Ngcebo Masilela / Gijsbert Hoogendoorn / Gustav Visser

A Historical Analysis of Tourism Development in Eswatini Using Butler's "Tourism Area Life Cycle"

Abstract

This paper applies Richard Butler's "Tourism area life cycle" (1980) (TALC) to examine the historical development of tourism in Eswatini (formerly Swaziland). The subsidiary aim is to reassess tourism development in Eswatini by updating Harrison's "Development of tourism in Swaziland" (1995) for the period 1995–2022. The research used a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data from the Eswatini Tourism Authority with qualitative interviews with tourism employees, tourists, and locals. The findings reveal that tourism development in Eswatini followed a different trajectory between 1995 and 2022 than the one described in Harrison's (1995) work. The industry initially went through the involvement stage, then the development stage, and, more recently, the stagnation stage, with attempts at rejuvenation. Although these findings differ from Butler's (1980), they extend TALC debates by showing how political shocks, source-market dependency, and domestic tourism resilience shape trajectories in ways the model does not anticipate, with implications for its application in Global South destinations.

Keywords: Eswatini, TALC, destination, development

1. Introduction

Tourism is one of the fastest-growing industries in the world and significantly contributes to the social, cultural, and economic development of destinations (Zuelow, 2016). Effective management and adaptation to economic, political, and social trends shape the development of tourism destinations (Haugland et al., 2011). This article focuses on Eswatini, a small, landlocked country in Southern Africa.

Eswatini is a monarchy: King Mswati III is the absolute ruler and has ruled since 1986 (Dlamini, 2024). Most *emaSwati* (Swati people) see King Mswati III as a unifier and a custodian of Swati culture and identity (Simelane, 2016). The country gained independence from Great Britain in 1968 (Dlamini, 2024). These political characteristics are important for understanding tourism development in the country, as periods of political instability in the kingdom have directly influenced the destination's image and consequent visitor flows (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

The World Bank Group (2021) classifies Eswatini as a lower-middle-income country. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF, 2023, p. 5), 59.0% of Eswatini's population lives below the poverty line, with 29.0% estimated to live in extreme poverty. Youth unemployment in Eswatini is estimated at 58.2%, and the country also has among the highest gender inequalities worldwide, ranking 138 out of 170 countries (IMF, 2023, p. 47). Tourism is a vital sector in Eswatini, contributing significantly to the country's economic output (Hermann et al., 2020). In 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic, tourism accounted for 1.2% of the nation's gross domestic product (GDP) (Eswatini Tourism Authority, 2024, para. 2). Tourism is also a

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significant engine for job creation in Eswatini, with the sector accounting for 30.2% of total direct employment in 2022 (Africa Press, 2024, para. 3).

Many researchers have tried to develop a theoretical framework to understand the development of tourism destinations. Arguably, the most important model for assessing tourism destination development is Richard Butler's "Tourism area life cycle" (TALC) (1980), published in *The Canadian Geographer*. The model describes the emergence, growth, and decline of tourism destinations through six stages: exploration, involvement, development, consolidation, stagnation, and decline or rejuvenation (Solomon, 2015). Richard Butler initially designed the TALC based on the "product life cycle concept"; he believed that tourism destinations, like product sales, evolve and change over time owing to various factors (Butler, 2006). Indeed, the core premise of the TALC is that tourism destinations are dynamic entities that evolve over time across destinations globally (McKercher & Wong, 2021).

Harrison analyzed tourism development in Eswatini from the 1800s to 1990 using the TALC. His analysis revealed that tourism in the country evolved through five stages: exploration, inactivity, transition, truncated development, decline, and attempted rejuvenation. He found that tourism in Eswatini began to decline in 1975 due to external factors, including economic and political changes in neighbouring South Africa, which shortened visitor stays. The Government of Eswatini and the private sector collaborated to rejuvenate the country's tourism industry, including "increased promotion of hallmark events and Swazi tradition" (Harrison, 1995, p. 138).

The Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) model is a widely used conceptual framework for analyzing how tourism destinations evolve across diverse contexts. Its applicability has been demonstrated in a range of settings, including resorts, urban centres, natural parks, and regional systems (Romão et al., 2013). For example, Solomon (2015) employed the TALC to examine the development trajectories of two coastal destinations in Sweden's Umeå municipality; Zhong et al. (2008) applied the model to Zhangjiajie National Forest Park in China; and Gore et al. (2021) applied the TALC in Goa, India. More broadly, Romão et al. (2013) examined regional tourism development in Southwest Europe, focusing on Italy, France, Spain, and Portugal. In contrast, applications of the TALC within African contexts remain comparatively limited. Existing studies include Ly's (2018) analysis of Saly, a coastal resort in Senegal; Sahli's (2020) examination of Hammamet in Tunisia; and Odum's (2020) application of the model to ecotourism destinations in South-Eastern Nigeria. These examples underscore the relative scarcity of TALC-based research in the Global South, particularly when compared to the extensive scholarly work produced in the Global North.

Expanding the systematic application of the TALC in Global South contexts would be valuable for several reasons. First, it would enable rigorous testing of the model's claims and support analysis of contexts shaped by colonial legacies and postcolonial development trajectories (Douglas, 1997). In this way, it would help identify divergences in destinations such as Eswatini, where tourism development may not follow the model's predicted sequence. Accordingly, it would provide theoretically informed insights into tourism planning in developing countries, where tourism often serves as a key socio-economic driver (Christie et al., 2014).

While Butler's (1980) TALC model remains a fundamental framework for understanding destination development, its applicability across diverse political, economic, and geographic contexts remains contested. This research contributes by revisiting tourism development in Eswatini, a landlocked African destination with strong regional dependence. Building on Harrison's (1995) work, this study finds that tourism development in Eswatini from 1995 to 2022 does not follow the S-shaped trajectory of the TALC. Instead, the findings highlight political shocks, heavy reliance on a single source market, and domestic tourism as key factors shaping destination development. Indeed, the 2021 'political shock' directly supports Kubickova and Martin's (2020) call for greater government involvement in the TALC, as governments play a vital role in designing policies and establishing institutions that foster tourism development in destinations. This paper also offers empirical evidence from the Global South, showing that a destination's reliance on a single source market reinforces

Haywood's (1986) critique that visitor numbers alone inadequately capture tourism dynamics. Moreover, domestic tourism's role during stagnation challenges the TALC's assumption that recovery depends primarily on international arrivals, exposing a limitation in Butler's original model.

