

Re-Imagining Zimbabwe's National Image through Cultural Diplomacy as Echoing Off Liberation

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Abstract

The sanctions and Western discourses that label Zimbabwe as a country of political chaos, instability and economic downfall, have long been misrepresenting the global image of the Southern African country. However, underneath these images, there exists a rich and unique history of liberation and Pan-Africanism which can be used as a source of positive national rebranding. This research is a synthesis of scholarly data published between 2010 and 2025 on national branding, heritage diplomacy, as well as image reconstruction in postcolonial Africa and Zimbabwe in particular. The data were collected based on the systematic review of the qualitative thematic analysis method. Six peer-reviewed articles, four policy documents and five institutional reports are utilised to understand the role of cultural institutions, in particular, museums, as soft power tools. The results indicate that although Zimbabwe is associated with a strong liberation triumph over political oppression, the world tends to view this strong resilience negatively because of disjointed branding strategies and the lack of use of the narrative focused on heritage, which the country has, over the years, defined or portrayed itself with. The study also argues that re-creating the image of Zimbabwe on the national level, means reclaiming the historical

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narrative using museums as diplomatic platforms, creating a unified heritage-based branding strategy based on the memory of liberation and togetherness.

Keywords: heritage branding, museum diplomacy, Pan-Africanism, sanctions, nation-branding

INTRODUCTION

The national image has become one of the intangible resources of a country in the changing global environment. Nations are no longer viewed only through economic and political systems, but also through the way countries present themselves to the global community. Nation-branding has turned out to be a strategic necessity given the global place in reputation, as Anholt (2007) notes, that countries in the global marketplace need to establish their legitimacy, attract investment and diplomatic bargaining power. It has since grown out of the commercial marketing reasoning logic into a syntactic system of competitive identity, comprising culture, government, tourism, people, and worldwide relations into a unified picture (Dinnie, 2009; Fan, 2010). In the case of developing nations, especially emerging out of colonialism history and political wrangles, this is a requisite weapon of redefining and regaining international trust since robust and coherent national branding functions as a critical instrument for reconstructing and enhancing international trust by projecting stability, credibility, and institutional integrity (Hassan and Mahrous, 2019).

The situation in Zimbabwe, formerly the so-called breadbasket of Africa, is a peculiar one in the African context, having lost its status in the world in the last 20 years because of economic sanctions, political problems, and international polarisation of its relations (Martens, 2012). Such forces have led to the spread of Western discourses that depict Zimbabwe as a weak, crisis-laden country and have, therefore, obscured its rich cultural

tradition and liberation history (Browning and Ferraz de Oliveira, 2017). Besides damaging its international reputation, this warped perception has compromised Zimbabwe in its quest to receive tourism, investment and diplomatic goodwill (Papadopoulos *et al.*, 2016). However, deep underneath, these negative accounts are a strong tale of freedom, Pan-African unity and strength which, when strategically exploited, can be used as the foundation of rebranding the country. This can be accomplished through strategically rebranding the country's liberation legacy and Pan-African identity into a unifying national narrative that highlights resilience, cultural richness, and self-determination using coordinated efforts in cultural diplomacy, media storytelling, and economic renewal to counter negative Western discourses and restore its global standing.

Culture has become dominant in determining national identity and diplomacy on the global front, one of the key types of soft power has become cultural diplomacy which uses cultural resources to facilitate a conversation, create a sense of understanding, and a sense of respect for each other (Hurn, 2016). According to Scott *et al.* (2011), nations make an impression globally through cultural institutions like museums, heritage sites and art festivals, which reveal their cultural values and identity. An example of such an application is China, which has managed to combine the symbolism of the past and the identity of the modern world in creating a unified global brand using its cultural diplomacy programmes. Similarly, countries such as South Africa and the United Arab Emirates, have mobilised cultural heritage not merely as a tourism asset, but as a symbolic resource for negotiating post-conflict or post-oil identities and asserting relevance within global markets (Pop *et al.*, 2020; Saad, 2020). These instances demonstrate the need to incorporate heritage-based narratives into systems of re-creating the national image.

