 in the ranking. This is the main result of this article, when the Sun Cities where there is no snow, reach a number of more than three times that of the Snow Cities. The major world centers will not have heating systems, people will not wear gloves, hats, scarves or thick coats and the massive use of fossil fuels will cease to be relevant.

Reducing the cities in the oceanic, continental and cold temperate zones, in favor of the intertropical and subtropical zones, the calculation of cities by religion and race follows. By the year 2100, Christian mega-cities will increase by 50 and one Christian and Islamist city. The great comeback is due to the continued growth of 8 American cities, the city of Tel Aviv in Israel which is Christian-Judaism and 41 Christian cities in Sub-Saharan Africa. Practically, European Christianity will be drastically reduced in front of American Christianity, but this too in front of African Christianity. In the end, with this comeback, Christian cities will number 92 mega-cities. Muslim cities are not far behind either, with an addition of 27 cities, with 13 in Islamic Asia and 14 Arab

cities or with Negroid, Saharan populations, from the northern half of Africa. These practically double the number compared to 2050, reaching a total of 55 cities. East and Southeast Asian cities, which exceed 10 million inhabitants with a periphery, of Eastern religion, add only two new cities, increasing to 44, and thus being overtaken by cities populated by Islamists. Hinduism, which started more slowly, with a sustained demographic growth, adds 8 new cities, with 29 cities in total and managing to reduce the differences. Although the rise of Christian cities restores world primacy by far, these cities are no longer dominantly located in the cold-temperate zone and are no longer necessarily populated by the white European race.

Among the three dominant major races, the white-European-Caucasian race will come with 33 new mega-cities, most of which are Islamist, followed by Hindu and Christian, for a total of 99 cities. The yellow East Asian race will bring only two new cities, accumulating a total of 55, remaining far behind the Indo-European populations, while the Negroid-African race will be the most successful, with a return of 52 new cities in the ranking, of which 10 are Islamist, one Islamist and Christian city, and 41 Christian cities. Thus, cities populated by the African race will reach 70, ranking between cities with a white population and cities with a yellow population.

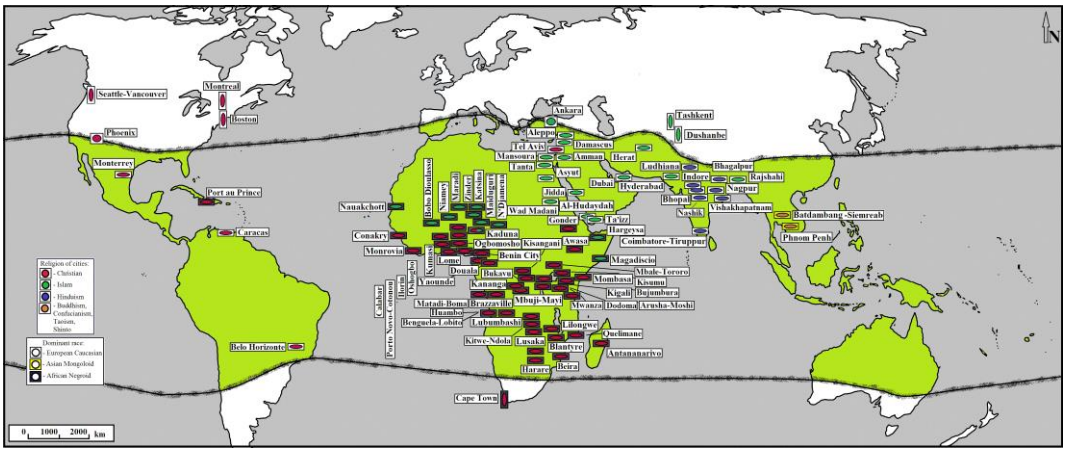

Figure 6. New urban agglomerations with over 10 million inhabitants, appearing between 2050 and 2100
Source: map created by the author, with own assessments and information from: OntarioTech 2025; N.U., 2025

CONCLUSIONS

By 2100, Egypt strategically surpasses Turkey, Turkey and Iran economically surpass Spain and Italy, Turkey demographically reaches Russia, and Egypt will have half the population of the EU, Africa alone will have the same population as: Europe, the USA and Canada, the former USSR, China, Korea and Japan combined, South Asia (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh) will double the population of East Asia (China, Korea, Japan), Southeast Asia will reach the population of China, and Central Latin America will surpass the population of the north and south, with the tropical axis going from 20% of the population of the southern and northern axes in 1900, to having 4 times more population by 2100. The strategic importance of Indonesia will surpass that of Japan, Thailand will surpass that of the united Korea, India will surpass that of China, and in the new equation, the trade axis of the Indian Ocean will be over

the Pacific or Atlantic Ocean, with serious possibilities that the trade route India (South Asia)-Africa (Sub-Saharan Africa) will surpass the US-Europe, US-China or Europe-China route, and the Sub-Saharan Africa-Latin America route with the flow of industrial products to the west and the flow of raw materials and agricultural products to the east, will be more important than the current axes: Africa-USA, Africa-Europe, South America-USA or South America-Europe.

With these changes, the large cities that together with the suburbs will exceed 10 million inhabitants, will become more numerous in the warm zone of the world. If in 1900 the majority of large cities were populated with the European race of Christian religion and in the cold zone, up to now we are witnessing a spectacular growth of cities populated with the Asian race of Buddhist, Confucian, Shinto or Taoist religion, but also in the cold zone, while the year 2100 comes with major changes, when the majority will be cities populated with the European race of Islamic or Hindu religion and cities populated with the African race and Christian religion, predominantly in the warm zone.

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BUSINESS TOURISM IN SOUTH AFRICA: GROWTH AND UNEVEN GEOGRAPHICAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract: Progress made in international business tourism scholarship largely has overlooked the spatial or geographical dimensions of business travel. The novel contribution of this article is to investigate the national performance of business tourism in South Africa between 2002 and 2024 and unpack the major geographical contours of business tourism. The leading business tourism destinations as well as those least visited business spaces are identified in an analysis of 213 local municipalities in South Africa. Key findings show that a major post-pandemic recovery has occurred of business travel in South Africa. In terms of geography, the results confirm that business tourism is spatially concentrated or polarized with business tourism dominating in the large metropolitan areas which host the bulk of the country's private sector commercial activity. Further, there is a strong performance of several business destinations associated with political and government activities, most importantly capital city functions at national and provincial level. The local level of business tourism is revealed as distinctive and influenced by an area's economic base. Case studies can illuminate the differentiated character of business tourism across levels in the national settlement system from major metropolitan centres, secondary centres and small towns.

Key words: business tourism, Global South, post-pandemic recovery, metropolitan dominance, South Africa

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INTRODUCTION

According to Davidson (1994, p. 1) business tourism "represents one of the oldest forms of tourism". The past quarter-century has witnessed the burgeoning of business travel and business tourism which consolidated its status as a vital segment of the global tourism economy (Davidson & Rogers, 2006; Celuch & Davidson, 2009; Biletska, 2011; Beaverstock et al., 2010; Rogers, 2013; Davidson, 2018, 2020). Robust growth has been recorded in flows of business tourism, both domestically and internationally, such that for certain countries it

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accounts for (at least) one-quarter of all tourism flows (Christie et al., 2014). Recently, Hernández-Andrés et al. (2025) asserted that business tourism is an important activity worldwide and has triggered the interest of international organizations charged with managing it. The World Tourism Organization (WTO) identifies business tourism as a key market niche and tracked its post-pandemic trajectory. It is disclosed that 2022 marked a phase of slow uneven recovery such that business travel rebounded at a more laggard pace than leisure travel. This was a result variously of corporate policies, digitalization and the growth of hybrid events. Post-2022, however, the evidence is of a clear trend towards the accelerated 'bounce' of business travel as part of the sustained global expansion of tourism demand and most especially for international travel (World Tourism Organization, 2024).

Among several scholars Kourkourides and Frangopoulos (2024) pinpoint that following the pandemic the market for business tourism experienced a considerable upturn. These authors project a continued growth trajectory, not least because of the acknowledgement that the rebuilding of business contacts in the post-COVID era necessitates that businesses go beyond virtual meetings. Within tourism scholarship Liu et al. (2025, p. 989) assert therefore that the "advent of the post-pandemic era has brought renewed attention to business tourism". It is against this backcloth that the intention in this paper is to offer a modest contribution to African research scholarship concerning business tourism. Across sub-Saharan Africa, business tourism is acknowledged as critical for boosting tourism economies and with wider ramifications for economic and social development (Christie et al., 2014). It was pointed out that during the pre-pandemic era that Africa was "the only continent where the number of business tourists consistently exceeds leisure tourists" (Coles & Mitchell, 2009, p. 3). Except for a handful of mainstream leisure destinations, such as Botswana, Kenya or Mauritius, it remained that "business tourism is by far the most important tourism segment in many African countries" (Coles & Mitchell, 2009, p. 34).

The novel contribution of this paper is to provide insight into the *spatial* aspects of business tourism within one country and to examine the changing patterns of business trips from a demand-side perspective. It will be argued that in the corpus of existing literature on business tourism only sparse attention has been given to the geographical structure of the business tourism economy. South Africa provides the case study for this investigation. Three sections of material follow. The next section gives a contextual literature review situating the study within an overview of key directions and themes in international business tourism scholarship. After a brief discussion on data sources, the results section unpacks the patterns of business tourism within South Africa over the two-decade period which is covered by this investigation. Key identified themes are of polarization and the markedly uneven geographical development of business tourism across South Africa.

LITERATURE CONTEXT

In a classic text Davidson (1994, p. 1) delineates the scope of business tourism as centred upon "people travelling for purposes which are related to their work". None the less, as Biletska (2011, p. 185) reflects, business tourism "is complex and multifaceted". Travel for work purposes can assume several guises with the major formal categories those of general business travel,

meetings, conferences, exhibitions and incentive travel (Swarbrooke & Horner, 2001). Although this definition is contested, the concept of business tourism usually is applied to encompass independent business trips and travelling for purposes of meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions – MICE tourism (Davidson, 1994; Davidson & Rogers, 2006; Biletska, 2011). Mainly, business tourists are comprised of employees of large corporates, government, NGOs or development agencies. Some business tourists, such as contractors, could spend several weeks at a particular location whilst others return on a regular basis on multiple occasions throughout a year. Beyond work travel for MICE purposes. other aspects of business travel can incorporate visits to suppliers, clients, contractors or for research purposes (Rivett-Carnac, 2025).

Further extensions of the traditional definitions around business travel have been recognised in recent years. Among the most significant are the activities of digital nomads. Arguably, the rise of digital nomadism is a new phenomenon in business tourism. It refers to remote working by individuals who retain employment whilst travelling (Hannonen, 2020, 2025). Lacárcel (2025) maintains that digital nomads are capitalizing on the convergence of digitalization and labour flexibility. In addition to digital nomads a further broadening of the 'Northern' definition of business tourism is required from the perspective of the Global South. Unquestionably, the distinctive character of business tourism which occurs in the Global South must be acknowledged. This is an informal economy of business tourism which has both an international and domestic dimension. Scholarly attention to this overlooked facet of business tourism was alerted by the pioneer research on cross-border traders in West Africa conducted by Timothy and Teye (2005). Subsequent research undertaken across several African countries discloses the existence of an extensive informal business economy dominated by the activities of cross-border shoppers and traders as well as a parallel domestic informal economy of shoppers and traders (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2025).

Academic research on business tourism concentrates on the Global North and is focused on the attraction of business events, MICE tourism, convention and exhibition centres, upmarket business hotels and recently the ramifications of COVID-19 for a 'new normal' of business tourism (Davidson, 2019; Liu et al., 2025). In their useful systematic review of global literature on business tourism Hernández-Andrés et al. (2025) identify several themes which characterise scholarship on the topic. The economics and politics of convention site selection processes attracted much historical interest (Zhang et al., 2011). Economic impact studies of MICE events and the perspectives of involved stakeholders was a strong focus in the early evolution of business tourism research. Indeed, the influential works produced by Getz (1989, 2008), Davidson (1993, 2018) and, by Dwyer and Forsyth (1997) constitute essential foundations for the establishment of a distinctive literature concerning the sub-field of business tourism. Key stakeholders under scrutiny were event organisers, owners or suppliers of business tourism venues. and the participants in business tourism.

In the bibliometric visualization exercise pursued by Liu et al. (2025) which is primarily centred on Northern research concerns, four leading issues were isolated in the literature. These issues relate to tourist behaviour, destination marketing, information technology, and work-family interferences of business travellers. Arguably, over recent years, different topics have moved onto the radar screen and research agenda of international business tourism. Issues

surrounding local boosterism and the investment of public funds for promoting convention tourism are explored by Davidson (2020). Other prominent concerns include sustainable development, the professionalisation of the sector, the inclusion and use of new technologies, the role of the public sector, and inevitably the ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic for business tourism (Hernández-Andrés et al., 2025). The work of Dodds and Holmes (2022) is illustrative of the growing interest in business travellers and sustainability. In terms of technologies the range of issues incorporates big data and smart MICE tourism (Zhou et al., 2024). Henn and Bathelt (2025) interrogate how firms transfer knowledge which is generated through business conferences and events. The wider role of innovation in driving competitiveness of business-tourism connected products and services is highlighted by Teixeira et al. (2025). The emergence of a recent scholarship and debates around 'bleisure' is a further extension of business tourism literature (Pinho & Marques, 2021; Batala & Slevitch, 2024; Makoni & Rogerson, 2024; Park et al., 2024).

In terms of the recent phenomenon of digital nomadism Hannonen (2020, 2025) provides the critical foundations for research progress. Arguably, remote working by digital nomads can stimulate local economies particularly in tourism-dependent regions and localities (Koufodontis & Gaki, 2025). In the international arena, in several countries local governments play 'smart' roles in encouraging and seeking to attract such nomad professionals. One example is Japan where local governments in attractive places ('vacation locations') organize crafted programmes of workcation in order to attract employees who are able to work flexibly (Hannonen, 2025). Local government facilitation of the establishment of local infrastructures such as co-working spaces is a preferred strategy for destination development and boosting the growth of this form of business tourism (Ji et al., 2024).

From a global perspective Hernández-Andrés et al. (2025) isolate that the majority production of business tourism research occurs from Europe, North America and the Asia-Pacific. In correspondence with recent trends in tourism scholarship in general, China emerges as a significant country focus for business tourism research (Zhang et al., 2011; Iacuone & Zarrilli, 2018). The mainstream of existing international literature concerning business tourism is overwhelmingly dominated by research about business tourism in the Global North or business travellers from there (Davidson, 2019; Hernández-Andrés et al., 2025). Looking at published systematic reviews of research on business tourism, it is striking that minimal attention is given to Global South issues of business tourism or of business travellers from this part of the world. Informality is a defining feature of business tourism across most cities in the Global South (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021a, 2025). Nevertheless, in the recent bibliometric visualisation review of 30 years (1994-2023) of business tourism research conducted by Liu et al. (2025), studies undertaken in the Global South are almost entirely ignored. The scant consideration given by these authors to research outside of the Global North is a remarkable omission. This is especially so in light of the appearance of an energetic scholarship on various facets of formal as well as informal business tourism in sub-Saharan Africa (C.M. Rogerson, 2005, 2011, 2014; Donaldson, 2013; J.M. Rogerson, 2014; C.M. Rogerson, 2015a, 2015b; Tichaawa, 2017; Greenberg & Rogerson, 2018; Pandy & Rogerson, 2019; C.M. Rogerson, 2019; Matiza, 2020; Tichaawa, 2021; Makoni & Rogerson, 2023; Welthagen et al., 2023; Makoni & Mearns, 2025; Rogerson &

Rogerson, 2025). In the alternative scoping of the state of global business tourism research produced by Hernández-Andrés et al. (2025), a more geographically balanced analysis is undertaken. Welcome recognition is given to the emergence of academic interest and of a research tradition based outside of the Global North.

The review by Hernández-Andrés et al. (2025) flags South Africa as the major country focus for African business tourism research. Much recent research has concentrated on the impacts and adaptations to COVID-19. Lekgau and Tichaawa (2021a) unravel the specific impacts of COVID-19 on the MICE sector in South Africa. In a series of further works the adaptive responses and resilience of the MICE sector in South Africa to the COVID-19 pandemic are under scrutiny (Lekgau & Tichaawa (2021a, 2021b, 2023). Indeed, these authors demonstrate that virtual and hybrid events represented a valuable tool for enhancing the resilience of South Africa's MICE sector during the crisis of COVID-19 (Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2022). Outside of South Africa several issues concerning both business tourism – formal and informal - have been explored in the contexts of Cameroon (Tichaawa, 2017, 2021), Kenya (Ogendo, 2018), Lesotho (Rogerson & Letsie, 2013), Rwanda (Rwigema & Celestin, 2020), Tanzania (Mwijarubi & Sabulaki, 2019) and Zimbabwe (Shereni et al., 2021; Manyeruki & Kabote, 2022; Makoni & Rogerson, 2023; Makoni et al., 2023a, 2023b; Makoni & Rogerson, 2024). Following the well-documented South African experience, Zimbabwe emerges as the second major focus for business tourism scholarship in sub-Saharan Africa.

METHODS AND SOURCES

The analysis of the geography of business tourism flows in South Africa is based upon the tourism component of the private sector S&P Global South Africa Regional eXplorer data base. This tourism data set is a subset of a consolidated platform of integrated data bases that, in the absence of official establishment and enterprise surveys, provides the most useful data available for planning purposes at a sub-national level in South Africa, with information provided down to the local municipal scale. The information base is built upon the regular collection and triangulation of primary information which is extracted by S & P Global from a wide span of both official and non-government sources. Sources include the regular surveys undertaken by South African Tourism and Statistics South Africa on international tourism arrivals and their movements as well as flows of domestic travellers within South Africa.