This paper first reviews the TALC, then describes the mixed-methods approach used in the investigation and finally presents findings across three stages of Eswatini's tourism development.

2. Literature review

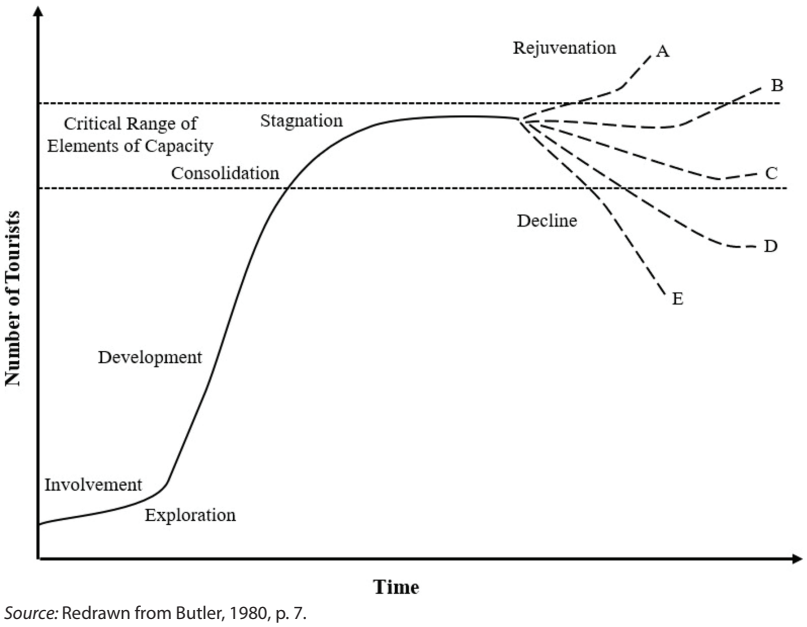
The TALC model is descriptive, arguing that tourist resorts follow typical development patterns (Butler, 2006). Although global tourism has changed significantly since the TALC's development in 1980, the model remains in use because of its valuable conceptual framework for interpreting tourism destination development across settings (Douglas, 1997; Garay & Cànoves, 2011).

Butler first became interested in tourism destination development in the 1950s, after personally experiencing physical, social, and economic changes across many Northern European tourist resorts (Butler, 2006). During this period, Butler observed significant shifts in resorts' appearance, attractiveness, tourist profiles, accessibility, and economic health. These experiences led him to develop the TALC model (Butler, 2006). Earlier studies by Wolfe (1952), Plog (1974), Stansfield (1978), and Doxey (1975) also laid the groundwork for the TALC (Butler, 2006). According to Butler (1980), these researchers' contributions were invaluable in formulating the TALC, as their publications supported discussions of the process of tourism destination change. Plog's (1974) paper, "Why destination areas rise and fall in popularity," on the psychographics of tourists was especially influential to Butler because it was among the first studies in the literature to discuss destination decline (Butler, 2006).

2.1. Butler's tourist area cycle of evolution

Butler's (1980) model (Figure 1) classifies the TALC into various stages. Due to space constraints, each stage is discussed briefly.

Figure 1
Hypothetical evolution of a tourist area



Source: Redrawn from Butler, 1980, p. 7.

- The *exploration* stage occurs when the tourism destination has no established tourist season and is largely unknown. The area receives few visitors, who are attracted to the destination's unique natural and cultural features. The tourism industry has little significance for the local socioeconomic well-being, nor does it change the area's physical or symbolic fabric (Butler, 1980).
- The *involvement* stage occurs as the area develops a visitation pattern and the visitor numbers increase; some locals are involved in tourism services provision (Butler, 1980). Visitors and locals interact more during this time (Lundberg, 2015). Local government structures improve existing facilities and provide additional infrastructure for tourists and locals alike (Oreja Rodríguez et al., 2008). Moreover, Butler (1980) stated that a tourist season emerges during this stage, systematically ending irregular visitation patterns as more organized travel arrangements are made.
- The *development* stage is characterized by widespread advertising of tourism destinations (Butler, 1980). Local involvement in tourism declines rapidly as tourism becomes more commercialized (Lee & Weaver, 2014). Locally owned businesses are replaced by externally owned businesses. As tourism grows, the destination area experiences physical landscape changes as more facilities are built (Setiawan & Wiweka, 2018). Various tourist types visit the destination during this time, and as a result, visitor numbers during peak periods may exceed the area's local population (Butler, 1980).
- The *consolidation* stage develops when much of the area's economy largely depends on tourism (Butler, 1980). The total number of visitors increases during this stage and temporarily exceeds the local population, although the rate of increase declines. Residents may oppose tourism and become discontented because of the large number of tourists, deteriorating facilities, and the overuse of resources associated with tourism activities (Solomon, 2015).
- The *stagnation* stage occurs when tourism development at destinations becomes stagnant over time despite having a well-established image among tourists. Repeat visitations, surplus bed availability, and poor visitor numbers characterize the area. As the area's natural and cultural attractions age and become less desirable, manufactured attractions on the periphery outnumber them, separating the destination's image from its original geographic environment (Butler, 1980).

Butler (1980) postulated that after stagnation, one of two scenarios is likely to occur. i) Decline stage. During this phase, tourists will use the area mainly for weekend or day trips, depending on accessibility. The area will experience high property turnover as non-tourism-related activities replace tourist facilities (Lundberg, 2015). Locals will be the most affected during this phase, as the destination may fail to rediscover its tourist function. ii) Alternatively, instead of decline, a destination may experience the rejuvenation stage. Butler (1980) suggested two ways to achieve rejuvenation: using artificial attractions and exploiting previously untapped natural resources.