Within the African context, liberation histories and Pan-African solidarities provide a distinct normative and symbolic reservoir from which alternative nation-branding frameworks can be articulated (Louw, 2016). In Zimbabwe, for example, the legacy of liberation struggle and continental anti-colonial consciousness constitutes an authentic and politically resonant foundation for advancing a renewed national image. The establishment of institutions, such as the Museum of African Liberation, illustrates an emergent effort to embed Zimbabwe's national re-imagination within a broader continental narrative of unity, resistance, and self-determination. Such institutions function as diplomatic platforms through which Zimbabwe may re-engage global publics using heritage-driven soft power. Yet, despite this potential, the nation's branding efforts remain fragmented, reactive, and insufficiently institutionalised. The absence of a coherent branding strategy rooted in cultural authenticity has permitted external actors, particularly international media and geopolitical commentators, to dominate and frame discourses about Zimbabwe. This vacuum highlights the strategic necessity of a heritage-based branding paradigm capable of repositioning Zimbabwe's liberation legacy as a communicative interface between national pride, historical sovereignty, and global engagement.

Modern scientific works on nation-branding point to the fact that the image of a nation is multidimensional, which means a combination of images of governance, culture, people, and values (Moilanen and Rainisto, 2009; Hao *et al.*, 2019). To a large extent, however, this scholarship has been Western-centric as it has concentrated on economic competitiveness and tourism appeal, rather than rebuilding identity. African experiences of branding, on the contrary, have been under researched and are usually restricted to tourism promotions as opposed to total identity programmes (Wanjiru, 2006). In the case of Zimbabwe, the problem concerns not only the

perception, but also the re-establishment of narrative sovereignty, the ability to determine itself based on its historical memory and collective identity.

This article seeks to address these empirical and theoretical lacunae by proposing a Heritage-Based National Image Model (HBNIM) for Zimbabwe. The model synthesises foundational theories of nation-branding (Anholt, 2007), cultural diplomacy (Hurn, 2016), and Pan-African identity formation to provide a conceptual and strategic framework through which Zimbabwe may reconstruct its international image. Drawing on literature published between 2010 and 2025, the study employs a qualitative meta-analytic approach to examine how heritage narratives, memory institutions, and liberation symbolism can be operationalised as strategic soft power instruments. In doing so, the study positions the Zimbabwean case within broader debates on nation-branding in postcolonial Africa—debates in which memory, identity politics, and global diplomacy intersect and mutually constitute one another.

The article is structured as follows: the next section offers a comprehensive review of the relevant literature and theoretical underpinnings of nation-branding, cultural diplomacy, and postcolonial identity formation. This is followed by a detailed explanation of the methodological approach adopted for the qualitative synthesis. The final section presents the study's conclusions, policy implications, and recommendations for reimagining Zimbabwe's position in the global arena through a heritage-based, culturally grounded diplomatic strategy.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Anholt (2010) Competitive Identity Theory and Cultural Diplomacy Theory, as conceptualised by Hurn (2016), form the theoretical underpinning of this study. Anholt (2010.) has formulated a framework conceptualising nation-branding as a

synthesis of six dimensions that are interdependent, which are governance, exports, culture and heritage, people, tourism and investment. All of them make up the reputation capital of a country and define its impact on the rest of the world. According to the Competitive Identity Theory, it is possible to compete with other nations to gain attention and respect by means of regular and value-oriented projection of identity.