The collated data is reworked in order to ensure consistency across variables as well as via the application of national and subnational verification tests in order to ensure that the economic model is consistent for the measurement of business activity in South Africa. As demonstrated in previous research, the local tourism base of the Regional eXplorer data set is valuable for spatial analysis and understanding the changing structure of the tourism space economy (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2019, 2021b). The data set includes information on the tourism performance of all South African municipalities in terms of the following variables, *inter alia,* the volume of tourism trips differentiated by primary purpose of trip (leisure, business, visiting friends and relatives and 'other'); tourism trips by origin of trip (domestic or international), bednights by origin of tourist; calculation of tourism spend; and, the contribution of tourism to GDP. The data base exists from 2001 and is constantly updated with

adjustments made to reflect official changes made in municipal administrative boundaries as well as the availability of new data (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021b). This investigation draws upon the 2025 iteration which provides the historical data as amended going back to 2001. The data base covers all South Africa's nine provinces and is differentiated for 213 spatial units. These comprise 205 local municipalities and the country's eight large and designated 'metropolitan areas', namely Buffalo City (East London), Cape Town, Ekurhuleni, eThekwini (Durban), Johannesburg, Mangaung (Bloemfontein), Nelson Mandela Bay (Gqeberha), and Tshwane (Pretoria). The country's network of 44 district municipalities is not included in the analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The mainstream of research in South African tourism scholarship concerns leisure tourism. The topic of business tourism is therefore relatively undeveloped. The existing literature on South Africa concentrates around five issues, *viz.*, who are the business travellers (formal and informal); the growth and supply of dedicated business tourism products in terms of conference facilities, exhibition centres or business accommodation facilities; the nexus of business tourism, local development and urban tourism; the impacts of climate change; and, most recently, the ramifications of COVID-19 and associated MICE sector responses and adaptations. Only limited information exists about the demand-side of business travel, most especially of the spatial flows of business travellers. Understanding these flows and the relative importance of business tourism in tourism economies is useful for policy-makers.

This analysis of the demand-side of flows of business travellers is pursued using the S & P Global tourism data base. The data base allows for the construction of the geographical distribution of business trips and a profile of the relative importance of local municipalities as business tourism destinations. The term 'business trip' can refer either to an international business trip or a domestic business trip into a South African destination. It should be noted that no spatially differentiated information is available on business tourism spend which might reveal the varying impacts of formal versus informal sector business travellers. The analysis below is therefore the establishment of a geography of business tourism which is based upon numbers of business trips rather than expenditure data. Two subsections of material are now given. The first provides a picture of the growth of business travel and its relative importance compared to other forms of travel in South Africa. The second section pivots to explore geographical issues and patterns.

The Growth and Importance of Business Travel

Figure 1 reveals the trajectory in business travel trips in relation to total national trips. Figure 2 shows the proportionate share of business trips in total tourism trips.

From Figures 1 and 2 three points must be noted. First, is that Figure 1 indicates that business trips constitute only a relatively small share of total national trips in South Africa. Second, Figure 2 shows that, as indexed by volume of trips, business travel is the third purpose of travel in South Africa after VFR and leisure travel mobilities. Three, the trajectory of business travel trips reflects clearly the COVID-19 impacts with 2020 and 2021 showing a marked downturn in trips.

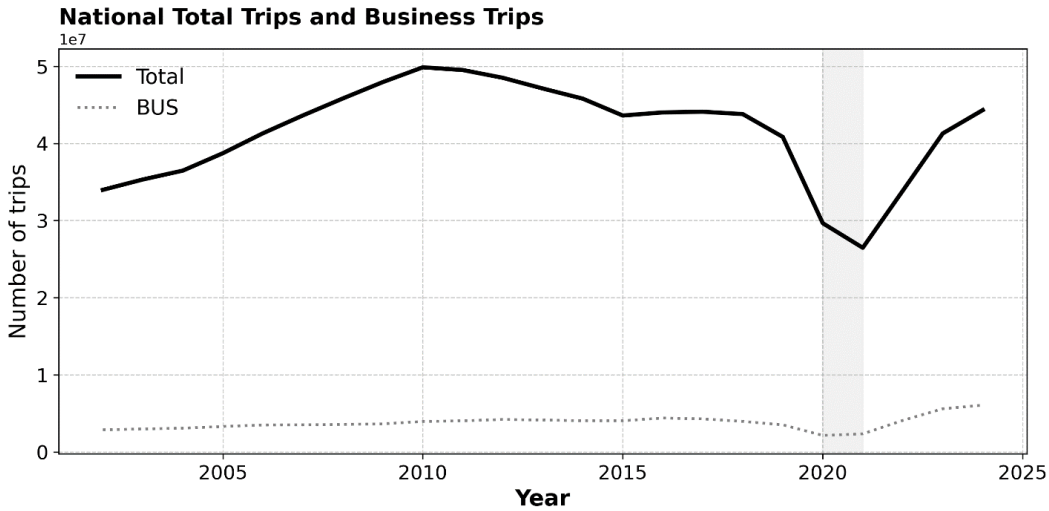

Figure 1. Comparison of Business Trips with National Total Trips 2002-2024
Note: The notation 1e7 refers to 10 million. The shaded years are those of COVID impact

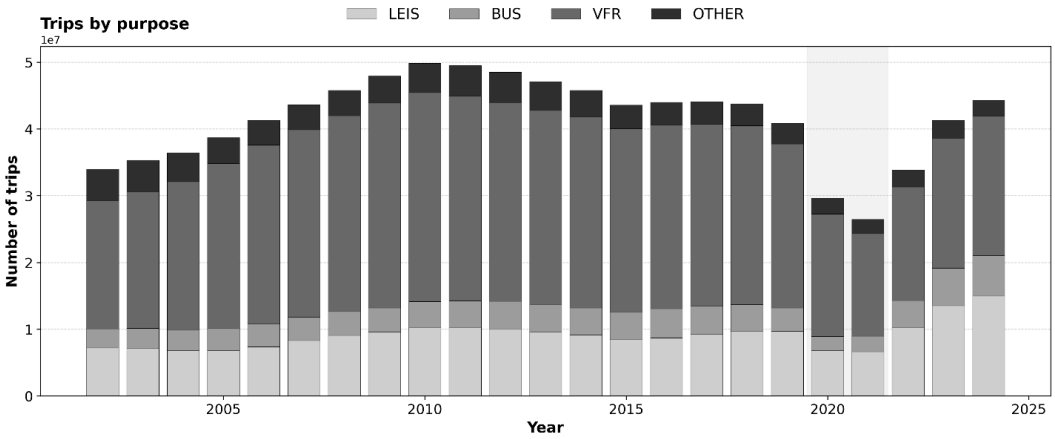

Figure 2. Trips by Purpose in South Africa, 2002-2024
Note: The notation 1e7 refers to 10 million.

Table 1. South Africa: Selected Years - Volume and Share of Business Trips

Year	Business Trips ('000s)	% Share of Business in Total National Trips
2002	2 862	8.42
2010	3 943	7.91
2019	3 506	8.58
2021	2 339	8.83
2024	6 056	13.67

Table 1 gives more specific detail of business travel and its share of total trips for five selected years. In terms of the study period the rationale for the selection was as follows. 2002 is the base year and when Johannesburg hosted the World Summit on Sustainable Development, a major trigger event for the

building of a business tourism economy in South Africa's major city (Rogerson, 2002). The tourism economy of South Africa was boosted in 2010 by the organization and impacts of the mega-event, FIFA Soccer World Cup. The year 2019 is selected as the final 'normal' travel year before the COVID-19 pandemic affected the trajectory of the national tourism economy for the subsequent two years (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021b). Finally, 2024 is the most recent year for which S & P data currently is available. It marks a year in the post-COVID recovery of the national tourism economy with visible signals of the appearance of a 'new normal' in tourism flows for South Africa.

Table 1 highlights that following a consistent rise in business travel during the 2000s decade, the volume of business travel was steady in the period 2010-19 with a rise in the share of business trips to national tourism trips by 2019. This phase was followed, however, by the major decline which was experienced between 2019-2021. What is striking is the remarkable recovery of business travel during the post-2021 period. By 2024 there is recorded the highest ever volume of business trips which reached over 6 million for South Africa (Table 1). The sharp upturn in the volume of business travel is reflected also in the growth in the relative significance of business travel in total national tourism trips. Alongside an expansion in the volume of business travel this growth in the proportionate share of business travel is accounted for also by the laggard post-pandemic recovery in the volume of VFR travel. From accounting for approximately 8 percent of total tourism trips for South Africa from 2010-2021, by 2024 business travel mobilities represent 13 percent of total trips (Table 1).

These results point to the strong 'bounce' and recovery in business travel in the post-pandemic years. Such findings are confirmed by those produced by Onderwater (2023) who looked at the business travel mobilities of staff working in an international consultancy firm based in South Africa. It was revealed in that investigation that once lockdown and other travel restrictions were lifted in South Africa "business travel picked up to a higher level than previously expected for the future" (Onderwater, 2023, p. 5). The conclusion of that small corporate study was that "on average business travel is resembling the Old-Normal situation" (Onderwater, 2023, p. 6).

The Geography of Business Tourism

The spatial distribution of business travel within South Africa can be unpacked by examining two sets of issues. First, is the absolute flows of business travellers at a local municipality destination level. This is investigated both in terms of those most visited business tourism destinations and the (little examined) least visited or worst-performing business travel destinations. Second, the relative concentration of business tourism in destinations is interrogated.

Table 2 ranks the leading 20 business tourism destinations in South Africa on the basis of their proportionate shares of total national business trips. It is demonstrated that business tourism is dominated by South Africa's eight major metropolitan areas which all are consistently among the top 10 business destinations. South Africa's major city and commercial heart, the City of Johannesburg is clearly the most significant business travel destination. With its cluster of headquarter offices of leading South African corporates and other large commercial enterprises Johannesburg enjoys the greatest concentration of business hotels and conference/exhibition facilities in the country (J.M.

Rogerson, 2014). In addition, Johannesburg inner city is the major national hub for informal business travellers as the city is a magnet for cross-border shopper/traders arriving from surrounding African countries as well as cohorts of domestic informal shopper/traders (Rogerson, 2018; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2025). In November 2025 the Johannesburg business economy was boosted massively by the decision that the city would be the venue for the Group of Twenty (G20) meeting of Heads of State and Governments. This mega-event of government leaders alongside various other associated people's summits and NGO gatherings around the city offered major financial benefits for the city's tourism and hospitality economy. The political decision by national government that Johannesburg rather than Cape Town or Durban would host this gathering.

Table 2. Leading 20 Municipalities' Share of National Total Business Trips for Discrete Years

Rank	% National Total							
	2010		2019		2021		2024	
1	City of Johannesburg	15.52	City of Johannesburg	13.48	City of Johannesburg	12.12	City of Johannesburg	12.49
2	City of Tshwane	8.90	City of Tshwane	8.03	City of Tshwane	6.58	City of Tshwane	6.58
3	City of Cape Town	6.48	Ekurhuleni	5.52	City of Mbombela	6.22	Ekurhuleni	5.50
4	eThekwini	6.33	City of Cape Town	5.32	Ekurhuleni	4.88	City of Mbombela	5.23
5	Ekurhuleni	5.72	eThekwini	4.72	eThekwini	4.31	eThekwini	4.42
6	City of Mbombela	3.35	City of Mbombela	4.58	City of Cape Town	3.52	City of Cape Town	3.71
7	Mangaung	2.30	Mangaung	2.85	Mangaung	2.70	Mangaung	3.03
8	Polokwane	2.15	Polokwane	2.06	Nelson Mandela Bay	2.40	Nelson Mandela Bay	2.11
9	Nelson Mandela Bay	2.13	Nelson Mandela Bay	1.99	Kouga	2.00	Buffalo City	1.95
10	Buffalo City	1.30	Buffalo City	1.25	Buffalo City	1.71	Kouga	1.53
11	Rustenburg	1.23	Nkomazi	1.22	Nkomazi	1.61	Nkomazi	1.39
12	Madibeng	1.12	Thaba Chweu	1.20	Thaba Chweu	1.59	Thaba Chweu	1.36
13	Mogale City	0.96	Emalahleni	1.05	Polokwane	1.39	Polokwane	1.29
14	Thaba Chweu	0.92	Kouga	1.02	Bushbuckridge	1.10	Dihlabeng	1.17
15	Nkomazi	0.90	Ba-Phalaborwa	0.92	Ndlambe	1.09	Emalahleni	1.12
16	Ba-Phalaborwa	0.89	Dihlabeng	0.92	Ray Nkonyeni	1.06	Ray Nkonyeni	1.08
17	Emalahleni	0.87	Ray Nkonyeni	0.92	Dihlabeng	1.04	Msunduzi	1.07
18	Ray Nkonyeni	0.87	Greater Tzaneen	0.90	Emalahleni	1.04	Sol Plaatje	0.95
19	Greater Tzaneen	0.84	Mogale City	0.90	Dr Beyers Naude	1.02	Bushbuckridge	0.95
20	Emfuleni	0.76	Madibeng	0.89	Dawid Kruiper	0.95	Steve Tshwete	0.86

Following Johannesburg, the second largest business travel destination is the City of Tshwane, with Pretoria its core. As the location of national government ministries, foreign diplomatic representations as well as many international agencies the City of Tshwane benefits greatly from flows of business travellers which are linked to national government as well as a lesser flow of corporate travel. The next most significant group of metropolitan centres for business travel are the two coastal cities of Cape Town, and Durban (eThekwini) and Ekurhuleni, which adjoins Johannesburg and is the location of O.R. Tambo Airport, South Africa's major international gateway. In all these cities there are established convention centres and large hotels with conference facilities. Finally, the metropolitan centres of Mangaung (Bloemfontein) in Free State province and the two other coastal metropolitan municipalities of Buffalo City and Nelson Mandela Bay (Gqeberha) are regularly ranked in the ten most important municipalities based upon their share of the national business trips.

Outside the metropolitan centres Table 2 discloses that among the list of leading business destinations there are a number of what would be recognised

as 'secondary centres' in the South African settlement system. Further, Table 2 indicates the existence of a group of small-town local municipalities which serve significant functions for business tourism. The most important secondary city is Mbombela, the provincial capital of Mpumalanga. The provincial government function provides once again one anchor for the city's economy of business travel, including for political gatherings. Arguably, other factors are the city's geographical proximity both to Kruger National Park making it an attractive MICE destination and its proximity to the border with Mozambique lending Mbombela a role in business travel associated with Mozambique. By 2024 Mbombela was the fourth most important business travel destination in South Africa ahead of both the major and larger coastal cities of Cape Town and Durban. Other notable secondary cities that must be recognised are Polokwane and Kimberley (Sol Plaatje municipality), respectively the capitals of Limpopo and Northern Cape provinces. The capital function again reinforces the importance of the location of government activities and meetings in impacting the uneven geographical development of business travel.

Arguably, locational proximity to the commercial markets of Johannesburg and Pretoria is one critical factor for the performance of the municipalities of Rustenburg, Madibeng, Emfuleni and Mogale City. The specific characteristics of many other of the second-tier business tourism destinations listed in Table 2 remain to be revealed. The value of local case studies to provide fresh insight on business tourism is exemplified by Rivett-Carnac's (2025) research in the 'Coalfields' region of Mpumalanga. Of interest is the regular appearance in the list of leading business destinations of the Mpumalanga municipality of Emalahleni (Witbank) and the 2024 listing also of Steve Tshwete (Middelburg). These regions of Mpumalanga are distinctive as business destinations because their local economies are anchored on coal mining, electricity power generation and a declining industrial base. According to Rivett-Carnac (2025), tourism in the Coalfields area of Mpumalanga concentrates upon Emalahleni and Steve Tshwete and is organised to support a distinctive form of local business tourism. The local business tourism economy and the focus of accommodation service providers are structured to support the area's industrial base of coal mining, coal power generation and other industries, with a segment of government meetings industry. The towns of Witbank (Emalahleni) and Middelburg are major regional foci for the hosting of business events with local accommodation service providers mainly catering to business tourism markets (Rivett-Carnac, 2025). For these two towns, government meetings, business travellers from the mines and from Eskom (the parastatal national electricity power provider) with their suppliers/contractors are critical business markets for local accommodation suppliers. Overall, it is observed that "independent business travel and business events are both common in the Coalfields, with business events particularly common in Emalahleni and Middelburg" (Rivett-Carnac, 2025, p. 71).

Turning to the opposite end of the business tourism spectrum in South Africa, certain reflections can be offered concerning the distribution of least visited (as indexed by volume of trips) or worst-performing local municipalities. The 20 least visited local municipalities are shown in ranked order on Table 3; the listings show the province in which the local municipality is located. It is observed from Table 3 that the least visited areas are dominated by remote spaces of South Africa, which in many respects are those 'left-behind' in terms of national economic development. The limited business travel to these largely

rural and small-town destinations is therefore 'the other side of the coin' to the flows of business travellers into South Africa's biggest centres of commercial activity. Geographically, these least visited business destinations concentrate in the poorer economically disadvantaged regions of the country with the lowest numbers of business trips recorded in mainly rural areas of the Eastern Cape and parts of KwaZulu-Natal province. As a general pattern, remote local municipalities which incorporate spaces of the former Bantustans or Homelands established in the apartheid period are among the worst performing as business tourism destinations. Examples would be Ntabankulu in Eastern Cape and Nkandla in KwaZulu-Natal, two local municipalities which since 2010 are consistently listed as those least visited by business travellers. In addition to these former Homeland spaces the cohort of local municipalities which are ranked as least visited for business travellers includes some which are situated in sparsely populated and arid areas of the provinces of Western Cape and Northern Cape.