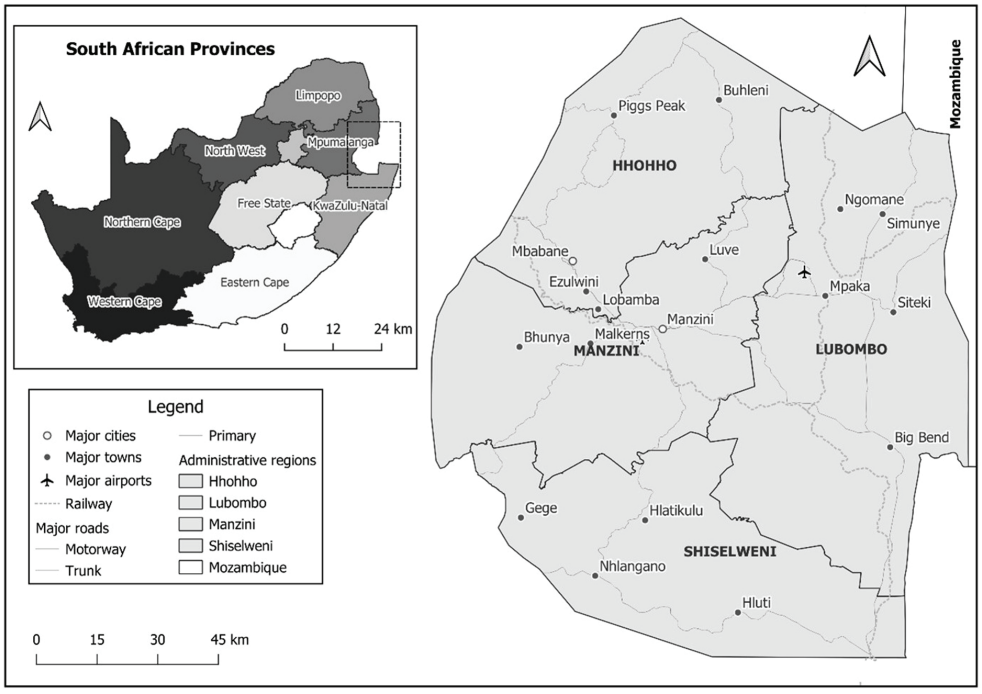
2.2. Criticisms of Butler's model

Numerous authors have criticized the TALC model; however, much of the criticism has not aimed to discredit Butler's (1980) work, but rather to adapt it into an operational conceptual framework (Lagiewski, 2006). Russell and Faulkner (1998) criticized the TALC's evolutionary phases, arguing that the development process of tourist resorts is complex and cannot be explained linearly by an S-curve. Subsequent studies reinforce this view, showing that destinations evolve along uneven trajectories rather than following predictable stages (Prats et al., 2008; Chapman & Light, 2016). In addition to these critiques, Kubickova and Martin (2020) highlighted the TALC's limited consideration of government involvement, arguing that government intervention and political stability significantly shape tourism investment and destination image.

2.3. Tourism in Eswatini

Eswatini is a landlocked country, surrounded by the Republic of South Africa and Mozambique (Schlüter & Schumann, 2018). The country has four administrative regions: Hhohho, Manzini, Lubombo, and Shiselweni (Figure 2). Despite its compact size, Eswatini offers a range of attractions and experiences. Visitors are drawn to a rich tapestry of cultural experiences at the Mantenga Cultural Village and through annual festivals such as the *Incwala* (First Fruits) and the *Umhlanga* (Reed Dance) (Hermann et al., 2020). Eswatini also offers visitors opportunities to experience diverse wildlife up close in its game parks, including Hlane Royal National Park and Mlilwane Wildlife Sanctuary (Moorman et al., 2024). Community-based tourism projects such as the Shewula Mountain Camp and Mahamba Gorge have also enriched the visitor experience by giving tourists a platform to engage with emaSwati (Du-Pont & Sacolo, 2019).

Figure 2
Location map of Eswatini



Today, the country offers a variety of accommodations, ranging from campsites to luxury hotels and lodges. According to Harrison (1995), when tourism began in Eswatini in the 1800s, the country had only a few hotels to accommodate adventurers and big-game hunters. By 1907, the country had five hotels catering to business tourists, and guesthouses began to appear periodically in mining and border towns (Harrison, 1995, p. 141). The number of hotels had increased to 11 by 1954, and most of the occupants were government officials and South African residents (Harrison, 1995). Hotels in Eswatini expanded in size between 1966 and 1975, primarily in the Ezulwini Valley. Increased investment by the Eswatini government in tourism in the late 1970s led to the construction of new hotels in the tourism hub of the Ezulwini Valley and in smaller towns such as Nhlangano and Piggs Peak (Harrison, 1995).

3. Methods

This investigation employed a mixed-methods approach to examine tourism development in Eswatini between 1995 and 2022, integrating quantitative trend analysis of tourism statistics with qualitative thematic

analysis of stakeholder perspectives. Both datasets were treated as equal sources of evidence. Quantitative data established patterns in visitor flows and accommodation, while qualitative data provided interpretive depth into the lived experiences underlying those patterns. Stage classification drew on findings from both datasets.

Quantitative data came primarily from the Eswatini Tourism Authority and, where necessary, were supplemented by publications from the United Nations World Tourism Organization. The dataset included international tourist arrivals by country of residence, domestic tourism figures, and accommodation statistics. We analysed these data using linear regression in IBM SPSS 29.0.2, presenting results at five-year intervals. The regressions were reported as descriptive trend lines rather than inferential statistical tests. Consistent with Butler's (1980) foundational premise that visitor numbers are a key criterion for identifying a destination's life cycle stage, the quantitative analysis used international tourist arrivals and accommodation statistics. This approach aligns with Dong et al. (2004), who emphasized that tourist numbers and tourism revenue provide a strong foundation for determining TALC stages.

Recognizing that visitor statistics alone are insufficient—a limitation Haywood (1986) highlighted by cautioning against relying exclusively on arrivals to represent life cycle position—the quantitative analysis was supplemented with additional indicators. These included accommodation occupancy rates, bed availability, and infrastructure development, drawing on approaches proposed by As and Mathews (2017), Romão et al. (2013), and James and Halkier (2018). These additional indicators were drawn from the ETA's annual reports and secondary sources.

The qualitative dimension of the study was based on semi-structured interviews conducted during two field site visits in 2023 and 2024. The study interviewed 20 participants, including tourism employees and managers, tourists, and residents living near major attractions such as Hlane Royal National Park and Mantenga Cultural Village. The study used convenience sampling, a non-probability sampling technique. In addition, secondary qualitative data from TripAdvisor and Eswatini Safaris reviews supplemented stakeholder perceptions, including 48 reviews posted between 2017 and 2022. These data provided additional visitor perspectives from a period not covered by the interviews.