Expanding on this is the Cultural Diplomacy Theory, which focuses on the ability of heritage, arts, and cultural exchange as a mechanism of peaceful international interaction. Hurn (*ibid.*) assumes that the soft power of culture is not limited to the conventional diplomacy that promotes feelings and mutual understanding between societies. Moreover, the recent versions of nation-branding have also added the human capital lens (Saad, 2020) and the cultural identity perspective (Pomeroy, 2013; Lahrech *et al.*, 2023) to emphasise that human development and authenticity make global credibility stronger. Such convergence implies that nation-branding needs to be effective must involve trade-offs between economic competitiveness and cultural integrity, and historical coherence.

When applied to the Zimbabwean case, it is suggested that the reconstruction of the national image will not happen without incorporating the liberation heritage of the country into a larger communication approach relying on the principles of unity, creativity, and African agency. With the rebranding of the national narratives in line with Pan-African values, Zimbabwe can rebrand itself as a country of perseverance and creativity instead of the country of Western political rhetoric.

Three important insights are highlighted in the reviewed literature. First, nation-branding has developed into a multidimensional process with its new role based on governance, culture and identity as compared to the old system,

which relied on economic and tourism-based structure. Second, cultural diplomacy and heritage-based branding provide potent tools of reasserting narrative sovereignty when it comes to postcolonial settings. Third, Pan-African identity offers an ideological basis for the true reconstruction of the national image in Zimbabwe. In totality, the above reasons warrant the adoption of a strategic construct, the Heritage-Based National Image Model (HBNIM), which incorporates the competitive identity, cultural diplomacy, and Pan-African consciousness towards the repositioning of the Zimbabwean image on the international front.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Nation-branding has developed into one of the key ways in which states express identity, exert influence on others, and compete to be noticed in the globalised world. According to Fan (2010), nation-branding is the process of creating, maintaining and quantifying the reputation of a nation in a manner that incorporates culture, governance, exports, tourism, as well as people. This realisation is in tandem with the concept of a competitive identity described by Anholt (2010) in which countries distinguish themselves in terms of consistent images, which reflect internal values and also international ambitions. In the last decade, the concept has been broadened, and the idea of strategic communication and soft power has been proposed to affect the worldview of a nation (Hao *et al.*, 2019).

Here, not just the political and economic realities of a nation are involved in determining its image, but also the accounts of tradition, novelty, and social pursuits. As Lahrech *et al.* (2023) write, credibility, stability, and cultural depth projected by a national brand are the key indicators of its strength. On the same note, Pop *et al.* (2020) discovers that coherent nation-branding also helps in economic growth through increased investor confidence and competitiveness in tourism. These

lessons highlight the need that a successful nation brand should be multi-dimensional, i.e. it should incorporate emotional, historical, and developmental aspects of a nation into a single national narrative.

In the case of Zimbabwe, the negative image of sanctions and political polarisation has overwhelmed the history of liberation and Pan-African identity of the country. Research like Saad (2020) highlights that the development of human capital and cultural resources is an under-explored factor that contributes to national competitiveness in developing states. Here is a significant gap in the literature: frameworks have not been developed that combine cultural heritage and nation-branding as tools of strategic reputation re-creation.

In the past decade, scholarly interest in heritage diplomacy—the use of museums, monuments, and cultural memory as foreign policy instruments—has increased. Hurn (2016) defines cultural diplomacy as the exchange of ideas, art, and traditions to foster trust and cooperation between nations. Within this context, heritage-based branding emerges as a strategy that leverages national history and identity to project authenticity and soft power. Sun (2016) further observes that nation-branding is most effective when anchored in culturally resonant values that appeal to both domestic and international audiences. Examples such as China and South Africa illustrate how heritage diplomacy reinforces nation-branding. Scott *et al.* (2011) show that China’s tourism and branding strategy emphasises historical continuity and national pride as foundations of its global image. Likewise, Louw (2016) argues that South Africa’s branding during the FIFA World Cup portrayed the country as a miracle nation, transforming its post-apartheid narrative into one of unity and modernity. These cases demonstrate how nations can reconstruct identity

through heritage-based communication, converting collective memory into a diplomatic asset.