Table 3. Worst-Performing Municipalities' Share of National Total Business Trips for Discrete Years

Rank	% National Total							
	2010		2019		2021		2024	
1	Ntabankulu (EC)	0.008	Ntabankulu (EC)	0.008	Ntabankulu (EC)	0.009	Ntabankulu (EC)	0.011
2	Nkandla (KZN)	0.012	Nkandla (KZN)	0.012	Nkandla (KZN)	0.012	Nkandla (KZN)	0.013
3	Khai-Ma (NC)	0.012	Khai-Ma (NC)	0.012	Laingsburg (WC)	0.021	Laingsburg (WC)	0.021
4	Renosterberg (NC)	0.013	Renosterberg (NC)	0.013	Dannhauser (KZN)	0.026	Maphumulo (KZN)	0.023
5	Magareng (NC)	0.014	Magareng (NC)	0.014	Emadlangeni (KZN)	0.026	Umzimkhulu (KZN)	0.025
6	Maphumulo (KZN)	0.017	Maphumulo (KZN)	0.017	Maphumulo (KZN)	0.026	Ubuhlebezwe (KZN)	0.027
7	Dannhauser (KZN)	0.020	Dannhauser (KZN)	0.020	Umzimkhulu (KZN)	0.029	Dannhauser (KZN)	0.030
8	Emadlangeni (KZN)	0.020	Emadlangeni (KZN)	0.020	Ubuhlebezwe (KZN)	0.030	Emadlangeni (KZN)	0.030
9	Thembelihle (NC)	0.021	Thembelihle (NC)	0.021	Ratlou (NW)	0.031	Nqutu (KZN)	0.031
10	!Kheis (NC)	0.023	!Kheis (NC)	0.023	Magareng (NC)	0.032	Prince Albert (WC)	0.033
11	Kareeberg (NC)	0.023	Kareeberg (NC)	0.023	Nongoma (KZN)	0.032	Magareng (NC)	0.034
12	Richtersveld (NC)	0.024	Richtersveld (NC)	0.024	Nqutu (KZN)	0.033	Ratlou (NW)	0.037
13	Laingsburg (WC)	0.027	Laingsburg (WC)	0.027	Prince Albert (WC)	0.033	Emalahleni (EC)	0.037
14	Sakhisizwe (EC)	0.027	Sakhisizwe (EC)	0.027	Mamusa (NW)	0.033	Sakhisizwe (EC)	0.038
15	Nongoma (KZN)	0.027	Nongoma (KZN)	0.027	Sakhisizwe (EC)	0.035	Dr AB Xuma (EC)	0.040
16	Umuziwabantu (KZN)	0.027	Umuziwabantu (KZN)	0.027	Emalahleni (EC)	0.035	Umuziwabantu (KZN)	0.041
17	Siyathemba (NC)	0.028	Siyathemba (NC)	0.028	Dr AB Xuma (EC)	0.037	Mamusa (NW)	0.042
18	Ubuhlebezwe (KZN)	0.028	Ubuhlebezwe (KZN)	0.028	Kagisano/Molopo (NW)	0.038	Khai-Ma (NC)	0.043
19	Umzimkhulu (KZN)	0.028	Umzimkhulu (KZN)	0.028	Mhlontlo (EC)	0.040	Nongoma (KZN)	0.044
20	Umzimvubu (EC)	0.028	Umzimvubu (EC)	0.028	Umuziwabantu (KZN)	0.042	Kagisano/Molopo (NW)	0.047

Note: EC – Eastern Cape; KZN – KwaZulu-Natal; NC – Northern Cape; NW – North west; WC – Western Cape

Table 4. The Polarization of Business Travel: Share of National Trips (%)

	2010	2019	2021	2024
Metropolitan Areas	48.7	43.2	38.2	39.8
Leading 5 destinations	43.0	37.6	34.1	34.3
Leading 10 destinations	54.2	49.8	46.4	46.5
Leading 20 destinations	63.5	59.7	58.3	57.8

Table 4 provides a picture of the extent of concentration of business tourism in South Africa over the period 2010-2024. In earlier research it was disclosed that the distribution of business trips and travel is more geographically concentrated or polarized than is the case for leisure travel and far more so than the much more dispersed spatial pattern which is associated with VFR travel (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021b). Table 4 confirms the polarization of business travel around South Africa's eight metropolitan areas. Of note is that taken with the share contributed by the other 12 most visited destinations for business travel, almost 60 percent of all business travel in South Africa is accounted for. Nevertheless, it is observed from Table 4 that the extent of polarization is showing signs of weakening. Between 2010 and 2024 the share of business travel accounted for by metropolitan areas has eroded from 48.7 percent in 2010 to 39.8 percent in 2024. Likewise, parallel declines are evident in the shares of the leading 5, 10 and 20 destinations between 2010 and 2024. These signals of a greater spread of business travel point to the need for further case study research to unpack local opportunities and changes which are taking place.

CONCLUSION

Towards the close of the decade of the 2000s, tourism scholars were alerted that the predisposition in tourism studies to focus upon the holiday sector had not encouraged research into other key components of urban tourism, such as business tourism (Williams, 2009). Arguably, since that warning there has been a growth and maturation in international business tourism scholarship including a recognition of its vital role in urban tourism. Indeed, recently Liu et al. (2025, p. 989) could affirm that in global tourism scholarship the topic of "business tourism is once again in the spotlight". Nevertheless, one major blind-spot in international research on business tourism concerns its spatial or geographical dimensions within countries.

The novel contribution of this paper is examining the national performance of business tourism in South Africa and isolating the major geographical contours of business tourism through identification of the leading business tourism destinations. Several striking findings emerge from the analysis. First, is that a remarkable post-pandemic recovery has occurred regarding business travel in South Africa with the highest ever volume of trips recorded in 2024 despite the shifts towards virtual meetings which occurred during the COVID-19 years. Second, the findings confirm that, relative to leisure travel or visits to friends and relatives travel, business tourism is geographically concentrated or polarized. Three, the results show the predominance of business tourism in the large metropolitan areas which host most private sector commercial activity and especially the 'command centres' or headquarters of leading corporates. Further, it was observed there is recorded a strong performance of certain business destinations which are associated with political and government activities – most

importantly capital city functions at national and provincial level. Four, the local level of business tourism can be distinctive and influenced by the area's economic base. Indeed, in final analysis, a research challenge is to advance our limited understanding of the differentiated character of business tourism at all levels in the national settlement system from major metropolitan centres, secondary centres and small towns. Local differences matter and can be best approached through case studies.

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THE DOCTRINE OF "ECONOMIC INFANTRY": A GEOECONOMIC CORRELATIONAL ANALYSIS OF INFRASTRUCTURE OUTSOURCING AND NATIONAL SOVEREIGNTY – THE CASE OF SLOVAKIA

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Abstract: This paper analyzes the sophisticated mechanisms of geoeconomic penetration within the European Union, focusing on the strategic confrontation between Hungary and Slovakia. Building upon the author's framework regarding geoeconomic positioning in Central Europe (Šarić, 2018), this research introduces the concept of state-backed corporate expansion, tripartite doctrine encompassing energy dominance (MOL Group), financial leverage (OTP Bank), and the socio-economic mobilization of ethnic minorities as instruments of state power. Utilizing a hybrid methodology that combines PEST and SWOT diagnostics with Pearson's correlation coefficient, the paper quantifies the relationship between Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in critical infrastructure and the gradual erosion of national logistical autonomy. The findings indicate a high positive correlation (\(r>0.87\)) between the outsourcing of strategic energy and transport services and the emergence of what the author defines as "Infrastructural Siege" and "Financial Occupation."

Key words: Geoeconomics, Economic Infantry, National Sovereignty, Infrastructure Outsourcing, Pearson Correlation, MOL, OTP, Slovakia

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INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, geoeconomics has evolved beyond simple economic cooperation, becoming a strategic instrument of statecraft (Blackwill & Harris, 2016) used to achieve national interests through economic means rather than military force. This shift represents what (Luttwak, 1990) famously described as the "logic of conflict in the grammar of commerce," where trade and investment patterns reflect geopolitical objectives.

Building on this theoretical foundation, the author has previously identified specific geoeconomic dynamics between Croatia and Hungary (Šarić, 2018),

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emphasizing that positioning within the European Union requires a profound understanding of asymmetric economic interdependence. In subsequent studies, the focus expanded to the energy sector as a key lever of power (Šarić, 2023), while a case study of Italy (Šarić, 2024) demonstrated how nation-states utilize geoeconomic tools to strengthen their regional positions. Particularly significant is the analysis of Hungarian port construction in Italy (Šarić, 2025a), which serves as an empirical example of strategic control over logistics hubs outside national borders.

This doctrine-which the author conceptually defines as "Economic Infantry" (referring to state-backed national champions acting as primary vehicles for outward strategic investment) - has been addressed in the context of strategic vulnerabilities in the Republic of Croatia (Šarić, 2025b) and Romania (Šarić, 2025c). However, it reaches its most complex form in the case of Slovakia. In this context, the outsourcing of logistics and energy services transcends standard business logic, evolving into a systematic reconfiguration of economic sovereignty.

The author's research is based on longitudinal observations initiated in 2010, during the transformation of Hungarian foreign policy from a reactive posture to a proactive geoeconomic strategy. While this assertive approach is strongly associated with the administration of Viktor Orbán, it is crucial to detect the continuity tracing back to the government of Ferenc Gyurcsány. It was during that period that the strategic positioning of Hungarian "national champions" (e.g., MOL, OTP) began in Central and Eastern European markets—a process subsequently accelerated and institutionalized after 2010.

This transition from "silent penetration" to an assertive geoeconomic strategy was scientifically articulated by the author in 2018 (Šarić, 2018), suggesting that Hungary's regional approach seeks to establish a high degree of economic influence over neighboring strategic assets. Today, after fifteen years of this doctrine's maturation, it manifests as a synchronized geoeconomic framework utilizing energy, finance, and infrastructure as integrated tools for regional influence. This paper aims to empirically examine these dynamics by analyzing correlation coefficients between capital entry and control over strategic sectors, testing the hypothesis of systematic geoeconomic expansion in Central Europe.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodological framework of this paper employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative environmental scanning with quantitative relational analysis. This hybrid model is designed to deconstruct complex geoeconomic processes that often transcend standard market transactions, focusing on the intersection of corporate expansion and state strategic objectives.

Analytical Framework: Environmental and Strategic Mapping

The first phase of the research utilizes PEST analysis (Political, Economic, Social, and Technological) not merely as a managerial tool, but as a systemic environmental scanning method to identify the macro-determinants of the geoeconomic landscape. Building upon previous applications of PEST in strategic planning (Šarić, 2017), this framework categorizes the levers used in the projection of economic influence from Hungary toward Slovakia.

The second phase involves a SWOT analysis, which serves as a diagnostic instrument for mapping the structural vulnerabilities of the host state. In this context, the SWOT matrix is utilized to identify "strategic gaps" in national economic sectors. Following the model developed by the author

(Šarić, 2021), these gaps are analyzed as entry points for foreign strategic actors (e.g., MOL, OTP), facilitating what is conceptually termed as "strategic infrastructural integration."

Quantitative Analysis: Relational Testing via Pearson's Correlation

To supplement the qualitative findings, the study applies Pearson's correlation coefficient (r) to examine the strength and direction of the relationship between key geoeconomic variables over a ten-year period (2015–2025).

The analysis tests the relationship between:

• Geoeconomic Input (Independent Variable X): Indicators of capital inflow, including Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), state-backed foundation subsidies (e.g., BGA), and credit exposure through national banking champions (OTP).

• Sectoral Impact (Dependent Variable Y): Indicators of domestic market share in critical infrastructure, changes in strategic land ownership, and the degree of cross-border logistical integration.

The correlation is calculated using the standard formula:

$$r=\sum(xi-\bar{x})(yi-\bar{y})\sum(xi-\bar{x})2\sum(yi-\bar{y})2\sqrt$$

Recognizing the limitations of simple correlation, this study treats values above 0.70 as strong statistical indicators of a synchronized geoeconomic pattern. To address the distinction between correlation and causality, the results are interpreted alongside qualitative process-tracing, allowing for a more robust identification of strategic intent behind the observed economic trends. This approach ensures that the findings provide an empirically grounded basis for analyzing regional geoeconomic shifts. Given the specific nature of geoeconomic data and the ten-year observation window (n=11), Pearson's r is used as an exploratory tool to identify trends, rather than a definitive proof of causality. The results are contextualized with qualitative analysis to ensure robustness.

HUNGARIAN GEOECONOMIC STRATEGY AND THE SLOVAK CONTEXT

The contemporary Hungarian geoeconomic strategy in 2026 transcends traditional market logic, integrating corporate expansion into a broader national framework that impacts regional economic sovereignty. Such a framework aligns with the conceptualization of regional powers using geoeconomic tools to establish hierarchical relations or strategic dominance (Wigell, 2016). As analyzed in the author's previous research (Šarić, 2025), this strategy reflects a model of asymmetric regional interdependence, where strategic sectors serve as levers for geopolitical influence.

Energy as a Strategic Instrument: The Role of MOL and MET Group

A defining characteristic of Hungarian geoeconomics is the alignment of corporate interests with national strategic objectives. Prime Minister Orbán underscored this connection by stating: "If anyone questions the integrity of MOL employees, we will always respond. However, if anyone forms an alliance with MOL, they will form a strong alliance with the Hungarian people" (Šarić, 2023). This narrative suggests that "national champions" like MOL Group and MET Group are not merely commercial entities but strategic instruments of foreign policy. Through significant control over refinery capacities and cross-border energy trade (ChemXplore, 2026), these actors establish a high degree of energy-sector influence within the Slovak market.

Interplay of Identity Politics and Economic Influence

Slovak Hungarian relations are characterized by a complex interplay between identity disputes and economic penetration. Legislative tensions, such as those surrounding the State Language Act (Act No. 270/1995 Coll.) and the 2010 Hungarian Citizenship Act (Venice Commission, 2011), function as catalysts for establishing socio-economic cohesion. The instrumentalization of national minority issues through state-funded foundations, primarily Bethlen Gábor Alap (BGA Zrt.), allows for a targeted entry into the Slovak economic space. In this context, Hungary acts not only as a foreign investor but as a strategic institutional actor, utilizing financial support models to strengthen its regional footprint - a process conceptually defined by the author as "strategic financial integration."

The historical continuity of these tensions - from the border incidents of 2008 near Komárno and Dunajská Streda to high-level diplomatic friction - has often preceded or accompanied geoeconomic expansion. The shift from Robert Fico's initial characterization of extraterritorial citizenship as a "security threat" (Slovak Spectator, 2010) toward a more pragmatic coexistence highlights the role of energy dependence in shaping political relations. This transition indicates that the Hungarian energy and logistics sectors have become pillars of regional stability, transforming what was once open conflict into a system of institutionalized economic influence.

The doctrinal framework of Hungarian geoeconomics is further elucidated by public policy articulations, most notably during the 2023 Tusványos speech (Orbán, 2023a). By redefining sovereignty through the lens of resource control and equating corporate integrity (MOL) with national integrity (Orbán, 2023b), the Hungarian leadership confirms that energy and logistics assets in Slovakia (as well as in Italy and Romania) are viewed as integrated components of state power rather than isolated market assets.

PEST ANALYSIS: Hungarian Geoeconomic Influence in Slovakia

To identify the macro-environmental determinants of Hungarian geoeconomic influence, this study utilizes a PEST framework. This allows for a systematic categorization of how political and economic levers are integrated with social and technological factors to project influence over the Slovak market. The following PEST matrix (Table 1) serves as a diagnostic framework for organizing observed empirical data across the energy, financial, and strategic minority support sectors.

Table 1. PEST Analysis of Hungarian Geoeconomic Instruments in Slovakia.
Source: Author's elaboration based on MOL Group (2024), NBS (2024), and BGA Zrt. (2024).

Factor	MOL Group (Energy Sector)	OTP Bank (Financial Sector)	Strategic Minority Support (BGA)
Political (P)	Utilization of Slovnaft as a key asset for national energy security; lobbying for EU sanctions exemptions on Russian oil.	Coordination of investment incentives between Budapest and Bratislava; OTP acts as a vehicle for bilateral financial diplomacy.	Legislative support for the Hungarian minority; political conditioning of regional stability through minority rights and citizenship acts.
Economic (E)	**Strategic Asset Control:** Dominance over the Slovnaft refinery and pipeline network, influencing regional	**Capital Distribution:** Preferential financing for Hungarian-linked SMEs; increasing Hungarian FDI	**Targeted Capital Transfers:** Massive funding via Bethlen Gábor Alap (BGA) for land acquisition and real estate in strategic corridors.

	logistics and transport costs.	through targeted credit exposure.	
Social (S)	**Employment Leverage:** Slovnaft's status as a major employer makes energy logistics a factor in maintaining social peace.	**Community Building:** Strengthening the Hungarian-speaking middle class through localized banking and business networks.	**Demographic Preservation:** Economic sustainability of the minority through land ownership and identity-based subsidies.
Technological (T)	**Technical Standards:** Dependence on Hungarian-controlled processing technology and digital logistics chains in the energy sector.	**Financial Platforms:** Integration of Slovak clients into Hungarian digital banking and Fintech ecosystems.	**Industrial Modernization:** Technological binding of the Slovak agricultural sector to Hungarian suppliers via machinery subsidies.

By categorizing these factors, we establish the qualitative basis for the subsequent quantitative correlation analysis. This structure ensures that the statistical testing is grounded in the specific political and economic realities of the Slovak-Hungarian geoeconomic relationship, moving beyond a final proof of intent toward a rigorous empirical assessment.

STRATEGIC DIAGNOSIS: SLOVAKIA'S GEOECONOMIC POSITIONING

To analyze the structural vulnerabilities of the Slovak economy in the face of assertive regional investment strategies, this study employs a SWOT analysis. This matrix identifies the internal and external factors that define Slovakia's capacity to maintain economic sovereignty within the Central European geoeconomic framework.