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase process. Familiarization with the data involved repeated reading of interview transcripts and reviews. Initial codes were generated both manually and with assistance from OpenAI ChatGPT-4. Prompts adapted from Kriukow's (2024) book, "The Scholar's Guide to AI-assisted Thematic Analysis," were modified and used to ask ChatGPT-4 to code the transcripts and reviews, capturing stakeholders' different viewpoints. All generated codes were manually reviewed against the original transcripts and reviews to ensure analytical rigor. Codes were then grouped into candidate themes that reflected the broader narrative grounded in the dataset. Overall, four themes emerged from the analysis: local participation, infrastructure development, connectivity, and authenticity. These themes were interpreted in relation to Doxey's (1975) Irritation Index, which posits that residents' responses to tourism evolve from euphoria to antagonism as perceived impacts intensify across life cycle stages.

Stage classification was determined using a composite set of criteria adapted from Butler (1980) and Haywood (1986), including the trajectory of international visitor arrivals, accommodation occupancy rates and bed availability, the balance of local versus foreign ownership of tourism facilities, the state of tourism marketing and stakeholder perceptions on resident attitudes towards tourism, visitor experiences, and tourism product authenticity. A stage was assigned when findings across all dimensions aligned, and transitions were identified at points where convergent evidence across dimensions shifted. The involvement stage (1995–2004) was identified based on increasing local participation, the establishment of the ETA as an institution, and infrastructure improvements. The development stage (2005–2019) was assigned based on increased foreign

ownership, marketing, growing accommodation capacity, infrastructure investment, and positive stakeholder perceptions. Declining occupancy rates, major hotel closures, and rapid declines in visitor arrivals identified the stagnation stage (2020–2022).

4. Results and discussion

Tourism development in Eswatini between 1995 and 2022 diverges from Butler's TALC stages, instead reflecting a context-dependent trajectory shaped by political shocks, dependence on a single source market, and domestic tourism. This departure highlights critiques of the TALC, which often underplays how political shifts and external shocks shape destination evolution. Table 1 provides an overview of Harrison's original tourism development stages and the revised stages identified in this study.

Table 1
Tourism development stages in Eswatini

Harrison's original stages (1800s-1990)	
Stages	**Characteristics**
Exploration 1800s–1902	A small but significant number of tourists, adventurers, big-game hunters, and settlers, hunting and concessions, interaction through intermediaries with the elite, radically changed social, cultural, and physical environments, a handful of new, foreign-owned hotels, and some advertising.
Inactivity 1903–1950	Establishment of colonial government, the end of hunting tourism, and a few hotels in towns and mining areas.
Transition 1951–1965	More hotels in industrial and administrative centres; some use of facilities by holidaymakers; Casino Act (1963).
Truncated development 1966–1975	Tourist numbers increase but remain well below the local population; concentration of tourist facilities; transnationals dominate with active government support; new formal tourism institutions; most tourists are weekend visitors or short-stay visitors.
Decline and attempted rejuvenation 1976–1990	Fewer holidaymakers and shorter length of stay, primarily because of factors external to Swaziland; the government invests in tourism, and attempts are made to decentralise tourism facilities away from the Ezulwini Valley; increased promotion of "hallmark events" and Swazi tradition. These strategies have some success, and tourism in Swaziland has become more buoyant. Social interactions are still constrained by the "uniform of colour."
Revised stages (1995-2022)	
Involvement 1995–2004	Establishment of Eswatini Tourism Authority, improved accessibility via Mbabane–Ngwenya road, community-based tourism development, and fluctuating visitor numbers.
Development 2005–2019	Major transport infrastructure development; increased tourism marketing, diversification of source markets, expansion of attractions and accommodation, spread of tourism beyond Ezulwini Valley, foreign ownership of major hotels alongside local small enterprises, short average length of stay, fluctuating but generally growing visitor numbers.
Stagnation and attempted rejuvenation 2020–2022	Sharp decline in visitors due to COVID-19 and political unrest; surplus accommodation capacity and hotel closures; job losses; increased reliance on domestic and regional tourism; social media-based tourism promotion; planned public and private tourism investments; and early signs of recovery.

4.1. Involvement stage (1995–2004)

Tourism development in Eswatini between 1995 and 2004 reflected the characteristics described by Butler (1980) for the involvement stage of the TALC model. This period was marked by institutional restructuring, increased local tourism participation, and infrastructure improvements. It also showed how political shocks and dependence on a single source market can destabilize the involvement stage in ways the TALC did not anticipate.

A pivotal milestone was the establishment of the ETA in 2001, which formalized government involvement in tourism and signalled a deliberate effort to reposition tourism within a changing regional landscape, following South Africa's democratic transition in 1994 (Mattes, 2002). During apartheid (1948–1994), Eswatini had benefited from sanctions by hosting sports and music events that drew large South African audiences (Harrison, 1995). The end of apartheid removed this advantage and forced the government to reorient its strategy

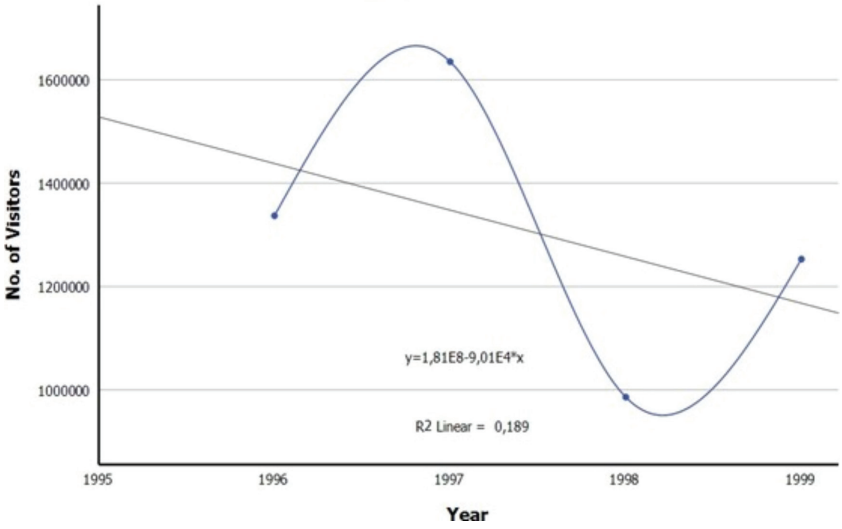
and diversify beyond its dominant South African market. The ETA's mandate included attracting investment and marketing the country internationally (Swaziland Tourism Authority, 2005).