In many African contexts, heritage museums have become crucial in reclaiming agency over historical narratives. Such institutions are not overdeveloped in Zimbabwe, and this has enabled the Western discourses to control the world's perceptions of Zimbabwe. However, according to Pop *et al.* (2020), cultural branding could rebrand a nation, as it could connect past memories of a nation to the current trends of innovation and development. This supports the fact that cultural diplomacy and heritage branding are not symbolic, but economically and politically strategic.

Pan-Africanism has been a historical political ideology as well as a cultural construct used by Africans to define themselves. Modern observers understand Pan-African identity as a statement of solidarity and opposition to neocolonialism discourse that misrepresents reality in Africa (Hassan and Mahrous, 2019). The Pan-African approach to nation-branding is against a Western-based approach, which emphasises indigenous cultural stories and memories of collective liberation. Enhancing this argument, Browning and Ferraz de Oliveira (2017) note that in marketing national image in the Global South, historical injustice, dignity, and identity sovereignty should be considered.

In Zimbabwe's case, the history and morality of its 'countryhood' are based on Pan-Africanism. The liberation struggle which united regional actors in the quest to have independence is a source of a strong reservoir of symbolic capital which can be used to support the international re-engagement of the country. Hao *et al.* (2019) remark that the emergence of the new wave of nation-branding studies connects the identity formation to the cultural authenticity more frequently than ever, a value

conforming to the liberation legacy of Zimbabwe. Incorporation of Pan-African awareness into the branding conversation will thus make Zimbabwe no longer a fringe player, but a leader in culture within the continent.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research design used in this study is a qualitative narrative, which involved the synthesis, interpretation and integration of the existing research on the topic of nation-branding, cultural diplomacy and national image reconstruction in the context of postcolonial relations, with special attention paid to Zimbabwe. The reason this design or method was selected is that it is possible to conduct a systematic synthesis of various qualitative studies and produce new conceptual understandings and trends (*ibid.*). Compared to the traditional meta-analyses that are based on quantitative aggregation, the qualitative synthesis adopted in the present study determines repeated themes, theoretical connections and practical implications based on academic literature published between 2010 and 2025. This structure is consistent with the possibility of developing a conceptual model, namely, the HBNIM, based on the existing evidence and theory.

Six peer-reviewed articles, four policy documents and five institutional reports provided in Google Scholar, ResearchGate and Scopus databases were considered the only sources of data to use in this study. The sources have been chosen from the list of the reviewed literature on nation-branding and cultural diplomacy that was created to support this research. The inclusion criteria used to select it are laid out in the forthcoming paragraphs.

Articles published between 2010 and -2025 provided empirical or conceptual significance to nation-branding, heritage diplomacy or cultural representation, as well as the focus on postcolonial contexts or developing countries, particularly in

Africa. Sources that concentrated exclusively on corporate branding, case studies from before 2010, or off-topic tourism marketing, were omitted. This guaranteed that the analysed literature directly aided in comprehending Zimbabwe's transformation of image via heritage-centred cultural diplomacy. The completed dataset included more than 40 academic references, featuring foundational studies by Anholt (2010), Fan (2010), Hurn (2016), Hao *et al.* (2019), Saad (2020), and Lahrech *et al.* (2023), among others.

The detailed methodological guidelines unfolded through two main phases, namely Data Familiarisation and Coding, whereby each chosen publication was thoroughly reviewed to pinpoint essential concepts associated with nation-branding, cultural diplomacy and national image. Descriptive codes were created to categorise insights within themes like heritage identity, soft power messaging and Pan-African awareness. Secondly, the recognised codes were grouped into broad categories that illustrate conceptual connections among studies. This allowed for comparing how various scholars have understood the relationship among national identity, culture, and branding.

To guarantee analytical thoroughness, interpretive coherence was preserved by consistently referring to the original texts. Focus was directed on encapsulating the core of current discoveries while formulating an innovative theoretical viewpoint pertinent to Zimbabwe's heritage and national identity.