Table 2. SWOT Analysis of Slovakia's Geoeconomic Vulnerabilities

STRENGTHS	**WEAKNESSES**
1. **Institutional Protection:** EU and Eurozone membership provides a stable regulatory and monetary framework, limiting external currency manipulation.	1. **Energy Vulnerability:** Significant reliance on the Slovnaft refinery and gas transit routes influenced by Hungarian strategic capital.
2. **Industrial Diversification:** A robust automotive sector (VW, Kia, Stellantis) serves as a macroeconomic counterweight to sectoral concentration.	2. **Regional Disparities:** Economic neglect of southern Slovak regions creates entry points for targeted cross-border financial influence.
3. **Security Framework:** NATO membership provides a stable geopolitical environment that limits non-market forms of strategic pressure.	3. **Political Fragmentation:** Internal institutional instability can be utilized as leverage through minority-based political representation.
OPPORTUNITIES	**THREATS**
1. **Regional Integration:** The Three Seas Initiative offers alternative North-South logistical connections, potentially reducing transit dependence.	1. **Strategic Logistics Dominance:** Concentrated control over energy supply chains via MOL/Slovnaft, impacting national transport autonomy.
2. **Supply Diversification:** Expansion of interconnectors (e.g., Poland) and LNG terminal access to weaken centralized energy hubs.	2. **Financial Market Concentration:** Potential dominance of the banking sector by regional champions (OTP), creating credit dependency for local SMEs.
3. **EU Cohesion Policy:** Strategic use of development funds for regional revitalization to mitigate the influence of external "guardian" funding models.	3. **Strategic Asset Acquisition:** Risk of localized loss of control over agricultural land and real estate through targeted foundation subsidies.

The identified threats in the SWOT matrix serve as the basis for the operationalization of variables in the subsequent quantitative analysis. By testing the correlation between these identified vulnerabilities and capital inflows, the study moves from qualitative observation to empirical testing of geoeconomic patterns.

SECTORAL ANALYSIS: ENERGY AND FUEL LOGISTICS (MOL/SLOVNAFT)

To further deconstruct the specific mechanisms of geoeconomic influence, this study analyzes the energy sector, which serves as the primary lever for regional strategic positioning. The following SWOT matrix evaluates the position of the Slovak energy market through the lens of MOL/Slovnaft's operations.

Table 3. Sectoral SWOT Analysis: Energy and Fuel Logistics

STRENGTHS	**WEAKNESSES**
1. **Operational Efficiency:** Slovnaft remains one of Europe's most modern refineries with a high conversion rate and integrated supply chains.	1. **Technological Lock-in:** High optimization for Russian Export Blend (REB) crude, creating a structural pretext for maintaining specific energy corridors.
2. **Strategic Network:** An integrated system of pipelines and storage facilities ensures a stable, albeit centralized, supply for the domestic market.	2. **Managerial Centralization:** Strategic investment and logistics pricing decisions are primarily aligned with the parent company's regional objectives in Budapest.
3. **Retail Market Dominance:** An extensive network of filling stations provides direct influence over end-consumer costs and national transport logistics.	3. **Transit Path Dependency:** A historical focus on East-West routes, which reinforces the role of the Hungarian energy hub in Slovak supply routes.
OPPORTUNITIES	**THREATS**
1. **Infrastructural Modernization:** Adapting for non-Russian crude via the Adria Pipeline (JANAF), strengthening energy connectivity with Croatia and the Mediterranean.	1. **Logistics Market Concentration:** The potential to utilize Slovnaft's infrastructure to limit the entry of regional competitors into the Slovak market.
2. **Energy Transition:** Leveraging EU funds for green hydrogen and decarbonization to diversify the refinery's strategic role beyond fossil fuels.	2. **Strategic Leverage:** The risk of utilizing energy supply and logistics pricing as a tool for achieving broader diplomatic or political concessions.
3. **Diversification Initiatives:** Synergies with the Three Seas Initiative to connect with LNG terminals, potentially reducing vertical dependence on a single regional hub.	3. **Transborder Influence Projection:** Utilizing Slovak territory as a strategic corridor for extending energy influence toward Czechia and Austria ("**Geoeconomic Corridor**").

The qualitative indicators identified in the PEST and SWOT matrices suggest a high degree of integration between Hungarian corporate expansion and state strategic objectives. To verify these observations, the following section applies Pearson's correlation analysis to test the empirical strength of these relationships between 2015 and 2025.

SECTORAL ANALYSIS: FINANCE AND BANKING (OTP AND STRATEGIC INVESTMENT FUNDS)

To complement the energy sector analysis, this section examines the financial lever of Hungarian geoeconomic influence. The banking sector, led by regional champions such as OTP, acts as a primary vehicle for capital distribution and strategic investment, particularly in southern Slovakia.

Table 4. Sectoral SWOT Analysis: Finance and Banking

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
1. **Capital Liquidity:** High capacity for rapid capital injection into strategic regional projects and SMEs.	1. **Extra-Eurozone Decision Making:** While Slovakia operates within the Eurozone, strategic capital allocation is influenced by the monetary and political framework in Budapest.
2. **Regional Specialization:** Deep market penetration in southern Slovakia, where domestic financial institutions may have a less specialized presence.	2. **Sectoral Concentration:** A focus on specific regional and identity-based economic interests may limit the broader resilience of the investment portfolio.
3. **Institutional Integration:** Direct operational links between the banking sector and state-backed funds (e.g., Bethlen Gábor Alap) for targeted regional support.	3. **Institutional Perception:** The potential perception of financial actors as extensions of state policy, which may limit expansion among the broader national population.
OPPORTUNITIES	**THREATS**
1. **Cross-Border Infrastructure:** Financing of integrated projects that strengthen logistical and economic connectivity between southern Slovakia and Hungary.	1. **Economic Enclavization:** The risk of creating a closed economic ecosystem where regional SMEs become exclusively dependent on external capital, weakening national economic integration.
2. **Digital Financial Integration:** Utilizing Fintech and digital banking platforms to streamline capital flows toward strategically identified sectors.	2. **Capital Repatriation Risk:** The potential for significant profit extraction or capital reallocation to support the parent company's domestic fiscal requirements.
3. **Strategic Financing Roles:** Positioning as a key financial intermediary for Three Seas Initiative projects, potentially marginalizing domestic state banking influence.	3. **Divergent Economic Autonomy:** The risk of creating an autonomous economic zone through selective lending that operates independently of the Slovak government's economic impulses.

SECTORAL ANALYSIS: STRATEGIC MINORITY INVESTMENTS AND LAND TENURE

The final layer of the geoeconomic framework involves the integration of minority policy with strategic asset acquisition. This section analyzes how institutional support for the Hungarian minority in Slovakia functions as a mechanism for regional economic cohesion and long-term asset management.

Table 5. Sectoral SWOT Analysis: Strategic Minority Investments

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
1. **Social Capital and Networking:** Strong local networks and institutionalized political leadership acting in synchronization with regional strategic objectives.	1. **Demographic Challenges:** Emigration and assimilation trends affect the long-term sustainability of the regional economic base, necessitating increased external support.
2. **Historical Continuity:** Strong historical and emotional attachment to land in Southern Slovakia facilitates the implementation of long-term asset preservation strategies.	2. **Institutional Dependency:** A significant portion of the regional economy has become reliant on external state-backed subsidies, creating vulnerability to budgetary shifts.
3. **Structured Financial Support:** Foundations such as **Bethlen Gábor Alap (BGA)** ensure a consistent flow of capital for targeted regional and ethnic projects.	3. **Regulatory Oversight:** Increased monitoring by national security and financial services regarding foreign funding models may impact the pace of strategic investments.
OPPORTUNITIES	**THREATS**
1. **Leveraging EU Cooperation:** Utilizing Interreg and other cross-border programs to provide legitimate financing for regional infrastructure and minority interests.	1. **Concentrated Asset Acquisition:** Massive acquisition of agricultural land and real estate through specialized funds, creating a localized economic belt.
2. **Regional Logistical Development:** Transforming Southern Slovakia into a key transit	2. **Strategic Policy Divergence:** The potential use of regional business networks to prioritize

zone that primarily serves integrated regional trade and energy routes.

3. **Digital Economic Integration:** Connecting regional entrepreneurs through digital platforms that enhance economic cohesion independently of national institutions.

cross-border interests over national strategic projects.

3. **Escalation of Identity Tensions:** Disputes over language and citizenship acts could trigger economic friction, potentially impacting logistical stability in southern regions.

DISCUSSION: FROM ECONOMIC COOPERATION TO STRATEGIC INTERDEPENDENCE

The interpretation of the variables suggests that Hungary does not utilize isolated channels of influence, but rather a synchronized system of geoeconomic levers. To analyze the strategic interactions between the two states, we can apply a Game Theory model - specifically a "Sovereignty-Interdependence Game" - to map the strategic choices of Hungary (as the Strategic Investor) and Slovakia (as the Host State).

Table 6. Strategic Interaction Model: The Sovereignty-Interdependence Game

Slovakia/ Hungary /	Strategy A: **Assertive FDI (Integration)**	Strategy B: **Diversified FDI (Neutrality)**
Consent/to Outsourcing	(**H: +10, S: -5**) Hungary gains control (**r=0.88r equals 0.88*r*=0.88);** Slovakia gains liquidity but loses sovereignty.	(H: -2, S: +2) Hungary seeks an alternative path; Slovakia remains isolated but sovereign.
Nationalization Attempt	(H: -5, S: -10) Hungary withdraws capital and blocks energy (MOL); Slovakia experiences systemic collapse.	(H: 0, S: 0) Status quo.

Variable X1: Strategic Energy Infrastructure and Market Concentration (MOL/Slovnaft)

The strong correlation between Hungarian FDI and logistical control (r=0.87) is empirically grounded in the structural position of Slovnaft (100% owned by MOL), which remains the sole refinery in Slovakia. According to MOL Group's strategic reports (Annual Reports, 2023), Hungarian capital controls not only the production vertical but also the primary logistical network of pipelines and storage facilities.

In this context, Slovakia's geographical position as a landlocked state creates a condition of logistical path dependency, where access to alternative crude oil sources is operationally mediated by MOL's infrastructure. This confirms the author's earlier findings on strategic infrastructural integration (Šarić, 2023), suggesting that control over energy nodes serves as a primary lever for regional geoeconomic positioning.

Variable X2: Institutional Minority Funding and Asset Acquisition (BGA Foundation)

The high correlation (r= 0.75) between subsidies from the Bethlen Gábor Alap (BGA) foundation and regional land acquisition (y2) indicates a synchronized pattern between identity-based funding and economic expansion. An analysis of the BGA Zrt. database (Pályázati adatbázis) reveals that significant capital flows are specifically directed toward the agricultural and real estate sectors in Southern Slovakia.

The author interprets these results as empirical evidence of a "strategic investment footprint" - a process where state-backed capital, channeled through minority institutions, facilitates a long-term shift in the ownership structure of strategically relevant territories. This localized concentration of assets, supported by the "motherland's" capital, represents a sophisticated model of geoeconomic anchoring, ensuring a permanent economic presence in the border regions.

Variable X3: Institutional Financial Expansion and Sectoral Credit Dependency

The high correlation coefficient (0.79) between OTP Bank's credit exposure to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in border regions and the percentage of logistics companies utilizing integrated regional supply chains indicates a process of strategic financial anchoring. According to data from the National Bank of Slovakia (NBS, 2024), the targeted channeling of capital through the OTP Group facilitates the development of a distinct financial ecosystem in Southern Slovakia. The author interprets this mechanism as a "sectoral economic bypass" that operates alongside Slovak national institutions, creating a high degree of credit dependency on the Hungarian financial center for local entrepreneurs. This structural alignment ensures a high level of coordination among regional economic actors and fosters a closed-loop system where integrated regional suppliers and logistical channels are prioritized. This process further consolidates the strategic infrastructural integration described in Section 5.1, effectively institutionalizing a model of regional geoeconomic influence.

Variable X4: Institutional Identity Policy and Cross-Border Social Capital

The relationship between the granting of Hungarian citizenship (based on data from the Hungarian Central Statistical Office – KSH) and the intensity of cross-border economic integration shows a moderate to strong correlation (0.69) Despite legislative efforts in Slovakia to regulate dual citizenship, this process has fostered a robust network of consumers and entrepreneurs with high cross-border mobility.

The author interprets this trend as a form of "institutional soft power", which serves as the socio-economic foundation for broader geoeconomic operations. In this context, identity-based affiliation acts as a mechanism for regional cohesion, providing the necessary social capital for the long-term sustainability of the strategic investment footprint described in previous sections. Without this underlying social integration, the "Economic Infantry" (the network of state-backed economic actors) would lack the institutional resilience required to maintain a consistent regional presence.

Quantitative Synthesis: Correlation of Geoeconomic Inputs and Sectoral Outputs

The following correlation matrix summarizes the relationship between Hungarian geoeconomic inputs and the corresponding strategic outputs within the Slovak economy.

Table 7. Correlation Matrix of Geoeconomic Input and Logistics Outsourcing
Source: Author's calculation based on KSH (2024) and NBS (2024)

Variable X (Geoeconomic Input - Hungary)	Variable Y (Logistical/Strategic Output - Slovakia)	Correlation Coefficient	Meaning for Analysis (Interpretation)
X1: Annual volume of Hungarian FDI in Slovakia's energy sector (MOL/Slovnaft)	**Y1**: Percentage of foreign entity's market share in national oil storage and transport capacities	**0.87** (Very High)	**Strategic Infrastructure Control**: Direct link between capital inflow and control over energy logistics.
X2: Total amount of subsidies from Hungarian foundations (e.g., BGA) for Southern Slovakia	**Y2**: Number of hectares of agricultural land and real estate transferred to Hungarian ownership	**0.75** (High)	**Strategic Asset Acquisition:** Correlation between institutional funding and localized ownership shifts.

X3: OTP Bank's credit exposure to the SME sector in border regions	**Y3**: Percentage of logistics companies in Southern Slovakia utilizing exclusively Hungarian supply chains	**0.79** (High)	**Financial Ecosystem Integration:** Creation of localized financial networks alongside national institutions.
X4: Number of Hungarian citizenships granted in Slovakia (ethno-politics)	**Y4**: Intensity of cross-border logistical integration bypassing official Bratislava's corridors	**0.69** (Moderate)	**SOFT POWER:** Influence of identity politics on the formation of informal economic corridors.

Statistical verification of these coefficients is provided in the attached analytical dataset, utilizing Pearson's correlation method on time-series data from 2015 to 2025. While the Pearson coefficients (r) indicate strong to very strong relationships, the author acknowledges the limitations of the ten-year time series (n=11). Statistical significance was tested using a two-tailed t-test, with x1and x3 showing significance at the $p < 0.05$ level. These results are not presented as absolute causal proof but as empirical indicators of a synchronized trend. The high correlation values ($r>0.70$) align with the qualitative 'process-tracing' performed in the PEST and SWOT analyses, collectively suggesting a deliberate geoeconomic strategy of strategic anchoring in the Slovak market.

CONCLUSION

The research has confirmed that Hungary's geoeconomic influence in Slovakia is not a series of isolated market events but a highly coordinated strategy utilizing integrated logistics, finance, and institutional minority support. The strong correlation coefficients identified in the energy sector (0.87) and the strategic land sector (r=0.75) provide empirical evidence that the concentration of strategic infrastructure and the targeted inflow of institutional funds have resulted in a significant shift in Slovakia's regional economic autonomy.

Through the application of the Game Theory model, this study demonstrates that Slovakia currently faces a "Lock-in" position. In this scenario, the systemic cost of re-establishing full sectoral autonomy (exit cost) has potentially surpassed the immediate costs of maintaining the current dependency on Hungarian strategic capital. The concept of "Economic Infantry"- the use of state-backed national champions and institutional networks - which the author conceptually proposed in 2018 (Šarić, 2018), finds substantial validation in the Slovak case as a synchronized mechanism of energy dominance and strategic asset anchoring.

A specific contribution of this research is the detection of an internal socio-economic substrate - an integrated ethno-economic network - which, through specialized funding models (e.g., BGA), facilitates a long-term reconfiguration of ownership over strategic resources. These findings suggest that the traditional distinction between "economic cooperation" and "strategic influence" is increasingly blurred in the 21st century.

To address these challenges, the results suggest that nation-states within the EU should consider refining their geoeconomic screening mechanisms to ensure that critical infrastructure and strategic land assets remain aligned with national security interests. Ultimately, this research underscores that logistical and financial autonomy represent fundamental prerequisites for sovereign decision-making. Failure to monitor and regulate the concentration of strategic

assets by foreign state-backed entities may lead to a state of permanent asymmetric interdependence, where national policy is increasingly dictated by external geoeconomic imperatives.

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LOCAL GOVERNMENT ROLES IN TOURISM DEVELOPMENT: PERSPECTIVES FROM SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract: Since the 1994 democratic transition tourism has been viewed as a major driver for local economic development in South Africa. In terms of South African policy frameworks local governments are considered to provide a supportive role for local tourism development. This paper analyses the fluid policy landscape in South Africa across the period 1994-2026 which shaped and continues to reshape the allocated roles of local governments towards local tourism development. The analysis draws primarily upon documentary sources in respect of three decades of policy papers which have been produced by national government and seek to delineate the responsibilities of local government towards tourism. Other material is sourced from the South African Local Government Association (SALGA), an organisation founded to represent, promote and protect the interests of local government authorities in the country and supplemented by detailed interviews conducted with the municipal manager and a tourism official at one of South Africa's most tourism-dependent local municipalities.

Key words: national policy, local government, tourism, South Africa, developmental local government

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INTRODUCTION

Until 1994 the tourism sector was only a minor component of South Africa's economy. The apartheid tourism industry was dominated by, and anchored mainly upon, the market of domestic travellers with the tourist experience conditioned by a political environment of racial discrimination and segregation (Rogerson 2025a, 2025b, 2025c; Rogerson and Rogerson, 2025). During the apartheid period the imposition of international sanctions and boycotts severely constrained the growth of international tourism to the country. Following

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democratic transition and South Africa's reintegration into the global economy, however, the 'rainbow nation' emerged as a popular destination for international tourism. New significance therefore attached to the potential of tourism as a driver for the expansion of national, regional and local economic development in South Africa.