Alongside institutional reform, community-based initiatives such as Shewula Mountain Camp and Mahamba Gorge Lodge emerged during this period, reflecting decentralized tourism benefits and increased local participation (Du-Pont & Sacolo, 2019). These projects not only generated employment but also reflected a shift toward more inclusive tourism models, driven by a deliberate policy response to changing regional political dynamics rather than individual responses to growing visitor demand during the involvement stage. This diverges from the TALC's reasoning behind local participation during the involvement.

Infrastructure also played a central role in shaping visitor flows. Matsapha International Airport was the main airport during this period. Its central location meant that visitors could access most of the country's attractions (Forsyth-Thompson, 2018). Most visitors entered Eswatini by road, and the Ngwenya border was the most-used point of entry. Completing the Mbabane-Ngwenya road was significant for tourism, as it provided a transport corridor linking Eswatini to South Africa. While this improved accessibility, it also deepened the country's dependence on a single source market.

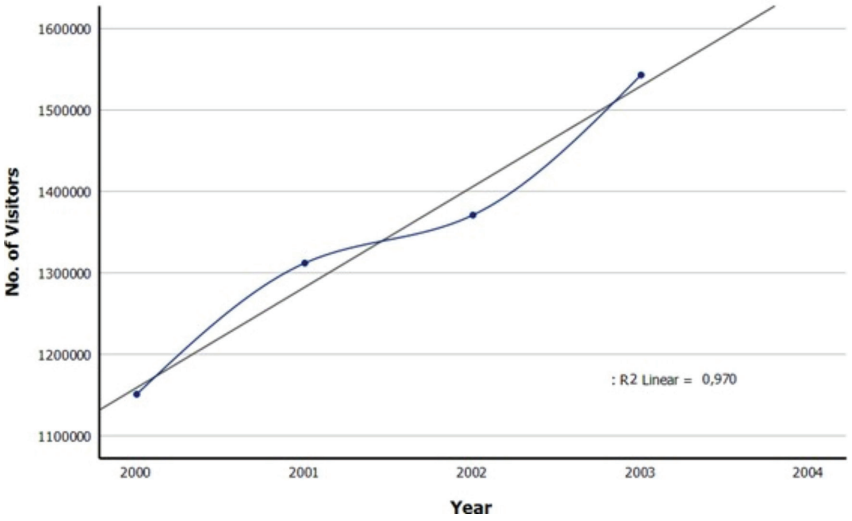
Visitor numbers fluctuated sharply during this period, illustrating Eswatini's vulnerability to political shocks. Between 1996 and 1997, arrivals surged to a record 1.6 million, before declining below 1 million in 1998 amid national elections and subsequent protests over human rights concerns (United States Department of State, 2000). Although visitor numbers rebounded modestly in 1999, the overall trend between 1995 and 1999 was negative, with regression analysis indicating an average annual decline of approximately 90,140 visitors (Figure 3). This trend reflects volatility, highlighting how external shocks and domestic political unrest disrupt predictable growth patterns and challenge the TALC's assumption of steady, uninterrupted growth.

Figure 3
Trend analysis of international visitors to Eswatini from 1995 to 1999



The early 2000s marked a partial recovery. Visitor numbers grew steadily from 2001 to 2003, coinciding with the establishment of ETA and increased marketing campaigns. The 2000–2004 trend line shows strong upward growth, reflecting consistent increases in visitor numbers during this period (Figure 4). This resurgence shows how institutional reforms and promotional strategies can counter earlier declines, reinforcing the argument that tourism trajectories depend on political and organizational interventions rather than predetermined cycles.

Figure 4
Trend analysis of international visitors to Eswatini from 2000 to 2004



Several defining criteria marked the transition to the development stage in Eswatini from 2005, most notably the establishment of the ETA, which formalized institutional involvement in the sector. At the same time, foreign capital investment from companies such as BON Hotels and Sun International began displacing local ownership in accommodation establishments, while marketing shifted from event-driven initiatives to sustained destination marketing, reflecting a more professionalized approach to destination promotion. These developments aligned closely with Butler's (1980) descriptors of the development stage, which emphasize intensified advertising, the replacement of locally owned businesses by externally controlled facilities, and significant landscape transformation.

Indeed, between 2005 and 2019, these characteristics became increasingly pronounced. Marketing was consolidated through social media platforms and the engagement of a UK-based tourism marketing firm, replacing the informal promotional strategies used during the involvement stage. Foreign investors' acquisition of major hotels exemplified Butler's observation that local enterprises are increasingly supplanted by external capital as commercialization advances. Parallel to these economic changes, infrastructure expansion, including the construction of King Mswati III International Airport, extensive road projects, and the spread of accommodation establishments beyond the Ezulwini Valley, further reflected the physical transformation Butler associated with this stage of tourism evolution.

4.2. Development stage (2005–2019)

Tourism in Eswatini between 2005 and 2019 exhibited characteristics consistent with Butler's stages of development. This period was marked by significant infrastructure investment, most notably the construction of King Mswati III International Airport, which opened in 2014 (Chaitoo & McGinn, 2022). Complementary road projects in Mbabane, Malkerns, Manzini, and Matsapha further enhanced domestic connectivity. These investments reflected the government's strategy of using transport infrastructure as a catalyst for tourism growth (African Development Bank, 2014). These changes aligned with Butler's observation that a destination in the TALCs' development stage experiences significant landscape changes.

Foreign capital investment increased during this period, with hospitality groups such as BON Hotels and Sun International acquiring major hotels (Mhlongo, 2023). This displacement of local ownership aligns closely with Butler's description of the development stage, in which locally owned businesses are progressively replaced by externally owned facilities. Marketing efforts also increased during this period,

with the ETA embracing digital platforms and appointing Geo Group Marketing Ltd, a UK-based marketing company, to represent Eswatini in the United Kingdom (Eswatini Tourism Authority, n.d.). These initiatives broadened Eswatini's reach beyond South Africa, attracting visitors from Europe and the Middle East. This market diversification reflects a deliberate effort to reduce dependence on regional inflows, echoing critiques of the TALC that emphasize the importance of external linkages in shaping destination trajectories.