The qualitative thematic-analytic method was considered appropriate as it facilitates a more profound interpretative comprehension, instead of just statistical summation. According to Browning and Ferraz de Oliveira (2017 and Pop *et al.* (2020)), branding of culture and nations is fundamentally a multifaceted issue that necessitates a qualitative amalgamation of meaning, identity and perception. The approach, therefore, aids in

recognising the conceptual connections among liberation heritage, cultural diplomacy and national reimagining. This method is in accordance with current academic trends, highlighting evidence-based conceptual modelling within the social sciences (Lahrech *et al.*, 2023). Through the systematic incorporation of various theoretical viewpoints, this approach guarantees that the results and suggested model are both empirically based and contextually pertinent to Zimbabwe's socio-political conditions.

FINDINGS

The qualitative meta-analytic review of chosen literature concerning nation-branding, cultural diplomacy and image reconstruction in postcolonial settings resulted in four key thematic conclusions. These themes together highlight the root factors contributing to Zimbabwe's unfavourable reputation, the unrealised promise within its cultural heritage and the essential elements for rebuilding a cohesive national brand.

In the examined literature, a common theme is the continuous misrepresentation of Zimbabwe's image in global narratives. The nation's image has been influenced by a mix of economic restrictions, political disputes and portrayals by Western media, which have highlighted instability rather than resilience (Fan, 2010). Researchers like Browning and Ferraz de Oliveira (2017) contend that the worldwide views of countries are shaped more by ideological interpretations than by factual realities, resulting in the solidification of stigmatised identities. In Zimbabwe, these representations have eclipsed its successes in education, agriculture and the legacy of liberation.

This illustrates what Anholt (2010) refers to as the “reputation trap”, in which continuous negative portrayals establish a self-perpetuating cycle that restricts diplomatic and economic interaction. Comparable patterns are noticed in other

postcolonial countries where foreign entities dominate major communication platforms, influencing public perceptions regarding governance and democracy (Hassan and Mahrous, 2019). The results show that although Zimbabwe's internal policies have impacted its international standing, the dominance of narrative control by Western media and organisations have sustained a skewed viewpoint. Moreover, Pop *et al.* (2020) observe that disjointed communication approaches in government and the absence of collaboration among national agencies worsen the reputational issue. Rather than presenting a cohesive brand, for example, Nyoni (2021) argues that Zimbabwe conveys various conflicting representations in tourism trade, and diplomacy. Literature indicates a significant requirement for a unified branding framework that aligns political, cultural, and developmental narratives into a cohesive identity.

A second important discovery is the insufficient use of heritage and cultural assets in forming Zimbabwe's cultural identity. According to Hao *et al.* (2019), heritage-based branding involves a comprehensive cultural branding which is free from colonial influence. In this case, heritage-based branding can significantly influence global perspectives. However, Zimbabwe has not completely utilised its liberation heritage or cultural resources to accomplish this (Saad, 2020). The Museum of African Liberation and various cultural organisations hold significant symbolic influence to convey Zimbabwe's narrative of resistance, unity, and Pan-African solidarity. Nevertheless, these assets continue to be largely detached from the country's global communication approach.

Hurn (2016) emphasises that effective cultural diplomacy necessitates organised frameworks that transform historical memory into tools of soft power. Nations such as China have tactically utilised museums and cultural institutions overseas

to convey a sense of civilisational pride and political stability (Scott *et al.*, 2011). In contrast, the heritage sector in Zimbabwe functions independently, frequently hindered by financial constraints, minimal global collaborations, and a weak digital footprint (Nyoni, 2021). This gap of financial constraints, minimal global collaborations and weak digital foot print shows a chance to turn heritage into a proactive diplomatic asset, rather than merely a passive internal repository.