Against a backdrop of high levels of unemployment and poverty, tourism was acknowledged widely as a critical focus for 'place-based' development and stimulating local economic development agendas (Kontsiwe and Visser, 2019; Visser, 2019; Rogerson and Rogerson, 2021&). The majority of the country's local governments pivoted to tourism as an anchor for catalysing local economic growth, job creation and small enterprise development (Nel and Rogerson, 2016; Rogerson and Rogerson, 2019, 2020a; Dlomo and Rogerson, 2021). With the heightened importance of tourism for local development futures in South Africa critical questions were raised concerning the allocation of the roles and responsibilities of local government towards tourism development. In South Africa local government represents the third sphere of public sector tourism. While national and provincial tourism organisations chiefly are responsible for the design and implementation of tourism strategies and national and international marketing campaigns, it is the lesser-known local government authorities which shoulder the responsibility for promoting and supporting the local tourism products (Cohen, 2010). As is stressed by van der Watt (2013, p. 62) "South African policy for local government and tourism assigns substantial responsibility for tourism to municipalities (local government)".

The aim in this paper is to interrogate the fluid policy landscape in South Africa since 1994 which shaped and continues to reshape the allocated roles of local governments towards local tourism development. Within the international context, several observers flag that the political nature of tourism and the state's power to influence tourism require interrogation (Hall, 2009; Scheyvens, 2010; Dredge et al., 2011; Dredge and Jenkins, 2011). The specific focus here is on delineating roles of local government in tourism, an issue which represents one aspect of what Jenkins et al. (2014) identify as a fragmented literature concerning tourism public policy. As Adu-Ampong (2021) points out the governance of the tourism sector itself is highly fragmented. Existing research on destination development mostly concentrates on the national and regional levels of government involvement. According to Saarinen and Rogerson (2013) local governments can have a direct impact on the overall experience of tourists and further that the competitive position and attractiveness of local areas as destinations is influenced by the diversity, blend and quality of its services and resources. Nevertheless, the critical role assumed by local government in destination development "often tends to go unnoticed even though local governments have the biggest responsibility of maintaining destination competitiveness and diversification of the tourism product" (Adu-Ampong, 2021, p. 66).

In terms of research methods, the article draws primarily upon documentary sources and an analysis of three decades of policy papers which have been produced by national government and seek to delineate the responsibilities of local government towards tourism. In addition, material is sourced from other public entities such as the South African Local Government Association (SALGA), an organisation founded to represent, promote and protect the interests of local government authorities in the country (Cohen, 2010). Supplementary material derives from detailed interviews conducted with the municipal manager (Respondent 1) and a tourism official (Respondent 2) at one of South Africa's most

tourism-dependent local municipalities. Two major sections of material are presented. The literature review situates the study as part of a wider international scholarship around local governments and tourism and more particularly of the responsibilities of local government for tourism development. The results section moves to present and discuss the detailed South African findings over the 30-year study period.

LITERATURE CONTEXT

Government is a principal actor in tourism development processes and intervenes in tourism for various reasons – political, economic and environmental (Nyaupane and Timothy, 2010; Nunkoo et al., 2012). For Nunkoo (2015) government is the principal actor in the political process of tourism development simply because it cannot afford to neglect the sector in light of its major economic, social and political significance. As highlighted by Timothy (1998) local governments generally are considered best suited to coordinate tourism development at the local level. Local authorities are closest to many of the problems associated with tourism development and control important levers for development planning issues associated with tourism (Dredge and Jenkins, 2007; Ruhanen, 2013; Can et al., 2014). Therefore, across many countries, local governments assume a vital role in tourism planning and for achieving goals for sustainable development (Adu-Ampong, 2016). Among others Deng et al. (2022, p. 1619) alert us to the fact that as main stakeholders "local governments are playing an increasingly significant role in local tourism development"

Arguably, aspects of the role of local government in tourism development and planning have been the subject of scholarly interest for decades (Long, 1994; Wong, 1996; Dymond, 1997; Godfrey, 1998; Ateljevic and Doorne, 2000; Dredge, 2001; Connell et al., 2009; Bramwell, 2011). Not surprisingly, within the international record of scholarship on local government and tourism the largest pool of writing relates to local governments in the Global North (eg. Charlton & Essex, 1996; Church et al., 2000; Church, 2004; Middleton & Lickorish, 2005; Shone, 2013). In an early contribution McKercher and Ritchie (1997) describe local government tourism officers as the third tier of public sector tourism. Historically, in certain countries organized local government support for tourism goes back even as far as the nineteenth century (Jeffries, 2001). The British experience of local government involvement in tourism is presented by Heeley (1981). The early role of local leaders in stimulating tourism in the Hungarian city of Pécs is documented by Gonda and Kaposi (2022). The New Zealand record of the historical development of local government in tourism is chronicled by Zahra (2010). From the international experience it is evident local governments "occupy a complex, central role at the heart of the tourism industry" (Shone, 2013, p. 45). This is despite the fact that neither development or promotion have been viewed as traditional roles for local authorities. Church (2004, p. 555) points out that in so-termed "less developed countries" the involvement of local governments with tourism is a more recent phenomenon.

In a seminal contribution Harvey (1989) directed the attention of urban and development scholars to a radical shift in governance practices of local governments which was becoming established by the 1980s. The shift was from long-established managerial practices of local governments primarily focused on the local provision of services and facilities towards a more entrepreneurial role involving the fostering of local economic and employment growth. Across the

international record of much of the Global North local government found itself involved in a range of activities that extend well beyond the traditional functions of the collection of rates, provision of water and collection of rubbish. The extended roles include social servicing, protection of community well-being and environmental management. In addition, local governments necessarily assumed an increasingly entrepreneurial role which was manifest in commitments towards driving the growth of local economies. This might encompass increased deployment of public resources into support for tourism, including through destination marketing. Within the changing context of governance practices the local planning and the development of municipal assets for tourism emerged as a significant focus for local government, part of what Harvey (1989) styles 'the speculative construction of places.

Ateljevic and Doorne (2000, p. 25) pointed out that at the local government level, tourism development has become a key strategy through which "a new entrepreneurial stance has been articulated". Churugsa et al. (2007, p. 453) observed similarly that as a consequence of governance trends during the 1990s and 2000s towards decentralization, "local governments play an increasingly important role in tourism development". At the core of 'new entrepreneurialism' around tourism was the notion of public-private partnerships with the use of local government powers to leverage new investment into localities. Among others Hall and Saarinen (2025, p. 5) draw attention to the "strong interest" which was evident from the 1990s in issues around public-private partnerships as an element of tourism governance. Overall, by the early 2000s there was "an emergent awareness amongst tourism managers in the public sector of broader approaches beyond destination marketing, in which tourism is regarded as a more integrated element of socio-economic development" (Ateljevic and Doorne, 2000, p. 26). As the business of tourism involves a host community, a physical setting, accommodation, transport, built and natural attractions, commercial services and infrastructure, it is the combination and synergies between these components that make destinations unique and contribute to its success and competitiveness. Further, Dredge (2013, p. 3) pinpoints that a key policy issue was to understand how governments "can strengthen their support for tourism and create an integrated landscape that supports long-term sustainable tourism growth and development". For Brokaj (2014, p. 110) only minimal attention "has been given to purposively identifying the roles and responsibilities of local government in addressing sustainable development within tourism destination contexts".

The question of the appropriate roles of local government in tourism development has commanded the attention of certain scholars. Simmons and Shone (2002) posited that local government has the dual potentially conflicting roles of tourism enablement and management of tourism's adverse impacts at the local level. Several authors attest that local governments assume a pivotal role in destination management not least as a result of a legislative mandate to pursue land use planning and regulate development applications (Bramwell, 2011; Dredge, 2013; Ruhanen, 2013). However, in Canada it is apparent that "local government lacks a clear mandate for tourism development" which necessitates that "local government redefines its roles and responsibilities in tourism development to be able to effectively deal with economic, political and social challenges" (Nunkoo, 2015, p. 631). In the case of Ireland five functional areas are identified for the engagement of local government in tourism, namely product

development, economic and community development, marketing and promotion, planning and policy, and sustainable tourism development (Moisuc, 2018).

As is the case in many other countries sub-national government in Ireland does not operate independently of national government; what this means is that changes at national level inevitably come to be reflected also at the local. Hanrahan and McLoughlin (2015) draw attention to the establishment of local authorities' involvement in tourism as based in its provision of local tourism infrastructure, planning and development control measures to maintain an attractive environment and pro-active policies – including marketing – in order to stimulate the private sector. Local governments in Ireland provide infrastructure and environmental management essential for local development including roads, provision of amenities and more directly for tourism are involved in the organization and funding of events and development of public tourism infrastructure (Moisuc, 2018). The Irish record is thus that local governments "have a critical role in creating the context and stimulating actions to ensure that tourism planning and development becomes more sustainable" (Moisuc, 2018, p. 33).

Table 1. Local Government Roles and Potential Tourism Impacts
(Source: Adapted after Brokaj, 2014, p. 111)

Local Government Roles and Responsibilities and areas of planning and development	**Potential Tourism Impacts**
Infrastructure provision and maintenance	Transport infrastructure can influence patterns of access both to and within destinations. Basic infrastructure capacity can shape destination capacity to absorb tourists and thus limits tourism development
Land use planning	Development assessment and strategic land use planning impacts the built environment and spatial integration of the destination.
Environmental planning and management	Protect/preserves or if mismanaged unique environmental features of a destination and manages visitor pressures on natural resources
Open Space Planning and Management	Protects and preserves open space, influences the character and amenity of a destination and fosters a 'sense of place'.
Public health and safety management	Protects and enhances visitor satisfaction, destination image and quality
Community development	Encourages community support for tourism and tourism enterprises
Local Economic Development	Fosters synergies between local economic activities, supply chains and the development of appropriate tourism support services.
Education, training and employment	Influences quality in delivery of tourism services
Tourism promotion and marketing	Encourages branding and destination image development
Arts and culture development	Fosters the development of unique identity of community and belonging which is supportive of tourism.
Human Services	Encourages positive attitude and improved service delivery

Arguably, local governments face a range of challenges for the effective planning and management of tourism at the local level. Brokaj (2014, p. 111) maintains that "the most important challenge is that of integrating the management of tourism with other functions and activities of local government". Based on a scoping of international experience Table 1 provides a summary of the key roles and responsibilities for local government, focus areas of planning and of potential tourism impacts. It is evident local governments engage in a multiplicity of different roles "which are subject to change over time" (Shone, 2013, p. 1). According to Shone et al. (2016) these roles broadly can be captured under the binary of enablement (marketing and promotion) and management (regulation and provision of infrastructure). Another critical challenge is addressing the question of how "do local governments reconcile their day-to-day management of public service provision with the long-term planning required of tourism-led local economic development initiatives" (Adu-Ampong, 2021, p. 80). Situated against the backcloth of this international survey of research concerning local governments and tourism attention turns now to focus on South Africa. The findings look at the period since the country's 1994 democratic transition.

RESULTS

The definition of the roles for South African local governments in tourism development has occurred within a series of changing policy frameworks introduced by national government. This section reviews the implications for local government of the shifts which occurred between 1996 and 2026. Across these three decades one consistent theme is that national and provincial levels of government and related entities retain core responsibility for the design and implementation of (macro) tourism strategies and marketing campaigns whereas local governments in South Africa are responsible for managing tourism in their local areas.

Policy Foundations

The statements of the specific roles and responsibilities of local government in tourism have been set forth in a series of government policy documents issued since 1994. These are the 1996 Constitution; 1996 White Paper on Tourism; the 1998 White Paper on Local Government; the 2010 Tourism Planning Toolkit for Local Government (issued by the Department of Tourism); the 2011 and 2017 National Tourism Sector Strategy; the 2023 Tourism Sector Master Plan; 2024 White Paper on Tourism, and 2026 Code of Good Practice for Short-Term Rentals.

The 1996 Constitution sets out three institutional principles underpinning the governance system in South Africa. First, is cooperative governance which relates to the system of decentralized governance model introduced post-1994 with three distinct, interrelated and interdependent 'spheres of government', namely national, provincial and local. Different powers and functions are allocated to each sphere and the principle of 'cooperative governance' compels each tier of government to cooperate with and support each other. Tourism is viewed as a concurrent function of all three levels of government and the "Constitutional powers and functions of local government include 'local tourism'" (van der Watt, 2022, p. 96). The second principle of governance in South Africa is that of participative democracy alongside representative democratic government. Participatory democracy involves the participation of individual citizens in decision-making that impacts their everyday lives. In terms of tourism the most

significant implication is the Integrated Development Planning (IDP) process which is a five year strategic plan, reviewed annually, produced by municipalities to determine local development priorities. Within the IDP process local ward committees and councillors are advised of issues impacting tourism that should be incorporated in IDP budgeting processes.

The third constitutional principle is that of developmental local government. Until the 1994 democratic transition the management and implementation of local development initiatives was not a traditional function of South African local governments which instead largely centred on traditional service delivery, such as infrastructure, roads, water, electricity and waste management (Venter, 2020). The 1996 Constitution devolved to local municipalities a series of competencies and functions that went far beyond the traditional historical role of local authorities such as service delivery. It assigned a dynamic role for local governments to overcome serious development challenges and galvanize local economic and social development (Venter, 2020). The transition from managerial to entrepreneurial forms of governance has been particularly challenging for less well-resourced and capacitated local governments which are mostly those in South Africa's secondary cities, small towns and rural municipalities (Kontsiwe and Visser, 2019). The Constitution recognizes that local governments are core actors in the local development of municipalities and tasked with improving resident quality of life through advancing economic growth and social development. At the heart of facilitating the development mandate of local governments is the IDP, the principal "strategic planning instrument which guides and informs all planning and development, and is the foundation for municipal budgets, service delivery and performance management" (van der Watt, 2022, p. 98).

The 1996 White Paper on Tourism provided the first details of the roles and responsibilities of South African local governments. It stated that the functions of local government mirror those of provincial government but with added emphasis on planning, development and maintenance of many specific aspects of the tourism product. Section 6.3 states as follows:

At the local government level, specific provincial functions of policy implementation, environmental planning and land-use, product development and marketing are further supported. Specific functions of local government include:

- responsible land-use planning, urban and rural development
- control over land use and land allocation
- provision and maintenance of tourist services, sites and attractions, e.g. camping and caravan sites, recreational facilities (parks, historical buildings, sports facilities, theatres, museums) and public services.
- provision of road signs in accordance with nationally established guidelines
- market and promote specific local attractions and disseminate information in this regard
- control public health and safety
- facilitate the participation of local communities in the tourism industry
- own and maintain certain plant, e.g. ports and airportsprovide adequate parking, also for coaches
- facilitate the establishment of appropriate public transportation services. eg. taxi services
- license establishments in accordance with national framework

- promote and financially support the establishment of local publicity associations/community tourism and marketing organisations to facilitate, market, coordinate and administer tourism initiatives.

The White Paper made clear two further important points. First, was that "local government should not provide services that can be provided by the private sector". Section 6.4 details the roles of the private sector: "The private sector has and will continue to play a critically important role in the further development and promotion of tourism. The private sector bears the major risks of tourism investment as well as a large part of the responsibility for satisfying the visitor. The delivery of quality tourism services and providing the customer with value for money are largely private sector responsibilities. Furthermore, the private sector is in a position to promote the involvement of local communities in tourism ventures by inter alia, establishing tourism ventures with communities. The government is committed to providing a climate conducive to the further growth, development and profitability of the tourism private sector. The second critical point in the White Paper relates to the caveat that the exact role of the local government in the tourism development thrust would "be determined by local conditions existing at provincial levels and most importantly the availability of the necessary financial means and skills base to carry out the respective functions". Local conditions, available capacity and financial resources would therefore impact the activities of local government in tourism development across the country.

The 1998 White Paper on Local Government provides further detail and indicated that the core responsibility of local government was to work together with communities to find sustainable ways to meet their social, economic and material needs and improve their quality of life. In terms of the developmental role of local government elaborated by the 1996 Constitution it was made clear that the traditional local government responsibilities for service delivery and regulations accord it great influence over the economic and social well-being of communities. Nevertheless, it is stated as follows: "Local governments are not responsible for job creation but rather are responsible for taking active steps to ensure overall economic and social conditions of the locality are conducive to the creation of employment opportunities". Arguably, within "the context of 'developmental local government' the local tourism function therefore must be interpreted as 'developmental tourism at a local level" (van der Watt, 2013, p. 64). Developmental tourism is elaborated as a process as follows: partners from the public, business, labour and civic sectors work together to identify sustainable ways to harness location-specific resources; to grow and transform the economy in specific local areas; and, to implement programmes and projects that build upon and showcase opportunities and/or address economic empowerment opportunities. Overall, it is suggested that the aim of developmental tourism in South Africa was to support and grow "local incomes and create job opportunities through enhancing the community's ability to create enterprises" (van der Watt, 2013, p. 64).

In 2010, the Department of Tourism issued The South African Tourism Planning Toolkit for Local Government. It was stated that the document was "commissioned by the National Department of Tourism (NDT) to promote and support tourism planning at the local level" (RSA 2010, p. 6). One rationale was that "local government may not be always clear about their role in developing local tourism especially in terms of maintaining infrastructure and public tourism attractions through the integrated development plans (IDP)" (RSA, 2010, p. 6).

Tourism development was viewed as "a joint responsibility of local government and the private sector" and that quality public sector facilities, services and amenities are complementary to successful tourism. Specifically: "The role of local government is to attract investors with their capital, undertake planning and provide leadership while the private sector is to attract customers with their capital (RSA, 2010, p. 17). The toolkit makes clear that "tourism is a local economic development directive that is mandated by the South African Constitution 1996" (RSA, 2010: 10).