Tourism products diversified significantly during this period. While nature-based and cultural attractions remained central to Eswatini's tourism offering, new facilities such as a sugarcane museum and an art gallery emerged, alongside a proliferation of guesthouses, backpacker lodges, chalets, and campsites. Initially concentrated in the Ezulwini Valley, these facilities gradually expanded between 2005 and 2019, reflecting a broader spatial distribution of attractions and accommodations across the country.

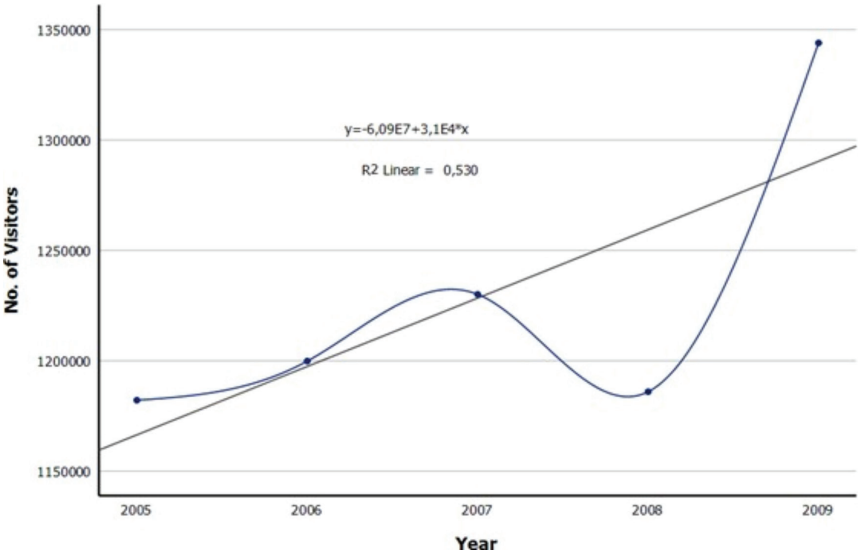
Qualitative evidence from this period revealed a common theme among destinations in the TALCs' development stage: as tourism becomes more commercialized, the authenticity of cultural and nature-based tourism experiences is questioned. Cultural villages were frequently identified as key attractions, and visitor responses were broadly positive. For example, participant 15 reported visiting Mantenga Cultural Village multiple times *"to experience the Swati culture and traditional ways of living."* Reviewer 3 similarly emphasized the site's educational value, noting that it *"gives you a good insight into the former Eswatini culture."* Reviewer 1 also highlighted the authenticity of the cultural experience, describing it as *"interesting to see a traditional Swazi village of times gone by and to receive an overview of where villagers slept, ate, and did daily chores."* Beyond education and authenticity, cultural encounters carried emotional resonance. Participant 6 explained that they visit whenever possible because they *"always feel a sense of belonging there,"* while participant 5 reflected that *"seeing Swazis practicing their culture and proud of their culture makes me feel a sense of belonging and being proud of African culture."*

Nature-based attractions contributed equally to visitor engagement, particularly through wildlife encounters and conservation education. Reviewer 15 described rhino tracking at Mkhaya Game Reserve as *"an intimate, heart-pounding experience that you certainly will not forget in a hurry,"* while reviewer 7 recounted being *"only about five meters from a mother and calf"* during a guided walk, characterizing the encounter as *"exhilarating and petrifying."* Conservation initiatives further enhanced visitor experiences. Reviewer 18 noted that *"signage and a collection of snares have been erected to educate children and adults alike about poaching"* at Mlilwane, while reviewer 12 observed that *"a macabre collection of animal skulls, snares and traps arranged at the entrance to Mkhaya Game Reserve tells the story of Eswatini's battle with poachers."*

Despite these positive assessments, some stakeholders raised concerns that cultural performances were becoming repetitive. Participant 12 cautioned that cultural repetition, particularly attractions' tendency to present similar performances, could undermine the country's ability to sustain tourist interest over time. If left unaddressed, such limitations may constrain Eswatini's capacity to diversify its tourism product and maintain competitiveness in the regional market. This concern is significant as it signalled that Eswatini's tourism product was beginning to lose its attractiveness, a characteristic of the TALCs' stagnation stage (Butler, 1980). Therefore, the qualitative evidence provides an early indicator of impending stagnation that the trend analysis does not reflect.

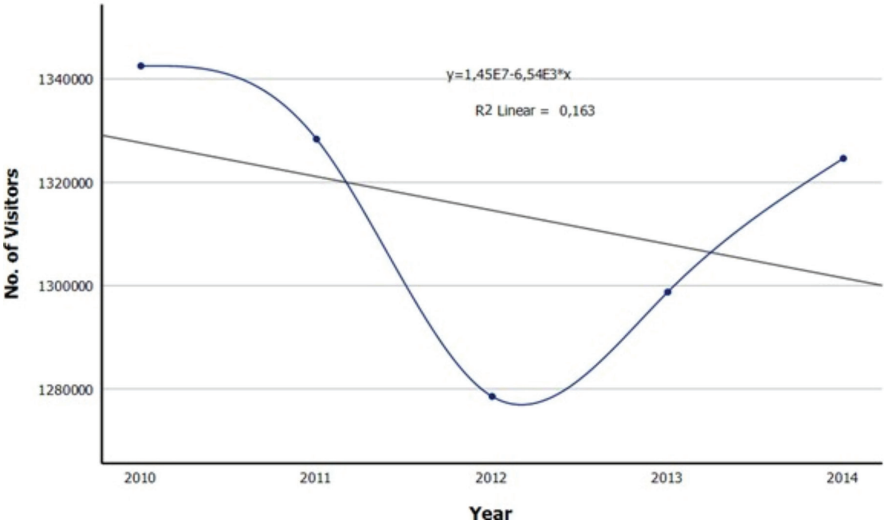
Visitor numbers fluctuated repeatedly in response to global and domestic shocks. Between 2005 and 2009, arrivals fell below 1.2 million in 2005 and 2008, reflecting the impact of the global financial crisis (Swaziland Tourism Authority, 2008). Despite political unrest linked to the Suppression of Terrorism Act in 2008, arrivals rebounded to 1.3 million in 2009, with regression analysis indicating a positive linear trend (Figure 5). Average tourist stays remained short, typically one night, similar to Harrison's (1995) observation during the truncated development stage.