Additionally, Lahrech *et al.* (2023) discovered that the credibility of nation-branding relies on cultural authenticity, the degree to which national stories correspond with real experiences and shared identity. Zimbabwe's liberation story offers genuine insight, but has yet to be recontextualised in the global conversation. The literature suggests that communication rooted in heritage may act as a basis for regaining narrative sovereignty and reinstating international legitimacy.

The synthesis of national-branding also shows an increasing acknowledgement of cultural diplomacy as a strategic soft power instrument in influencing global reputation. Cultural diplomacy is not limited to art and exhibitions; it includes the application of cultural expression, conversation, and cooperation to foster shared understanding (Hurn, 2016). Evidence from different contexts shows its effectiveness in changing views of politically marginalised nations. For example, South Africa's branding after apartheid, centred on reconciliation and multiculturalism, effectively transformed the nation into a "rainbow nation" (Louw, 2016). Likewise, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates have significantly focused on cultural diplomacy to shift views from reliance on resources to emphasising innovation and modernity (Saad, 2020)

In the African context, the literature examined shows that cultural diplomacy is still an underutilised aspect of foreign

policy. In Zimbabwe, many external engagement approaches focus on political negotiation or economic diplomacy, overlooking the influential role of culture in communication (Gwakwara and Niyitunga, 2024). Researchers like Browning and Ferraz de Oliveira (2017) and Hassan and Mahrous (2019) contend that cultural soft power strategies can restore trust and foster international empathy, particularly for countries experiencing geopolitical marginalisation. The results confirm that a structured integration of cultural diplomacy into Zimbabwe's branding approach could enable renewed engagement with both African and Western audiences, transitioning views from conflict to collaboration.

The literature consistently associates Pan-African identity with the reconstruction of national images in postcolonial Africa. Pan-Africanism, as demonstrated in the works of modern academics, serves not only as a political ideology, but also as a communication framework enabling African countries to regain their dignity and self-identity (Hassan and Mahrous, 2019). In this context, Zimbabwe's liberation legacy represents a continental fight that echoes throughout Africa, portraying the country a symbol of defiance and strength.

Hao *et al.* (2019) note that contemporary nation-branding progressively combines ideological identity with cultural authenticity to create representations that are both trustworthy and aspirational. Embedding Pan-African values in Zimbabwe's branding initiatives could shift the country's perception from isolation to one of leadership. Ståhlberg and Bolin (2016) highlight that cosmopolitan imagination of the capacity of a nation to portray itself as globally interconnected while being culturally anchored, is crucial for reputation management in the 21st century. For Zimbabwe, this signifies utilising the collective memory of liberation as a link connecting its national identity with its continental and international responsibilities.

The examined literature emphasises that Pan-African branding provides Zimbabwe with a chance to re-establish itself as a cultural centre of African solidarity and postcolonial autonomy. By shaping its identity through themes of resilience, creativity and liberation solidarity, the nation can go beyond the constraints of politically motivated Western narratives. The results thus verify that Pan-African awareness serves as both a cultural asset and a strategic branding element that can alter global perceptions of Zimbabwe.

The alignment of these results suggests multiple consequences for the reconstruction of Zimbabwe's image. The nation's reputational deficit is primarily driven by narrative rather than structure, suggesting that altering its image needs to focus on managing perception and communication. Secondly, cultural diplomacy rooted in heritage provides a genuine and sustainable basis for rebranding efforts, resonating with Anholt's (2010) idea of competitive identity. Third, the effectiveness of this strategy relies on institutional coherence, as museums, cultural ministries, and diplomatic missions work together within a cohesive branding structure.

DISCUSSION

The results of the meta-analysis indicate that Zimbabwe's reputational crisis is a matter of mainly narrative rather than a lack of national assets or accomplishments. Western media and policy narratives have built and perpetuated an image of political turmoil, oppression, and economic mismanagement, influencing global views for more than 20 years (Browning and Ferraz de Oliveira, 2017). This corresponds to what Fan (2010) defines as "externally imposed image construction", in which outside narratives prevail because of the lack of cohesive national communication strategies.

