

Beyond the Falls: Strategic Tourism Development for Profitable Youth Employment in Zimbabwe

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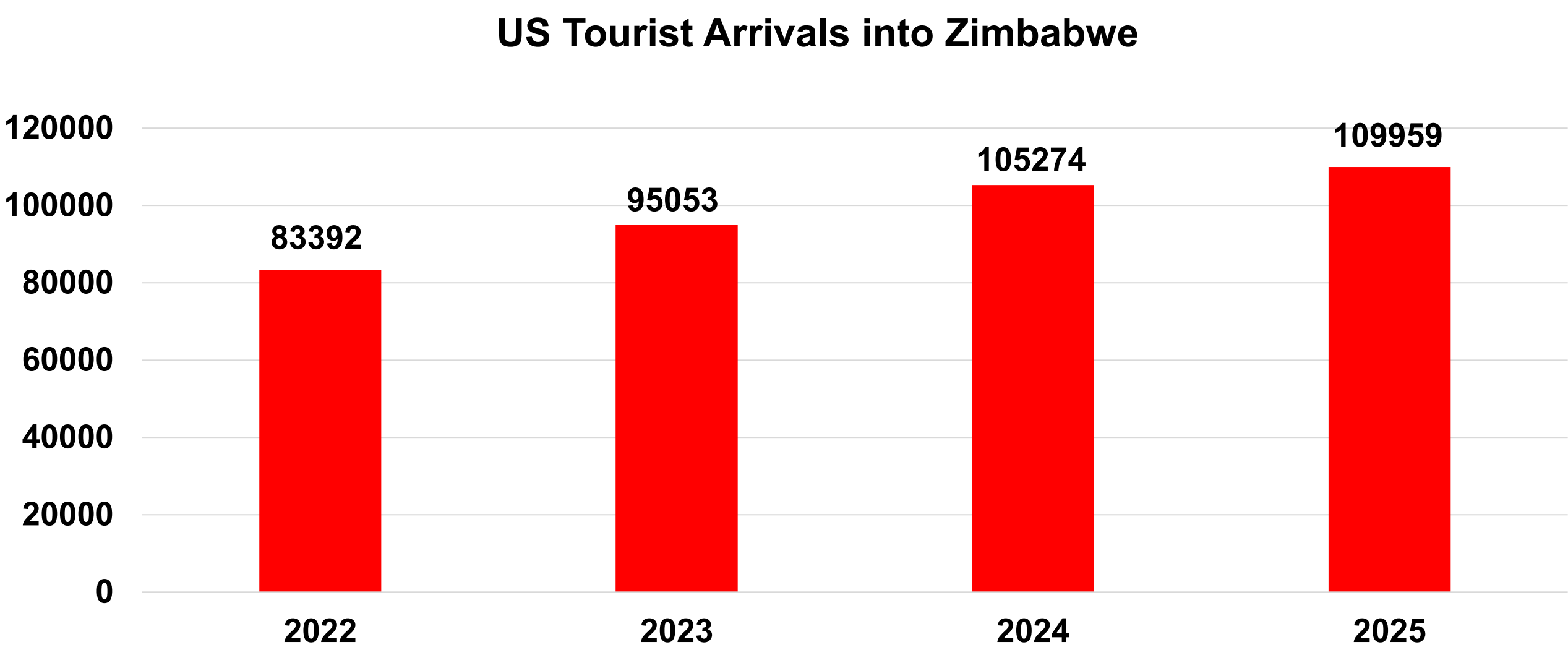
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Introduction

Tourism is a key driver of economic growth in developing economies such as Zimbabwe, with the capacity to generate jobs across industries. Despite this potential, a critical gap exists between global tourism demand and Zimbabwe’s ability to convert demand into growing numbers of tourists and jobs.

This challenge is particularly urgent given Zimbabwe’s labor market conditions. National unemployment stands at 20.7%, while youth unemployment is higher at 39.3% (ages 15–24) and 28.9% (ages 15–35). Additionally, nearly half of youth are not engaged in employment, education, or training (Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency, 2025).

This study focuses on the U.S. outbound travel market to examine how demand can be better converted into tourism-driven employment. The U.S. is the largest source of international tourists for Zimbabwe with over 109,000 tourists in 2025 (National Zimbabwe Tourism website).