Figure 5
Trend analysis of international visitors to Eswatini from 2005 to 2009



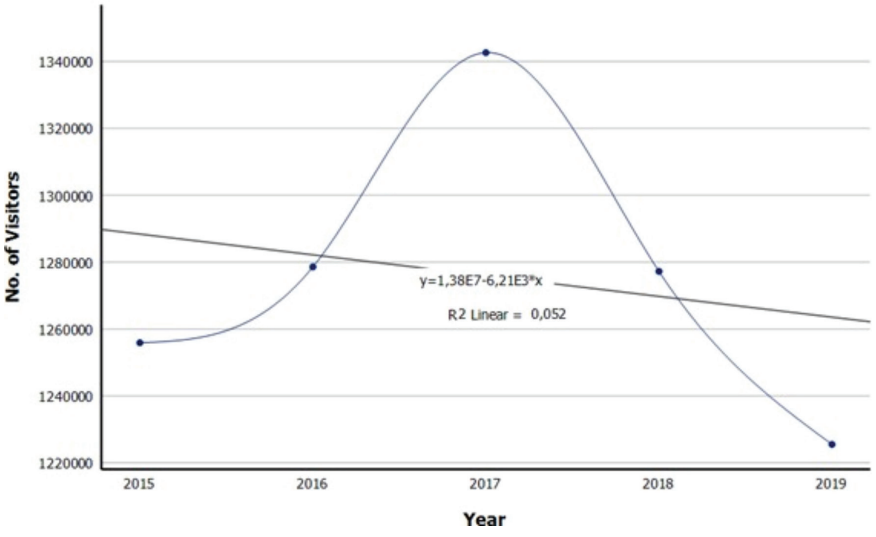
Between 2010 and 2014, visitor numbers fluctuated again, declining in 2012 amid the Eurozone crisis before recovering in 2013 (Dhladhla, 2013). The downward trend line in Figure 6 suggests that external financial shocks constrained growth despite improvements in infrastructure and marketing.

Figure 6
Trend analysis of international visitors to Eswatini from 2010 to 2014



The final phase (2015–2019) was similarly uneven. Visitor numbers rose in 2016 and peaked in 2017 at over 1.3 million, coinciding with the growing popularity of the MTN Bushfire Festival, a multicultural event launched in 2007 (Acha-Anyi & Dlamini, 2019). Attendance declined in 2018, attributed to violent protests and safety concerns (Human Rights Watch, 2019). Regression analysis shows a slight negative trend (Figure 7).

Figure 7
Trend analysis of international visitors to Eswatini from 2015 to 2019



The transition to stagnation was marked by the following indicators: occupancy rates collapsed to surplus levels, reflecting a sharp decline in demand relative to available capacity. Major accommodation establishments faced indefinite closure. At the same time, qualitative evidence pointed to product repetitiveness and declining perceptions of authenticity. These indicators provided sufficient grounds to classify the tourism industry in Eswatini as having entered the stagnation stage of the TALC model, which, according to Butler (1980), is characterized by poor visitation and a destination no longer capable of attracting visitors.

4.3. Stagnation stage and attempted rejuvenation (2020–2022)

The period between 2020 and 2022 marked a sharp departure from Eswatini's earlier growth trajectory, as the tourism sector entered a period of stagnation. The COVID-19 pandemic did not primarily cause this departure; rather, it stemmed from pre-existing structural vulnerabilities in Eswatini's tourism sector, such as over-reliance on South Africa as a source market and limited diversity of tourism products. The COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2021) and the violent protests of 2021, which resulted in 50 fatalities and property damage estimated at R3 billion (South African rand) (Human Rights Watch, 2022), further exposed and accelerated pre-existing issues in the country's tourism sector.

The hospitality sector suffered severe consequences. Accommodation occupancy rates plummeted, particularly in Ezulwini, leading to the indefinite closure of major hotels, including Lugogo Sun and Royal Swazi Spa (Hlatshwayo & Majola, 2020). Rising accommodation costs and widespread job losses compounded the crisis. This oversupply of beds and decline in demand epitomize the stagnation stage, where facilities outpace visitor flows and profitability declines.

Qualitative accounts provided insight into how this decline was felt on the ground. Participant 12 noted that *"major hotels have recently been closed in the Ezulwini area…places of elite accommodation are becoming fewer... major stores and food outlets are only found in limited areas such as Manzini and Mbabane."* The same participant pointed to spatial inequalities, explaining that essential services were concentrated in major urban centers, making access difficult in smaller tourism towns. This uneven distribution reinforces accessibility challenges in smaller tourism towns and reflects broader structural imbalances within the sector. At the same time, some

participants noted incremental infrastructure improvements. Participant 2 noted that *"there are good roads and more petrol stations compared to the last time I visited,"* suggesting that the decline in the accommodation sector coexisted with selective development gains. Similarly, Participant 7 highlighted emerging opportunities linked to infrastructural projects, explaining that *"the development of dams in the country comes with a spinoff tourist attraction development, for example, the development of Maguga dam brought about the Maguga lodge, dam viewpoints, picnic spots and boat cruise."* Such accounts indicate that stagnation was accompanied by attempts to diversify products.