Four major points illustrate this point. Firstly, "Local government has a significant impact on natural and cultural resources in and around destinations. Local government impacts on tourism products in how they manage the environment and provide services to their communities". Tourism relies on these resources to be in a healthy state. Second, "Local government provides the core utilities and infrastructure on which the tourism industry is based. These include district and municipal roads, lighting, water and sewerage, public transport systems, signs, and at times airports and ports. Local government has a role to play in the operation of attractions such as museums, art galleries, sports stadia, convention centres, parks, gardens, events, tours and other amenities" (RSA, 2010, p. 6). Third, it was made clear that "Collectively this represents a multi billion rand investment of public money. It also means that local government is perhaps the largest 'tourism operator' in the country" (RSA, 2010, p. 6). Four, alongside other government actors, local government enables regional marketing and provides visitor information", including through visitor information desks. Overall, the tourism toolkit was viewed as a 'living resource' and intended for local government support only. Its use was voluntary and aimed at building capacity in local government for tourism planning. It is argued that the preparation of a local tourism policy was important for several reasons. One reason is that whilst councillors might be replaced after local elections, "a policy document ensures continuity of commitment to tourism" (RSA, 2010, p. 56). In addition, it enables a long-term focus, forward planning and budget allocations through IDP plans. Finally, a policy document ensures local agencies work together in order to benefit the community (RSA, 2010, p. 56).

Rethinking and New Directions

The National Tourism Sector Strategy (NTSS), issued in 2011, provided further clarification of the responsibilities of South African local governments. It was stated that the role of local governments in tourism "is to manage assets such as public land, and to provide important infrastructure" (RSA, 2011, p. 50). The 2011 NTSS identifies that at the local level tourism-specific functions should be carried out by a local tourism bureau (LTB) or local tourism organization (LTO) which should "be established by the local authority (town or district council) and private businesses in a local area, as a legal entity that represents these parties". Such organizations should be "jointly funded by the local authority and private-sector industry members in the area, as well as from own revenue, including marketing commissions" (RSA, 2011, p. 56). Further, the composition of the LTO or LTB should include a significant number of persons who "represent previously disadvantaged constituencies" (RSA, 2011, p. 56), in other words population groups which were discriminated against by previous apartheid legislation. The 2011 NTS spells out the functions of local authorities as follows: "The local authority's line function departments should be responsible for all integrated

development matters, including the development of tourist attractions, the provision of public amenities, and infrastructure in support of tourism, and the general maintenance of the environment" (RSA, 2011, p. 56). Moreover, it was stated that "these should be part of the development plan of the local authority, who should consult the LTB in the planning and implementing phases". Table 2 provides a summary of the different activities of local municipalities and a local tourism bureau or organisation.

Table 2. Potential Roles of Local Municipalities and Local Tourism Bureau/ Organisation in South Africa
(Source: After RSA, 2011: 57)

Local Municipality	Local Tourism Bureau/Organisation
Establish and provide funding to the LTB	Manage the information office/visitor centre and feed into the provincial information system
Maintain and develop public tourism attractions (historical, cultural, environmental)	Market specific events, conferences and meetings in the local area
Support the tourism industry through provision of public facilities such as parking and public transportation	Be the first point of registration for tourism businesses in terms of provincial registration systems and monitor minimum standards that are maintained by registered businesses.
Conduct spatial planning to support tourism and allocate land and infrastructure for tourism development	Represent and assure that tourism interests are incorporated into IDP planning
Plan and provide local road signs	Receive and channel local applications for road signs from members to the municipality
Maintain the general safety, upkeep, cleanliness and beautification of the locality.	Promote tourism awareness, a culture of hospitality and involvement in tourism among the local population.
Assist the LTB in implementation of provincial and minimum standards registration regarding health and safety	Monitor tourism issues as a whole and advise the municipal authority about the needs of the tourism sector

The 2011 NTSS was revised and updated by national government in 2017. The production of the 2017 National Tourism Sector Strategy was to represent a national strategy for tourism for the period 2016-2026. It indicated the need for establishing a clearer articulation of the roles and responsibilities of the different spheres of government in tourism. As tourism was an agreed concurrent function of all three spheres of government it was stated that the definition of roles should not take 'a one size fits all' approach but instead "should allow for the appropriate calibration of these to the particular circumstances of an administrative region, including its size, scope and resources, as well as tourism potential and existing development" (RSA, 2017, p. 27). In terms of the 2017 NTSS the position was reaffirmed that local government was a key stakeholder in developing tourism and achieving its outcomes not least for the promotion of local economic development. It is observed, however, that the document is silent on any detailed changes in institutional arrangements other than mentioning the need for a local tourism forum which "shall deliberate and determine tourism priorities to support tourism growth and development in the region, facilitate cooperation and alignment with

provincial tourism authorities" (RSA, 2017, p. 44). Indeed, the only specific task mentioned for local authorities was to keep and up to date supplier data base of all tourism operators in their respective regions which could feed into the provincial data base" (RSA, 2017, p. 45).

In 2020 the South African Local Government Association issued a position paper reflecting on the 2017 NTSS (SALGA, 2020). From the perspective of SALGA (2020) Schedule 4B of the Constitution contains a list of functional areas that are the responsibility of local government identifies local tourism as a local government competence. SALGA identifies that local governments can provide a strategic and operational role in maintaining an enabling environment for tourism to flourish. As indicated on Table 3 three sets of enabler of tourism are isolated with corresponding roles for local government identified. In addition, SALGA highlights that a vital local government function is to ensure that the needs of residents, businesses and environment are considered in the local management of tourism.

Table 3. Role of Local Government in relation to Enablers for Local tourism
(Source: Author Modified after SALGA, 2020)

Enablers of Tourism	Role of Local Government
Infrastructure Development	Provision of Basic services: roads, water, sanitation, electricity.
Easy access to destinations	Provision and maintenance of public infrastructure, Roads – installing signposts; interpretative and tourist information panels, building car parks, public transport, security, construction and maintenance of parks and trails
Integrated Planning	IDPs are inclusive and strategic plans that guide and inform all decisions with regard to management and development of the municipality

The devastation of the COVID-19 pandemic ultimately derailed the implementation of the 2017 NTSS planning and sector strategy. As a response to the COVID-19 impacts on tourism, the national government produced the Tourism Sector Master Plan to assist revival of the sector (RSA, 2023). The major actions for this plan were to be led by national government with the role of municipalities/local authorities indicated as to implement and support norms for safe (health) operations across the tourism sector (Rogerson and Rogerson, 2020b). In addition, a critical function was "protection for core tourism infrastructure and assets" (RSA, 2023, p.51). Another stated function that was identified for local governments to assume a supporting role in monitoring the regulatory environment for support of tourism small, medium and micro-enterprises (SMMEs) which had emerged as a prime policy focus for 'transformation' and the growth of Black entrepreneurship in the South African tourism economy.

The most recent policy document which speaks directly to the role of local government in tourism is the 2024 White Paper on Tourism. This White Paper is viewed as an update and resulting from a review of the original 1996 White Paper on Tourism. The stated goals in the 2024 White Paper are as follows: "The policy envisages a sustainable, competitive and inclusive tourism sector that leverages innovation and digital technologies, addresses barriers to tourism growth, builds partnerships, and responds to the country's social imperatives. It will further enable the tourism sector's contribution to the broader economy, employment and

entrepreneurship while ensuring that the sector becomes resilient as it better responds to crises, and adapts to the future needs of tourism". At the heart of the 2024 White Paper is the need for a comprehensive response led by national government designed to ensure "Harmonisation in the delivery of the tourism mandate by all spheres of government" (RSA, 2024: 2) which were specified in the 1996 Constitution.

The 2024 White Paper (WP) stresses that the success of the tourism sector at local level requires the inclusion of tourism priorities in IDPs. It is pointed out among its policy proposals the need to target tourism priorities in municipal development plans (RSA, 2024, p. 16). The White Paper reiterates the statement that "Local government carries somewhat similar responsibilities to those of provincial government such as policy implementation, environmental planning and land use, product development, marketing and promotion". Nevertheless, it is acknowledged "there are other critical functions that municipalities must carry out to facilitate tourism development". Amongst others these include the following:

- Responsible land use planning, urban and rural development, control over land-use and land allocation;
- Provision and maintenance of public services, tourist services, sites and attractions, such as parks, recreational facilities, museums and historical structures;
- Provision of municipal road infrastructure, including signage in accordance with nationally established guidelines;
- Market and promote specific local attractions and disseminate information in this regard;
- Facilitate the participation of local communities in the tourism industry;
- Maintain municipal owned infrastructure supporting tourism such as ports and airports;
- Facilitate the provision of appropriate public transportation services and control public health and safety;
- License establishments in accordance with relevant frameworks; and
- Promote and support the establishment of local tourism associations/community tourism and marketing organisations to facilitate, market, coordinate and administer tourism activities" (RSA, 2024, p. 48).

Finally, the 2024 White Paper concludes its discussion on local government roles with a restatement of two earlier policy positions, namely that (1) "Local government should not provide services that can be provided by the private sector" and (2) "The exact role of the local authorities in each province will be determined by local conditions as well as skills and financial resources" (RSA, 2024, p. 48).

A new sphere for South African local governments in their engagement in tourism development surrounds the impact of the growth of the sharing economy. In 2025 it was announced that the Department of Tourism was developing new policy guidelines for the control of the short-term rental market (STRs) for tourism accommodation (Petersen, 2025). This initiative is a response to the mushrooming of short-term rentals in recent years and most especially in Cape Town, South Africa's leading destination for international tourism and digital nomads. The burgeoning expansion of STRs in Cape Town has dramatically impacted the city's property market. The emerging context is of the rise of local resident protests against 'overtourism', escalating property prices and the resultant lack of affordability of rental accommodation particularly in inner-city areas of Cape

Town (Jessa and Rogerson, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c). Following restrictions imposed on STRs in Barcelona, London, New York and other major cities, South Africa's Department of Tourism is finalising legislation with local governments to be the responsible agents for their implementation.

The essential directions of the new policies and legislation frameworks around STRs are clear. Airbnb owners will face stricter compliance and tax requirements with impending rules to be similar to those for hotels. STR hosts will be required to register their properties such that they align with hospitality standards, tax and zoning regulations (Johnson, 2025). In addition, in order to address housing shortages potential limits may be introduced on the number of days that properties can be rented out annually on platforms such as Airbnb (Johnson, 2025) In March 2026, as a first step towards the roll-out of a new legislative framework, the Department of Tourism issued a draft Code of Good Practice for short-term rentals and designed to improve accountability as well as address regulatory gaps (Department of Tourism, 2026). The new Code of Practice is targeted ostensibly "to support sustainable tourism growth, social inclusion and the strengthening of local economies" within the wider context of "ensuring that tourism activity develops in a balanced and responsible manner, consistent with broader government objectives" (Department of Tourism, 2026, p. 4).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In an assessment of this nearly three decades of policy documents it is evident that the exact details concerning the role of any local government with regard to tourism might differ across South Africa. For those working at the coalface within local governments the viewpoint is expressed that whilst certain of the mandates under the Constitution and subsequent White papers on Local Government are "quite clear… on things like tourism it is not very clear rather it is very broad" (Respondent 1). The tourism official likewise opined that the White Paper "is incredibly vague about what is the responsibility of local government in tourism and what is the responsibility of provincial government" (Respondent 2). At the municipal level the essential direction is interpreted as one designed to ensure that the local economy as a whole is growing and "specifically that we must create an environment that's conducive for tourism" (Respondent 1). Further, the importance of establishing a local tourism policy or strategy was elaborated: "We need to provide the overarching strategy where we would like to see tourism going and growth in tourism, new opportunities coming in and supporting those by making sure the infrastructure supports them and also in a regulatory way" (Respondent 1). The considered response of the tourism official was that for local governments "destination promotion is equally important as destination management" (Respondent 2).

Acknowledgement was made of shortcomings in the operation of IDP processes in relation to tourism. The Municipal Manager conceded that tourism was insufficiently represented in IDPs and that municipalities fell short in terms of resident participation in IDP processes (Respondent 1). In terms of South Africa's institutional structure of cooperative governance the IDP is the principal channel for residents to advance their concerns and goals for tourism in the municipal area and their wards. This said in a recent case study van der Watt (2022, p. 116) shows that residents "hardly used participatory mechanisms to advance their needs and hold politicians accountable for delivery of much needed development". Arguably, whilst successive national tourism strategies espouse a

rhetoric of engaging residents and local communities in tourism decision making the reality is of residents and communities (especially of disadvantaged groups) as marginalized onlookers (Van der Watt, 2022, p. 265). Overall, despite policy rhetoric, local tourism institutions and processes in South Africa are failing in terms of requirements for resident participation (Respondent 1). These conclusions confirm other studies that IDP processes have largely not mobilized active resident participation in local decision-making processes.

Another critical point is that whilst "primary responsibility for the execution of the function of tourism is often allocated to a specific line department within a municipality, the function is affected by the actions of other line departments" (van der Watt, 2013, p. 62). Indeed, the tourism line department's efforts to attract investment in tourist accommodation and attraction would be impacted by decisions relating variously to planning approvals, environmental impact assessments and so on. Overall, therefore, it is argued that "the decisions and actions of the entire municipal organization determine whether tourism thrives or flounders in a local area" (van der Watt, 2013, p. 63). Such an assessment for South Africa directly mirrors that of the international experience as reported by Dredge (2013). A distinctive facet of the South African situation, however, is the marked decline in the quality of governance as reflected in reports on an almost daily basis of corruption, financial mismanagement and procurement irregularities at the level of local government. Indeed, the current situation across much of South Africa is that the majority of the country's local municipalities are barely able to deliver basic services let alone effectively engage residents and grow their economies (Nel and Rogerson, 2016).

The international evidence as reported by Detotto et al. (2021) is that a positive relationship exists between good governance in a destination and tourism growth. In South Africa, however, citing the World Bank Governance Indicators index, Meyer and Rheeders (2024, p. 85) aver that "good governance has deteriorated over the last two decades in South Africa, resulting in development challenges for the tourism sector". These authors assert that for "the tourism sector to produce valid social and economic benefits, the principles of good governance should be considered" (Meyer and Rheeders, 2024, p. 86). Examples would be reducing corruption, improve transparency and effective government, and enforcing the role of law. It is argued that the widespread occurrence of poor governance at the tier of local government negatively impacts the tourism sector as it affects several of the core components that allow the tourism sector to grow within an enabling environment. Examples would be safety and security absent or ineffective governance can be associated with unrest, increased crime and tourists choosing to avoid such destinations or the deterioration of critical infrastructure which is of crucial importance for tourists including clean water, sanitation and roads. Further, poor governance in terms of environmental and cultural management can undermine critical tourist assets in destinations (Meyer and Rheeders, 2024). In final analysis it must be concluded therefore that there is only limited potential at present for most South African local governments to fulfil their designated role and responsibilities to positively contribute towards tourism development in their municipalities.

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SHAPING DIGITAL GAZE THROUGH INFLUENCER VISIBILITY OF RURAL DESTINATIONS IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract: This study investigates the role of social media platforms in shaping tourism trends through the content created by tourism influencers. Using purposive sampling, the research analyses influencer-generated content across Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube between 2021 and 2025, focusing on platform affordances and algorithmically mediated visibility. The study uses content and sentiment analysis to identify themes in destination framing and assess followers' sentiments. The research conceptualises a "digital gaze" to explain how influencer narratives, platform algorithms, and audience interactions co-construct destination meanings. Findings reveal high engagement, with visual storytelling and algorithmically amplified content shaping perceptions of remote destinations, contributing to digital placemaking and reshaping tourism landscapes in South Africa.

Key words: Nature-based tourism, Digital gaze, social media influencers, digital place-making, South Africa

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INTRODUCTION

In the years that followed the Covid-19 pandemic up to the present day, travel behaviours across the globe have undergone a seismic shift, with safety and proximity being at the centre of travel decisions by many tourists (Saini et al., 2023). The challenge is that lesser-known remote and rural destinations have limited strong marketing frameworks, which affects their maximum potential to attract visitors (Rao Hill & Qesja, 2023). Tourism areas such as inland reserves,

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mountain regions and remote coastal areas are faced with a dual challenge of addressing the tourists' fears of isolation and attracting increased visitations. For instance, in 2022, it was reported that both domestic and international tourists were hesitant to travel to sparsely populated mountain trails and game reserves despite the low Covid-19 risks in such areas (South Africa Tourism (SAT), 2022).

Amid these shifting dynamics, there is a growing emergence of social media platforms seen as vital tools in shaping the travel narrative through the lens of influencers acting as content creators and travel vloggers (Li & Zhou, 2023). These individuals play an indirect, yet significant, destination marketing role by documenting their journeys, activities and experiences in the lesser-known remote, nature-based and rural destinations (Han & Chen, 2022), in real-time through various platforms such as TikTok, YouTube and Instagram (Bou Aragones et al., 2025). Influencers unintentionally operate as digital ambassadors for natural and remote tourism destinations, particularly those off the beaten path. Their impact is enhanced by the subsequent reciprocal engagements from their followers, whose likes, shares and comments highlight interest and influence travel motives to these remote places (Yi et al., 2025).

Travel influencers are crucial because they efficiently bridge the information gap for potential tourists, providing real-time information and insights into destinations' safety issues, quality of tourism offerings and accessibility factors (Li & Zhou, 2023). Thus, travel influencers are facilitators of digital place marketing who play a vital role in helping to develop captivating visuals and narratives of the identities of underexplored destinations (Babu & Philip, 2025). Such dynamics trigger significant questions regarding the role of social media trends evolving into actual spatial movement and economic boost for less prominent tourism areas (Rao Hill & Qesja, 2023). Crucial to note is that the convergence of post-pandemic travel behaviours and the growing influencer-driven digital marketing creates a distinct space in which remote nature-based and rural tourism destinations can be reimagined and reintroduced to the global tourism audience. Additionally, the visibility of destinations on social media is not entirely dependent on influencers. Platform algorithms and recommendation systems play a significant role in amplifying, filtering, and prioritising content, thereby determining which destinations gain prominence and which ones remain invisible. An additional layer of algorithmic mediation is, therefore, introduced to the digital place-making procedures, where visibility is co-produced by both human actors-influences and followers, and non-human actors- platform logics.