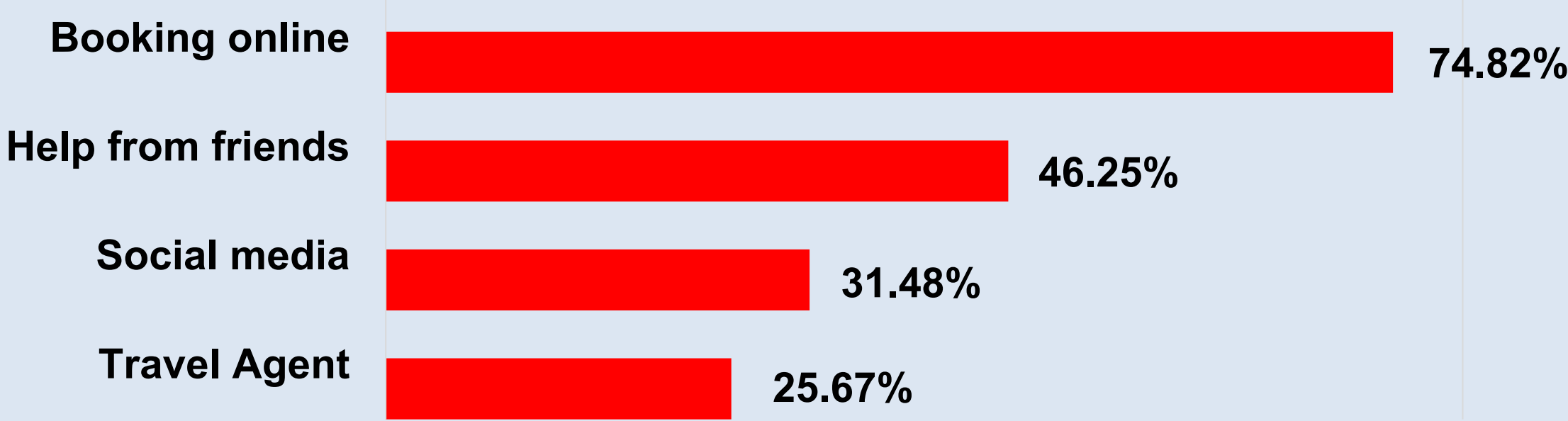
While Zimbabwe is globally associated with Victoria Falls, broader destination awareness remains limited. The study aims to identify key motivations, perceptions, and barriers among U.S. travelers and translate these insights into actionable strategies. By aligning tourism development with market demand, this research positions tourism as a scalable pathway for youth employment and inclusive economic growth.

Method

- Interview with Minister Counsellor of Tourism, Ropafadzo Dunira (Embassy of Zimbabwe, U.S.)
- Development of a 25-question survey instrument and deployment to 1,000 frequent U.S. travelers, via U.S.-based marketing research firm Centiment
- Of 1,000 surveyed, 413 responded, generating over 10,000 data points
- Collection of demographic and psychographic data to identify patterns in travel behavior and perceptions
- Correlation analysis conducted to examine relationships between destination awareness and interest
- Segmentation analysis used to identify distinct traveler groups and behavioral clusters