Beyond economic decline, qualitative evidence revealed challenges in the tourism product itself, particularly in how culture was commercialized and represented within curated cultural spaces. Several stakeholders expressed concerns that cultural performances appeared overly staged and disconnected from lived realities, while others highlighted discomfort with how cultural narratives were constructed and presented, especially regarding social roles and gender representations. For instance, reviewer 30 noted that *"the way this particular guide was explaining the role of girls and women in their culture...made me really uncomfortable,"* underscoring tensions around identity and social roles. At the same time, some visitors valued these experiences, with reviewer 25 noting that *"I visited Mantenga multiple times to experience the Swati culture and traditional ways of living,"* and Participant 18 commenting that *"this place gives you a good insight into the former Eswatini culture."*

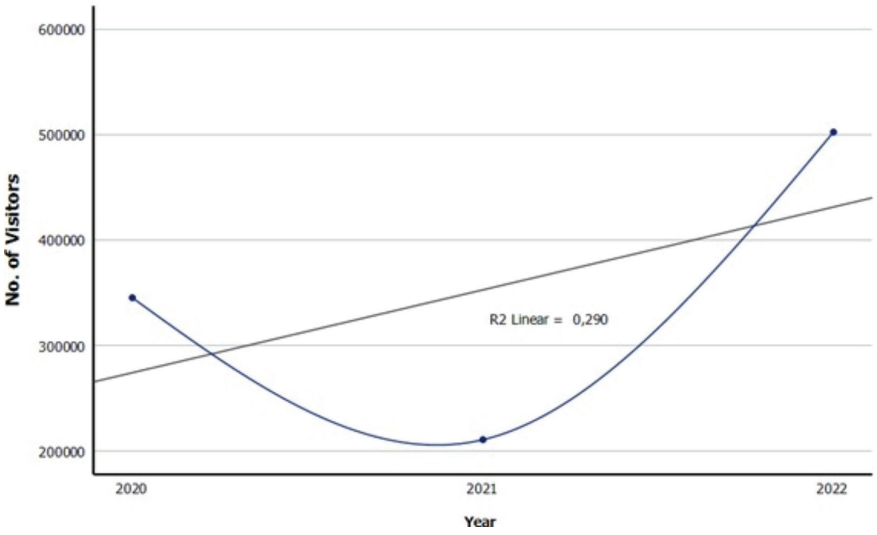
Similarly, appreciation for performances such as *"the vibrant dancing and singing"* coexisted with implicit concerns that such expressions may be selectively staged for tourist consumption. Taken together, these accounts suggest that while cultural tourism remains central to Eswatini's appeal, stagnation is reflected not only in declining visitor numbers but also in evolving tourist expectations and heightened scrutiny of how culture is packaged, performed, and consumed by external audiences, thereby exposing growing tensions between authenticity and commodification. Importantly, cultural commodification is not confined to Eswatini; Masilela et al. (2023) and Yanying et al. (2026) highlight similar issues across multiple cultural tourism sites globally.

In response, domestic tourism emerged as a critical survival strategy. Campaigns such as *VakashaEswatini* and *StayInEswatiniStaySafe* leveraged social media platforms to encourage emaSwati to support local establishments (Eswatini Tourism Authority, 2020). This grassroots participation provided a lifeline, particularly in Ezulwini, where domestic tourists outnumbered international arrivals. Such local engagement highlights destinations' adaptive capacity, challenging TALC's portrayal of stagnation as a terminal stage and instead suggesting pathways to resilience through community-driven support.

Despite the immediate challenges, the government pursued ambitious rejuvenation plans. Projects included transforming Hlane into a cultural hub, anchored by the construction of the E200 million (Eswatini lilangeni) Hlane Roadside Motel, scheduled for completion in 2024 (Motau, 2023; Ntshakala, 2024). Additional initiatives involved reconstructing the Ngwenya Mine Interpretation Center, destroyed by fire in 2018, and securing private investment for a theme park and hotel in Hlane, scheduled for 2027 (Motau, 2023). These projects signal attempts to diversify Eswatini's tourism product beyond its traditional cultural and nature-based offerings, address concerns about repetitiveness, and position the sector for long-term renewal.

Visitor statistics reflect this turbulent trajectory. International arrivals dropped from over 1.2 million in 2019 to 345,349 in 2020, to 210,705 in 2021 before rebounding to over half a million in 2022. The trend line in Figure 8 points upward, suggesting a tentative recovery from the 2021 lows. However, the uneven rebound underscores the fragility of Eswatini's tourism sector, where recovery remains contingent on both global health conditions and domestic political stability.

Figure 8
Trend analysis of international visitors to Eswatini from 2020 to 2022



Overall, Eswatini's stagnation and attempted rejuvenation between 2020 and 2022 diverge from Butler's TALC model. Rather than a gradual inactivity, stagnation was abrupt, triggered by external shocks and compounded by internal unrest. Rejuvenation efforts, while ambitious, remain speculative, highlighting the contingent and unpredictable nature of tourism development in contexts where health crises and political instability intersect.

5. Conclusion

The Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) model was originally conceived on the premise that destinations evolve continuously, adapting their structures and offerings to attract tourists. Despite its widespread adoption, the model has faced sustained critique, particularly regarding its applicability across diverse geographical and socio-political contexts. This study employed a mixed-methods approach to investigate tourism development in Eswatini through the TALC, integrating qualitative and quantitative evidence and situating the findings within Butler's (1980) theoretical framework. The analysis revealed that Eswatini's tourism trajectory between 1995 and 2022 diverged markedly from Harrison's (1995) account. Specifically, the industry progressed through the involvement and development stages before entering a period of stagnation, accompanied by attempts at rejuvenation. Although these findings depart from Butler's original formulation, they contribute meaningfully to ongoing debates by underscoring the need to recognize destination heterogeneity when applying TALC. Notably, domestic tourism emerged as a resilience mechanism during stagnation, a dimension largely absent from Butler's original framework.

The Eswatini case, characterized by the omission of consolidation and a direct transition from development to stagnation, empirically supports Russell and Faulkner's (1998) contention that the S-curve inadequately captures destinations exposed to external shocks. Unlike their theoretical critique, this study demonstrates how such discontinuities materialize in practice: the convergence of global health crises and domestic political instability compressed what TALC anticipates as gradual transitions into an abrupt collapse. This dynamic has broader implications for applying the model in politically unstable destinations. Furthermore, while Harrison (1995) emphasized apartheid-era dependency, updated evidence suggests that South Africa's democratic transition did not liberate Eswatini from structural market reliance; it merely reconfigured it. This exposes a conceptual blind spot in TALC: it fails to theorize how source-market structures shape destination trajectories. The Eswatini case illustrates how a landlocked state, virtually encircled by a single dominant economy, follows

a regionally contingent rather than universally predictable life cycle, thereby enriching debates on TALC's relevance in small, landlocked states. Collectively, these insights reaffirm the utility of TALC as a heuristic device while simultaneously reinforcing the value of context-based assessments in building a more nuanced understanding of how the model's stages operate across varied destination settings.

Declaration of Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing interests that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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