There is plausible literature on the subject matter of 'post covid travel and the impact of digital place-making, particularly in relation to social media influencers' (Lee et al., 2020; Vukmirović et al., 2020). However, notable gaps remain regarding understanding how such travel content shapes travel patterns, especially in developing countries such as South Africa. This is despite the growing visibility of the influencer-led promotion of nature-based and rural destinations (Saini et al., 2023). Scholarship on spatial tourism, both pre- and post-Covid, has focused mainly on urban and well-established tourism geographies, with a notable lack of empirical insights into lesser-known, remote, nature-based tourism destinations. What is lacking is a dearth of studies on these destinations and the nuanced role of social media influencers in the development and growth of remote nature-based and rural tourism areas. Practically, many remote nature-based and rural tourism destinations in South Africa face challenges around digital accessibility, infrastructure and marketing strategies. These gaps necessitate

focused research that can inform tourism development strategies aligned with current digital and social trends, ensuring that the benefits of increased visibility translate into sustainable local economic development.

Against such a background, this research sought to evaluate the role of social media influencers, particularly travel vloggers, in shaping tourism trends towards remote, nature-based and rural tourism destinations in South Africa. The research aimed to provide actionable insights for tourism planners, digital marketers, and local communities to leverage social media for destination visibility and visitor growth. Ultimately, this research contributes to the growing body of knowledge on digital tourism through explicitly focusing on the Global South, particularly South Africa, where remote and rural destinations remain marginalised in digital tourism scholarship. Through this, the research illuminates the distinct socio-economic, infrastructural, and related developmental dynamics that shape tourism visibility in the Global South contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Post Covid-19 tourism shifts, social media and the rise of the remote nature-based, and rural destinations

After the end of the Covid-19 pandemic, travel patterns worldwide experienced significant disruptions, with key emerging drivers of travel decisions being flexibility, isolation and safety (Orîndaru et al., 2021). In the wake of heightened concerns of crowded urban spaces and the lingering psychological impacts of the lockdowns, many tourists began looking for different spaces to visit, such as remote, nature-based and rural destinations (Fernando & Ratnayake, 2025) The advantages of such places are that they provide an allure of natural beauty, seclusion and the perceived safety of less populated destinations. Besides the growing demand for off-the-beaten-path experiences, most remote destinations remain hidden and invisible in mainstream tourism circuits (Tegelberg & Griffin, 2024). This is because of several challenges such as limited marketing efforts, poor digital infrastructures and limited promotional frameworks. Amid these challenges, social media has since emerged as a dominant platform for shaping public perceptions and travel choice (Skryl & Gregoric, 2022). Central figures in curating and sharing experiences of remote destinations are the influencers, particularly travel vloggers and digital content creators. These influencers craft visually compelling narratives that bring less-known places into the digital spotlight, using platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and YouTube (Kilipiri et al., 2023). The content shared on these platforms acts as a digital bridge that connects secluded regions to a global audience and provides potential tourists with rich imagery and experiential storytelling of these regions (Chatzigeorgiou, 2017). It is undeniable that the Covid-19 pandemic altered the global tourism landscape, influencing trends to more natural and sparsely populated destinations (Kusdibyo et al., 2023). While the urban centres became associated with health risks and travel restrictions, many travellers began to seek experiences in destinations that provided physical distance, escape and immersion in nature (Buckley & Cooper, 2022). Such a shift enhanced the appeal of rural and nature-based tourism (NBT), positioning these environments as ideal for post-pandemic recovery travel (Fernando & Ratnayake, 2025). Nature-Based Tourism, a form of tourism that emphasises the greater contact and understanding between people and the natural environment, provided both the perceived safety and emotional reprieve from the pandemic-induced anxiety and

isolation. In a similar fashion, rural tourism offered prospects for authentic experiences, cultural engagement and laid-back and less constricted activities, often absent in highly commercialised urban areas (Makoni & Tichaawa, 2021).

Digital place-making, digiatal gaze and the influencer culture in remote nature-based, and rural destinations

To understand the role of social media influencers in shaping tourism perceptions, it is crucial to engage with the following interrelated concepts- digital place-making, the digital gaze and the influencer culture. Digital place-making refers to how digital technologies, especially social media, are being used to develop and disseminate narratives about places (Halegoua & Polson, 2021).

In tourism, this implies that physical landscapes are being transformed into symbolic, experiential spaces shared through videos, images and stories. Digital place-making helps physically remote and underdeveloped destinations to be virtually accessible and visually appealing to tourists (Abate et al., 2025). Digital place-making can also enhance the visibility of lesser-known destinations and recontextualise them within the aspirational travel discussions, encouraging spatial reimagining by both visitors and locals (Halegoua & Polson, 2021). The concept of digital gaze builds on the foundational work of John Urry and Larsen, who conceptualised the tourist gaze as socially constructed and mediated through images, cultural representations and expectations (Larsen, 2014) Today, this gaze is increasingly determined by platform-based interactions, algorithmic curation, and user-generated content (Larsen et al., 2007). In many instances, tourists travel based on expectations shaped by interactions with content created by others who have travelled to places of interest (Larsen & Urry, 2011).

In other words, it is largely the mediated imagery that creates the interest to travel to certain places (Priatmoko et al., 2021). Digital placemaking, however, is not a neutral process. Places that gain more visibility rely of platform algorithms, which significantly influence the mediated imagery through privileging content that aligns with engagement metrics, trends and platform-specific logics (Larsen & Urry, 2011). In the digital era, this gaze is increasingly built through dynamically generated content. Influencers design this gaze through an emphasis on specific aesthetics that frame rural and nature-based destinations in ways that align with contemporary travel desires (Lee et al., 2024).

However, the influencers' selective portrayal of landscapes and experiences reinforces certain values- such as aesthetics, solitude and escape, while potentially overlooking other valuable aspects of remote spaces- such as community values, infrastructure, and socio-political realities (Pop et al., 2022). This dynamic is further shaped by the influencer culture. Travel influencers operate as unofficial trusted promoters of destination experiences, often bridging the gap between personal storytelling and commercial promotion (Mqwebu, 2024). The influence of these individuals lies in the aspirational content they post, which fosters parasocial relationships with their followers (Lee et al., 2023). Influencers do not merely portray destinations in their posts, they reframe them through their personal views, often reproducing emotional and aesthetic responses that influence viewers' perceptions and intentions to travel (Peng, 2024). Influencer-follower interactions, through comments, likes, shares and direct messages, reinforce a feedback platform in which the engagement with individuals determines future content and destination visibility as well as perceptions. Such

an interaction is increasingly putting remote, nature-based and rural destinations on the map in the post Covid-19 era (Kusdibyo et al., 2023).

Besides the growing interests and shifting tourist preferences towards remote, nature-based and rural experiences, especially in post Covid-19 tourism discourse, most of these destinations remain under-leveraged and continue to experience limited measurable tourism growth, particularly in developing contenxts. They face several challenges, such as poor digital and physical infrastructure, structural barriers, limited access, and limited marketing efforts (Iswanto et al., 2024). While some of these remote destinations have experienced a moderate increase in domestic tourism during the periods of international restrictions, they have struggled to maintain that gradual growth into a long-term (Kusdibyo et al., 2023). This current disconnects between the demand and readiness offers a unique opportunity for rethinking how digital media, especially influencer-driven content, can bridge the gap between visibility and accessibility to remote, nature-based and rural areas (Skryl & Gregoric, 2022).

Social media platforms and the influencer-driven destination visibility

Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and YouTube are central to the distribution of travel content, allowing for real-time sharing of experiences and direct audience interaction (Peng, 2024; Xie-Carson & Benckendorff, 2024). In the case of the remote, nature-based and rural destinations, these platforms provide a significant opportunity for enhanced destination visibility and storytelling. Influencers are central to this transformation as they act as informal ambassadors of these places through their content (Peng, 2024).

The influencers make use of immersive visuals, personal narratives and relatable content presentations to reposition remote destinations (Meng et al., 2024). For instance, on Instagram, influencers normally pair panoramic landscapes with emotionally resonant captions narrating a sense of peace or escape (Xie-Carson & Benckendorff, 2024). TikTok provides users with an option to create short-form, energetic clips showing hidden gems, local cultures and authentic experiences (Mqwebu, 2024). YouTube provides a platform for longer, documentary-style vlogs, where influencers can post content on their day-to-day experiences of their journeys and stays in remote areas (Iswanto et al., 2024). An advantage of these platforms is that they highlight several destination issues, such as accessibility, safety, and logistical information that is often lacking in official channels. Also, this content forms aid the carefully curated digital gaze that positions remote, nature-based and rural destinations as desirable, safe, emotionally and authentically fulfilling (Iswanto et al., 2024). When influencers make aesthetic choices in their content, such as drone footage, sunset shots and slow-motion videos, viewers and followers are drone to these as they influence their expectations for a destination (Putu et al., 2020).

The impact of travel influencers on tourism destination marketing

The distinction between the influencers and traditional tourism marketers is their perceived authenticity and relatability to both destinations and their people and prospective travellers. Most people normally view the influencers' content as trustworthy, mainly because it is broadcast as personal experiences instead of corporate messaging (Chatzigeorgiou, 2017). Also, their content is from their own personal and authentic experiences, and the posts are not related to commercial marketing efforts of the destinations. Therefore, this authenticity

creates parasocial relationships between influencers and their followers and makes travel recommendations feel more like suggestions from a friend than an advertisement (Meng et al., 2024). Because of this, influencers play a significant role in shaping tourists' travel motivations, particularly amongst the younger digitally native demographics. It has been observed that influencers act as sources of assurance to travellers who are hesitant to travel to destinations that are remote, nature-based or rural (Kilipiri et al., 2023). Most importantly, influencers demystify the associated challenges with remote and rural travel through documenting their journeys to and stays in such areas (Abate et al., 2025).

This becomes especially crucial in developing countries, such as in South Africa, where safety and infrastructure problems can hinder both domestic and international travel (Mqwebu, 2024). It is, however, important to note that not all social media travel content is accurate and sustainable. One of the major problems faced is that some influencers may overlook other important aspects of the remote and/or rural areas they travel to in their narratives of their experiences (Xie-Carson & Benckendorff, 2024). For example, influencers may romanticise rural life while overlooking the local struggles and cultural realities. Such can contribute to unrealistic expectations and, in some cases, unintended consequences of tourism, such as cultural degradation. Digital visibility does not guarantee equitable benefits for local communities unless it is tied to community-based tourism models and inclusive planning (Bastrygina et al., 2024). Besides this, though, the impact of travel influencers continues to grow, strengthening the significance of understanding the role of digital narratives in shaping real-world tourism flows. For remote and rural areas, specifically, travel influencers provide a substantial means of bridging the gap between invisibility and inclusion in the global tourism discourse.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study investigated the role of social media platforms in shaping tourism trends through the content created by tourism influencers and the reciprocal engagement from their followers. Employing a qualitative research design, the study used content and sentiment analysis to identify themes and visual aesthetics to frame destinations for desirable experiences and assess the potential influence of content posted on followers' travel intentions. Data were collected using purposive sampling techniques focusing on vlogs posted from June 2021 to December 2025. The focus was on Instagram, TikTok and YouTube vlogs posted on remote, rural, and nature-based destinations in the South African provinces. The selection of Instagram, TikTok and YouTube was informed by their dominance in visual storytelling, high user engagement and distinct content affordances. While YouTube offers a platform for long-form immersive storytelling, TikTok prioritises short-form videos and Instagram emphasises curated visual imagery. The differences in these platforms are significant in shaping the manner in which destinations are viewed, represented and visited.

Influencers were manually selected if they had a minimum of 1000 followers to ensure there was follower engagement and diversity in opinions, and consistently post-Covid tourism-related content with a focus on remote, nature-based and rural destinations. Also, the threshold of 1 000 followers was chosen to ensure that the selected influencers had an established followers base capable of generating measurable engagement while still capturing a diversity of micro- and mid-tier influencers. It is common that influencers have multiple accounts

across different social media platforms; as a result, the account with the highest number of followers was considered. While some remote, nature-based and rural destinations in South Africa have existing tourism recognition, such as the Wild Coast in the Eastern Cape, The Drakensberg region and some parts of Mpumalanga and Limpopo, the study prioritised influencer content featuring destinations that are relatively underrepresented within mainstream South African tourism marketing. A total of (n=50) influencer profiles were selected for analysis (Table 1).

Table 1. Influencer Profile (n=50)
Source: Authors

Platform	Influencer Code	Number of Followers (in 000)
YouTube	YTV1	8.23
	YTV2	11
	YTV3	1.1
	YTV4	5
	YTV5	23.7
	YTV6	1.05
	YTV7	3
	YTV8	9.1
	YTV9	8.6
	YTV10	2.5
	YTV11	23.6
Instagram	IGV1	37
	IGV2	146
	IGV3	122
	IGV4	105
	IGV5	13.7
	IGV6	20.6
	IGV7	10.6
	IGV8	2
	IGV9	13.7
	IGV10	22.3
	IGV11	300
	IGV12	10.3
	IGV13	1
	IGV14	8
	IGV15	104
	IGV16	14.2
	IGV17	159
	IGV18	2
	IGV19	7.6
TikTok	TTV1	344.4
	TTV2	220.8
	TTV3	3.556
	TTV4	4.2

	TTV5	199.1
	TTV6	156.9
	TTV7	99.4
	TTV8	35.2
	TTV9	41.9
	TTV10	8.1
	TTV11	6.8
	TTV12	187.3
	TTV13	8.2
	TTV14	5.8
	TTV15	8.9
	TTV16	11.7
	TTV17	53
	TTV18	3.5
	TTV19	27.3
	TTV20	10.1

Notes: YTV=YouTube Vlogger, IGV= Instagram Vlogger and TTV= TikTok Vlogger

The study sample included both South African influencers and international visitors, which allowed for comparative insights into how rural and remote destinations in the country are portrayed by both locals and international travellers. For each influencer, their most popular vlog featuring a remote, nature-based or rural destination was selected for analysis. The dataset for the research included both video and associated user comments. For each selected vlog, all the publicly available comments were extracted and analysed, ensuring compliance with platform terms and conditions. The data collection in this regard adhered to the ethical standards for social media research, focusing exclusively on publicly accessible content without interaction with the users (Chen et al., 2023). The researchers meticulously addressed the ethical considerations in line with established guidelines for internet research (Ghermandi et al., 2023). Because the study collated publicly available data, formal ethical clearance was not required (Townsend et al., 2016). However, anonymity and non-identifiability of users were maintained. In addition, researchers did not collect personal and/nor sensitive information, and all data usage adhered to the platform policies.

The metadata collected for each video included the number of views, likes, favourites, shares and comments. Following a thematic coding approach, a content analysis was done, which involved initial open coding, then axial and selective coding to identify dominant themes. Sentiment analysis was then done using NVivo, integrating automated sentiment classification with manual validation to enhance reliability. Coding was done by the authors, with iterative discussions to promote consistency and credibility of interpretations.

FINDINGS

Engagement Analysis

Sharing online content on social media platforms has opened many possibilities for marketing destinations, especially for social media influencers, through their engagement with their followers (Saini et al., 2023). The study presents statistics on top-performing vlogs to gain insight into influencers'

engagement with their followers through the posted vlogs, focusing on remote, nature-based, and rural destinations in South Africa (Table 2).

Table 2. Engagement analysis
Source: Authors

Influencer	**Destination**	**Engagement statistics**				
		Views	Likes	Favourites	Share	Comments
YTV1	Mpumalanga	1 200 000	80 000	6 000	1 200	4 500
YTV2	Mpumalanga	850 000	55 000	4 000	900	3 200
YTV3	Mpumalanga	600 000	40 000	3 200	700	2 300
YTV4	Limpopo	1 500 000	120 000	10 000	1 800	6 800
YTV5	Mpumalanga	750 000	50 000	4 000	800	2 700
YTV6	Free State	500 000	32 000	2 500	600	1 900
YTV7	Mpumalanga	900 000	60 000	5 000	1 000	3 500
YTV8	Northern Cape	650 000	45 000	3 800	750	2 400
YTV9	Eastern Cape	1 100 000	76 000	6 200	1 300	4 800
YTV10	KwaZulu Natal	1 300 000	90 000	7 500	1 600	5 200
YTV11	KwaZulu Natal	700 002	48 000	4 200	800	2 600
IGV1	Western Cape	420 000	35 000	6 000	1 200	1 800
IGV2	Mpumalanga	300 000	20 000	3 200	650	1 200
IGV3	Western Cape	580 000	45 000	7 500	1 400	2 300
IGV4	Western Cape	340 020	26 000	4 200	800	1 500
IGV5	Free State	200 000	15 000	2 500	500	800
IGV6	Eastern Cape	480 005	38 000	6 000	1 100	1 700
IGV7	Western Cape	620 000	47 000	8 200	1 600	2 500
IGV8	North West	230 000	18 000	2 800	550	900
IGV9	Western Cape	710 000	52 000	8 800	1 800	3 000
IGV10	Western Cape	890 000	65 000	10 000	2 200	3 600
IGV11	Western Cape	540 000	40 000	6 500	1 300	2 100
IGV12	Mpumalanga	310 000	22 000	3 500	700	1 300
IGV13	Limpopo	260 000	19 000	3 000	600	1 100
IGV14	North West	180 003	13 500	2 200	450	700
IGV15	Western Cape	600 000	44 000	7 800	1 700	2 400
IGV16	Western Cape	820 000	60 000	9 500	2 000	3 100
IGV17	KwaZulu Natal	470 000	36 000	6 000	1 200	1 800
IGV18	Northern Cape	210 000	15 500	2 600	500	800
IGV19	Northern Cape	240 000	17 500	2 800	600	900
TTV1	Limpopo	231 700	9 540	2 470	12	59
TTV2	Limpopo	2 800 000	146 000	38 300	99	908
TTV3	North West	247 000	1 957	1 667	109	27
TTV4	Eastern Cape	572 400	62 100	8 046	1 591	880
TTV5	North West	145 700	13 900	3 004	225	284
TTV6	Mpumalanga	1 100 000	33 100	11 500	841	472
TTV7	Mpumalanga	38 300	954	240	20	21
TTV8	Free State	341 500	14 800	4 147	125	459
TTV9	Limpopo	225 400	10 500	2 212	115	170
TTV10	Eastern Cape	402 900	12 500	1 138	1 409	134
TTV11	Eastern Cape	65 700	4 062	175	698	156
TTV12	Mpumalanga	1 500 000	73 000	5 781	5 911	70

Table 2 of the engagement statistics shows strong engagement between social media influencers and their followers. Social media platforms serve as platforms where influencers create compelling content that inspires and informs potential travellers (Ahluwalia & Shukla, 2024). Findings show that when influencers post their content on social media, their followers view the content and engage through likes, favourites, shares and comments. This is because social media users with high engagement levels are usually first perceived as peers by their followers (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). This support (Chamboko-Mpotaringa & Tichaawa, 2021)'s view that social media fosters a sense of community and connection among users.