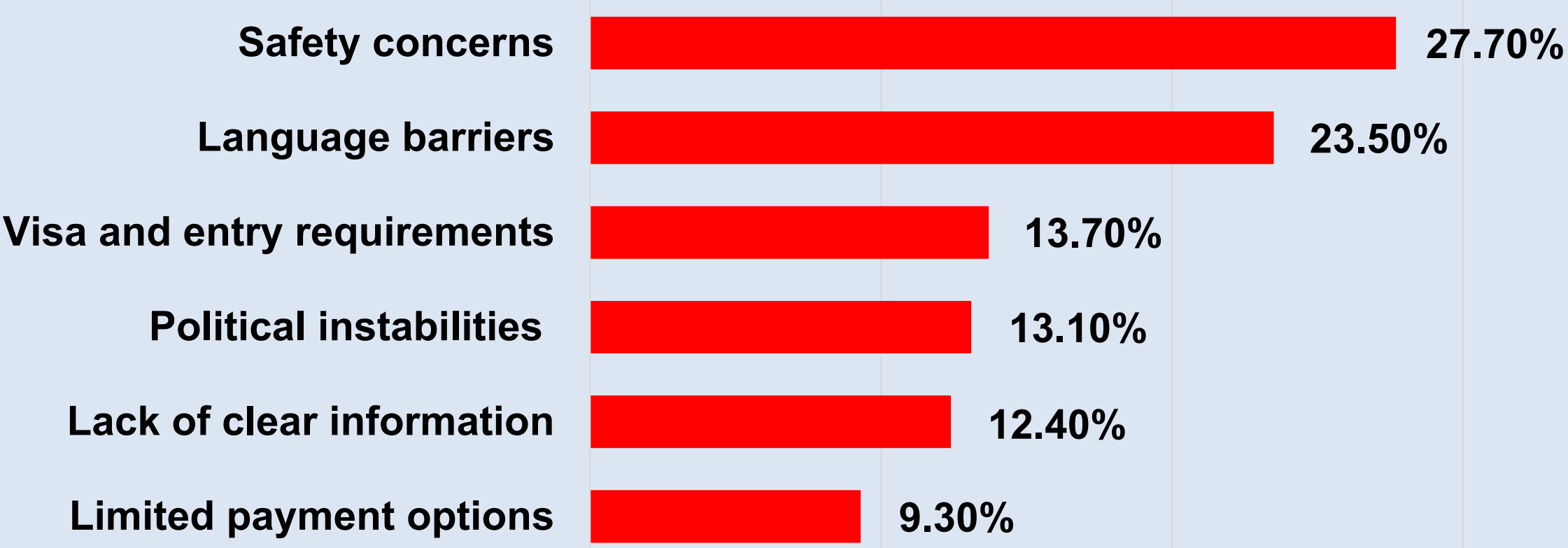
Results

When planning trips, which of the following do you use?



Data exposes gap in Zimbabwe’s current marketing efforts that rely on traditional travel agents and B2B familiarization tours for bookings and destination awareness yet conversion opportunities are dominantly online.

What challenges do you face when planning to travel to less conventional destinations?



Barriers indicate a need for campaigns that dispel and pre-empt concerns that the US audience has regarding travel to Zimbabwe.

	Q20. Zimbabwe as a travel destination	Q21. Victoria Falls	Q22. Great Zimbabwe Ruins	Q23. Matobo Hills	Q24. Hwange National Park	Q25. Mana Pools	Q26. Vumba Highlands	Q27. Khami Ruins
Q20. Zimbabwe as a travel destination								
Q21. Victoria Falls	0.53							
Q22. Great Zimbabwe Ruins	0.70	0.54						
Q23. Matobo Hills	0.67	0.50	0.81					
Q24. Hwange National Park	0.62	0.50	0.78	0.83				
Q25. Mana Pools	0.61	0.50	0.77	0.82	0.79			
Q26. Vumba Highlands	0.63	0.47	0.78	0.83	0.76	0.82		
Q27. Khami Ruins	0.65	0.47	0.80	0.78	0.76	0.78	0.83	
Q28. UNESCO World Heritage Sites	0.66	0.56	0.75	0.71	0.72	0.71	0.71	0.75

Correlation above .70 or 70%

Correlation scale -1 ---0--- +1

Familiarity or interest in many of Zimbabwe's historical/natural sites is highly correlated (+.70), implying a shared awareness or perhaps that visitors interested in one tend to be interested in or know about the others.

Conclusions

- This study demonstrates that Zimbabwe’s tourism constraint is not lack of demand, but weak conversion. However, this demand is limited by structural barriers, including safety concerns, visa complexity, limited destination awareness beyond Victoria Falls, and gaps in digital booking accessibility, despite over 70% of travelers planning trips online.
- These findings indicate that targeted tourism strategies such as improved digital visibility, streamlined e-visa systems, and segmented, motivation-driven marketing can increase conversion from interest to actual visitation. Increased arrivals expand demand across labor-intensive sectors including hospitality, transport, and cultural services.
- If Zimbabwe refines its marketing efforts, tourism will be a clear pathway to job creation with 1 U.S traveler potentially creating 1-1.5 local jobs annually. By addressing leaks in the conversion funnel, tourism can function as a scalable mechanism to absorb employable youth into the labor market and support inclusive economic participation.
- This study examines the demand-side drivers of tourism rather than downstream employment outcomes. It identifies the conditions required to increase arrivals, which serve as a prerequisite for employment expansion in the tourism sector.

Acknowledgements

My gratitude to Professor Erik Wennerod, Professor Joseph Panzarella, and the Katz School of Science and Health faculty for their support in this research and, overall, nurturing a cohort of Zimbabwean students who luckily found themselves at Katz. I thank Minister Dunira for her grace and patience in contributing to this research.

References