Construction of Destination Appeal

There were notable differences that emerged across the platforms in how the destination appeal was constructed. For example, TikTok vloggers prioritised short-form, trend-driven discovery while YouTube vloggers posted immersive narrative experiences, and Instagram vloggers focused more on the curated visual aesthetics. The study examined how social media influencers construct destination appeal across Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok, focusing on content related to remote, nature-based and rural tourism destinations in South Africa. Four key themes emerged (Table 3), illustrating the narrative strategies and aesthetic techniques used to frame destinations as desirable tourism experiences. In the presentation of the results and discussion, the following codes and meanings are used: YTV (YouTube Vlogger), IGV (Instagram Vlogger) and TTV (TikTok Vlogger) to denote the social media influencer.

Table 3. Themes and subthemes for the construction of destination appeal
Source: Authors

Theme	**Sub-theme**
Immersive natural aesthetics	Scenic views. Calming water-based moments. Sunset and stargazing moments.
Emotional wellness and escape	Relaxation and mental reset. Peaceful solitude and couple or family bonding. Spiritual and emotional elevation.
Unique local encounters and authenticity	Interaction with local people and culture. Discovery of hidden gems and lesser-known places. Rustic simplicity
Camera technique	Selfie-style narration Drone footage and aerial views Panoramic and wide-angle shots

Immersive natural aesthetics

Immersive natural aesthetics, with subthemes: scenic views, calming water-based moments and sunset and stargazing moments were recurring strategies by many social media influencers in constructing the destination appeal of remote, nature-based and rural tourism destinations. Many influencers consistently showcase visuals that emphasise untouched natural beauty and atmospheric serenity. Their vlogs are often accompanied by captions describing the settings as breathtaking or unreal, positioning the landscape as the destination's main drawcard. One influencer shared, "The views were stunning, rolling hills, wide

open skies, and fresh air everywhere" (YTV4), while another stated, "Name a better artist than God?" (TTV4). These narratives support (Lee et al., 2024)'s view that influencers emphasise specific aesthetics to frame tourism. Other influencers' vlogs featured water-based destinations, showcasing the waterfalls, rivers and infinity pools as tranquillity spaces. As influencers narrated, "We dipped our feet in the cool water and just sat on the rocks talking and enjoying the view" (YTV11) and "The canoe ride was peaceful and beautiful… the river was calm, and the trees made it feel like a dream" (IGV9). These narratives reinforce the connection between nature and personal well-being. Moreover, sunset and stargazing moments were reflected as emotional and introspective experiences. Examples include narratives such as, "The sunset from here is stunning, like the whole sky turns orange and pink" (YTV2) and "Spent time stargazing from a hammock… the sky was so clear, I could see everything" (IGV1). These narratives are consistent with insights from existing literature that recognise social media influencers as digital ambassadors who promote destinations through visually appealing content (Meng et al., 2024; Sodikov, 2024)

Emotional wellness and escape

The second theme, centred around emotional wellness and escape, reveals that social media influencers emphasise travel's therapeutic and restorative potential to remote, nature-based and rural tourism destinations. Influencers' narratives highlighted disconnection from daily stress, reconnection with inner calmness and experiences such as romantic escapes, family bonding, or solo retreats in natural surroundings. Some influencers narrated, "The peace I felt there was something I will carry with me for a long time…this is the kind of place you go with someone special… laugh, eat well, and feel human again." (IGV1), "It was a peaceful day filled with nature, good food, and small moments that made me smile." (IGV7) and "I loved the views from the balcony. It's a perfect place for nature lovers, which allows you to disconnect from everyday life and reconnect with nature." (TTV9). Other narratives were of emotional language and expressed through song lyrics or reflective captions. These narratives were shown in these statements: "Hello peace, hello joy, hello love… it is a new horizon" (TTV10) and "This trip made me feel happy and peaceful, and I would love to come back again someday" (IGV11). Influencers' reviews framed these destinations as sanctuaries for emotional wellness and escape by emphasising relaxation and mental reset, peaceful solitude, small group experiences, and spiritual and emotional connections. These insights are consistent with the views of (Meng et al., 2025) who insist that influencers use emotionally appealing captions to evoke feelings of tranquillity and connection with nature by combining visuals with relatable narratives that emphasise the emotional allure of destinations.

Unique local encounters and authenticity

Many influencers narrated unique local encounters, reflecting authenticity. They showcased their interaction with local people and their culture. One influencer narrated, "They shared stories, spoke in isiZulu, and made me feel like one of their own" (YTV10), and another stated, "The waiter even shared a little story about how the penguins sometimes wander near the restaurant!" (IGV7). Echoing prior literature, influencer content goes beyond destinations' natural appeal (Sanz-Marcos et al., 2024). It is constructed

through the influencers' engagement with the locals, their cultural traditions and everyday rural life. The shared stories, meals and conversations with local residents were framed as meaningful and memorable while contributing to a sense of authenticity and uniqueness. This confirms the fact that ethnic minority destination endorsers impact tourists' perception of authenticity and destination image (Dong et al., 2023). Destinations were often described as hidden gems, positioning them as alternatives to mainstream tourism hotspots. In addition, rustic simplicity was portrayed through posts that emphasised modest, grounded experiences as the core components of the remote, nature-based and rural tourism destinations such as farm stays, traditional meals and braais in the bush.

Narratives such as "I found this gem in my home province… I didn't know this beauty existed here" (TTV8) and "Maiden's Cove is one of Cape Town's best-kept secrets" (IGV4) were noted. Other influencers highlighted that, "We had uphuthu, beans, and chicken stew cooked outside on a fire—it tasted amazing." (YTV10) and "We had a braai while listening to the sounds of the wild; it felt like a dream." (YTV4). These narratives illustrate how social media influencers shape the digital gaze through the visibility of remote, nature-based, and rural destinations, concurring with (Deb & Mallik, 2023) who maintain that the democratisation of information dissemination in social media has effectively bridged geographical divides, bringing previously obscure or less-visited destinations into the forefront of potential travellers' consciousness. This further supports the views of (Wengel et al., 2022), who revealed how TikTok made two off-the-beaten-track destinations in China (Hainan) popular overnight.

Camera techniques

Many influencers used different camera techniques to evoke a sense of presence, enhance immersion, emotion and aesthetic appeal. Some influencers used selfie shots and first-person narrations to build personal connection and authenticity, while others showcase expansive landscapes and scenery with drone and aerial views. These were noted in narratives such as "Drone capturing the dramatic drop of Meiringspoort Falls" (IGV10) and "We flew over the escarpment… this view is heaven." (TTV10). In addition, panoramic and wide-angle shots were used to emphasise the vastness of nature and reinforced the narrative of escape. These narrations confirm that social media influencers utilise the audiovisual attractiveness of destinations to attract attention, employing high-quality images and videos (Akhtar et al., 2024).

Influencer Followers' Sentiments

The strategies employed by influencers in constructing destination appeal played a key role in how destinations were perceived. The comments section across the platforms under analysis provided insights into the influencer's followers' sentiments. The sentiment analysis of the comments section identified four themes: sentimental reflections, validation and shared experiences, travel intention, and barriers and constraints (Table 4). In the presentation of the results and discussion, the following codes and meanings are used: YTF (YouTube Follower), IGF (Instagram Follower) and TTF (TikTok Follower) to denote influencers' followers.

Table 4. Influencer followers' sentiment themes and subthemes
Source: Authors

Theme	Sub-theme
Sentimental reflections	Emotional resonance Nolstagia Cultural connection and identity
Validation and shared experiences	Agreement and validation Shared travel experience
Travel intention	Bucket-list goals Readiness to act Future travel intentions
Barriers and constraints	Cost as a barrier Perceived risk

Sentimental reflections

Many of the influencers' followers' comments expressed sentimental reflections, highlighting emotional resonance, nostalgia, cultural connection, and identity. They expressed feelings of peace, joy and emotional upliftment in response to influencers' content. Most of these emotional reactions were framed as deeply personal, as noted in some of the comments, such as "This video made me feel so relaxed. Thank you for sharing" (IGF12) and "This looks like a perfect spot to escape the city and just unwind" (YTF6). These sentiments reveal that the strategies used by influencers to construct destination appeal not only inform and entertain followers but also evoke emotional resonance, nostalgia, cultural connection, and identity, which significantly shape followers' sentiments. This aligns with (Sanz-Marcos et al., 2024), demonstrating the emotional power that influencer-generated content has on its audience, cultivating empathetic connections, and blurring the distinction between commercial and personal content.

Influencers' content triggers memories of previous travel experiences and inspires followers' longing to revisit destinations. Influencers' followers frequently reflect on past travel experiences. Significant comments such as "I visited Meiringspoort Falls two years ago and it was amazing. Watching your video makes me want to go back this summer" (IGF4) and "Your review brought back such good memories" (TTF8) were made reflecting nostalgic longing. These nostalgic comments and longing support previous research that followers share experiences triggered by influencers' content, highlighting the power of shared experiences and the desire to relive positive moments (Conner, 2024) and validates the effectiveness of immersive visuals and narrative cues in generating affective recall among viewers (Sammy et al., 2017).

Influencer content can foster a sense of local belonging and rootedness among locals, forcing them to reevaluate their domestic tourism landscape. Many of the followers' comments revealed an evoked connection, identity and pride towards the destinations featured by influencers. Some TikTok followers commented, "This is why, as South Africans, we must tour our own country first before galivanting overseas" (TTF8). Another commented, "This made me realise how much of my home province I still need to explore" (TTF10). These observations align with the idea that social media influencers can inspire locals to connect with their heritage and explore local areas, thus encouraging domestic tourism (Ahluwalia & Shukla, 2024; Saini et al., 2023)

Validation and shared experiences

The validation and expression of shared experiences by influencers' followers act as social cues, confirming influencers' framing of destination appeal. Their comments validated influencers' content accuracy, with other followers sharing their own past experiences of the featured remote, nature-based and rural destination. This was noted with comments that agreed with influencers' perspectives, exemplified with affirmations, such as 'agree', 'so true' or 'yes'. Comments like "I completely agree with you about the views; Maiden's Cove is amazing" (IGF2), "I totally agree…it's the perfect place to slow down and feel alive again)" (IGF7) and "Yes, our country truly is beautiful" (TTF12) were noted. These sentiments confirm that the credibility of influencers' content stems from its perceived authenticity and relatability, fostering stronger connections with their audience than traditional advertising (Vukmirović et al., 2020).

Beyond validation, many followers commented by sharing their experiences of visiting the featured destinations, adding their own perspectives beyond the influencers'. "Wow, your experience sounds amazing! I stayed at Mjejane a few months back and also loved the peaceful vibe" (IGF8). Others commented, "I remember visiting it a few years ago with a friend, and it was such an unforgettable experience (YTF9)" and "The safari drives were incredible, and we got to see the Big Five! The sunsets were breathtaking, too. If I could, I'd go back in a heartbeat" (TTF9). Influencers' ability to tap into shared experiences reinforces connections (Ebben & Bull, 2023).

Travel intention

Many of the comments from the influencers' followers show how social media influencers' content stimulates travel intentions, planning and in some cases, immediate decision-making. Prominent comments were centred around bucket-list goals, readiness to act and future travel intentions. Many followers strongly desired to visit the featured remote, nature-based and rural tourism destinations by adding them to their travel bucket list. Comments reflecting their long-term travel aspirations included: "This should be on my bucket list." (TTF3). "Definitely adding Muluwa Lodge to my travel list." (YTF2) and "Now I really want to go back and try King Fisher Lodge." (IGF8). Other comments reflected the followers' readiness to act and were often framed with decisiveness. Examples include: "I really want to go there now." (IGF10), "Please share the place details. I want to book." (TTF8), "I will be visiting soon." (TTF10) and "I am definitely coming there in November during my birthday." (TTF14). The comments show confirmations and plans to book, visit, or travel during upcoming occasions.

In addition to bucket lists and readiness to act, many followers expressed generalised future travel intentions. Though not framed as urgent, they signalled followers' intention to travel in the future, driven by influencers' digital content. Followers commented, "We owe ourselves this… one night just to refresh." (TTF25) and "I hope I can visit soon and experience the friendly local vibe you described". (IGF10). Others express their future travel intention, "I love how you shared all the activities you did, from hiking to stargazing. I will definitely try it out with my partner next time" (IGF12). These responses demonstrate the ability of social media to influence travel intentions (S. Chen & Lin, 2019), aligning with (Campbell & Farrell, 2020), who posit that content posted by influencers on social media has significant persuasive and influence power.

Barriers and constraints

While social media influencers' content successfully generates interest and the desire to travel and enhances engagement, followers' comments also reveal the realities that limit travel conversions. Cost as a barrier and perceived risk surfaced across all three platforms as significant challenges in converting digitally stimulated interest into actual travel, specifically in developing economies among domestic tourists (Busca & Bertrandias, 2020). These challenges were more pronounced on TikTok, where the users are mainly the younger and economically diverse followers. Followers expressed that although the destinations were appealing, financial limitations prevented them from travelling. Some comments that were noted were: "Beautiful but overpriced." (TTF11), "Looks stunning but not in my budget." (TTF16) and "Money is stopping me from travelling." (TTF17). These findings reveal the unequal access to leisure tourism, often due to structural constraints on tourism consumption (Angeloni & Rossi, 2020), particularly relevant in the South African context, where income disparities and unemployment remain high, rendering leisure travel an unattainable luxury for a considerable portion of the population (Bob & Gounden, 2024).

Some influencers' followers expressed safety-related fear, especially in unfamiliar rural and natural environments, reflecting a psychological barrier to travel. TikTok follower 2 commented, "I would love to do something like this, but I feel like I would be the one they make an example out of." (TTF2). These findings align with safety perceptions having a significant influence on destination choice, particularly in regions perceived as unsafe or unfamiliar (Bob & Gounden, 2024).

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The study aimed to investigate the role of social media platforms in shaping tourism trends through the content created by tourism social media influencers and engagement with their followers. Drawing of the findings from influencer content posted on Instagram, TikTok and YouTube promoting remote, nature-based and rural tourism destinations, the study showed that tourism social media influencers have strong engagement with their followers and validates the effectiveness of immersive visuals and narratives used by influencers in constructing a "digital gaze" shaping how the featured destinations are perceived. Four themes emerged, revealing how these influencers effectively digitally frame remote, nature-based, and rural tourism destinations as having natural aesthetics, providing space for emotional wellness and escape with unique, local, and authentic experiences while employing various camera techniques to enrich the content. Analysing followers' sentiments revealed four themes (sentimental reflections, validation and shared experiences, travel intentions, and barriers and constraints), which highlight the significant impact that digital narratives created by influencers have on shaping perceptions of destinations and influencing travel decisions.

Theoretically, the study enhances the interrelated concepts of digital place-making, digital gaze and influencer culture by examining how social media influencers transform physical spaces into symbolic and experiential locations through digital narratives. It also explores how these digital representations, through content posted by influencers, influence travel decisions and legitimise destinations. Thus, the study findings contribute to empirical evidence on debates centred around social media and influencers' role in shaping tourism, revealing how digital platforms reshape perceptions of rural and remote tourism landscapes in South Africa through influencer-driven visibility of underrepresented spaces.

The study also shows how the convergence between tourism and technology has blurred the lines between virtual and reality, creating a hybrid space where digitally mediated experiences can influence tourists' perceptions and expectations of actual travel. This dynamic emphasises the necessity for tourism stakeholders to understand and leverage the influence of social media in crafting destination marketing strategies that resonate with today's digitally engaged tourists.

This study provides practical insights for tourism planners, digital marketers, and local communities on effectively using social media to increase remote, nature-based, and rural tourism destinations' visibility and attract more visitors. Digital marketers and destination marketers can enhance their marketing strategies by curating visual content that highlights the natural environment, capturing scenic views, tranquil moments by the water, and mesmerising sunsets, accompanied by evocative captions that emphasise the emotional experiences associated with nature. Additionally, destinations can create opportunities for visitors to share their experiences online, enhancing engagement and authenticity. These approaches can significantly boost interest in remote, nature-based, and rural tourism destinations. As social media and influencers draw tourists' attention to previously under-explored areas, local tourism planners and governments should proactively improve digital visibility and accessibility of these natural areas. The study recommends that governments promote and support community-based tourism initiatives and ensure the availability of basic infrastructure to accommodate increased visitors' interest generated by social media exposure. Domestic leisure tourism must be economically inclusive, with marketers offering a range of prices and promoting accessible tourism experiences (Bob & Gounden, 2024). Policy makers, destinations and organisations must carefully assess the effectiveness of influencer marketing in stimulating travel intentions within the framework of socioeconomic disparities and perceived risks associated with venturing into unfamiliar environments, as these factors can hinder the translation of online engagement into tangible tourism demand, potentially leading to a disconnect between online interest and actual travel behaviour.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The limitations of this research are mainly related to the research methodology used. The study was limited to purposive sampling and the focus on only three social media platforms. In addition, the research only focused on the analysis of the most popular vlog per influencer. Future research could explore influencer content from developed countries to assess whether similar themes would emerge. Other studies can take cognisance of the growing integration of AI-generated content in tourism marketing and could explore how tourists perceive narratives by machines versus humans.

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