Nonetheless, this externally framed story exists alongside an internal counter-narrative grounded in a heritage of liberation, Pan-African pride, and cultural resilience. Zimbabwe's fight for independence, its involvement in regional liberation efforts, and its persistent dedication to African unity, provide strong bases for constructive rebranding. Anholt's (2010) Competitive Identity framework offers theoretical backing for this view, highlighting that a nation's reputation relies not on promotional slogans, but also on the genuine representation of its character, values and history.

The difficulty, then, is not in creating a new identity, but in regaining narrative control, the power to manage, mould, and share one's own story in the worldwide context. According to Lahrech *et al.* (2023), a country's credibility emerges when its outward communication mirrors internal reality and consistency. Zimbabwe should align its external communication with its historical integrity and Pan-African identity to regain trust and visibility. The second key interpretive insight relates to the impactful role of heritage in defining Zimbabwe's identity. Heritage branding, noted by Hao *et al.* (2019) and Saad (2020), serves as a multifaceted approach linking historical successes to current goals. It provides a feeling of consistency and validity, traits that countries facing international examinations desperately need.

In Zimbabwe, liberation heritage signifies more than just remembering the past; it serves as a moral asset that embodies strength, autonomy and togetherness. Incorporating this heritage into national branding initiatives allows the country to redefine itself as a pioneer in Pan-African awareness and postcolonial respect. Hurn (2016) claims that heritage-based cultural diplomacy exerts a more robust and lasting impact than political communication, since it resonates with universal human values of identity, memory, and belonging. Moreover,

the Museum of African Liberation illustrates the capability to implement this heritage. As a dynamic archive of Pan-African resistance, it has the potential to be Zimbabwe's leading institution for heritage-driven cultural diplomacy, facilitating exchanges, exhibitions and collaborations that express the African liberation story through a Zimbabwean lens. Pop *et al.* (2020) emphasise that effective national image rebuilding relies on converting cultural symbols into communication tools. Therefore, Zimbabwe's heritage needs to evolve from being a passive location of remembrance to an active space for re-engagement and narrative expression.

The synthesis reveals that cultural diplomacy is a potent but often overlooked soft power strategy in postcolonial Africa. Cultural diplomacy refers to the intentional application of cultural expression, education, and conversation to foster understanding and shape global perspectives (Hurn, 2016). In Zimbabwe's context, this entails positioning cultural exchange as a mechanism for strategic re-engagement, particularly amidst sanctions and global isolation. Instances from similar situations establish evident benchmarks. China's Confucius Institutes, for example, advocate for culture and language as a basis for worldwide impact (Scott *et al.*, 2011). Similarly, the United Arab Emirates utilises art showcases and cultural festivals to express a blend of contemporary and traditional elements (Saad, 2020). Incorporating cultural diplomacy into Zimbabwe's nation-branding approach could restore global confidence by highlighting its role in liberation, education, and African leadership.

Browning and Ferraz de Oliveira (2017) emphasise that cultural diplomacy has the potential to humanise international relations by redirecting attention from political conflicts to common values and creativity. This method corresponds with Zimbabwe's necessity to reshape its international identity via

gentle narratives of solidarity, strength and Pan-African involvement. According to Ståhlberg and Bolin (2016), contemporary nation-branding demands a cosmopolitan perspective, the capacity to portray a nation as both culturally anchored and globally interconnected. Cultural diplomacy offers Zimbabwe this creative connection.

The results verify that Pan-African awareness is essential for any rebranding initiative for Zimbabwe. Pan-Africanism represents the collective challenges and ambitions of the continent, establishing it as both a historical and ideological branding resource. Hassan and Mahrous (2019) emphasise that national images based on collective identity possess greater resilience and international respect, as they promote solidarity over competition. For Zimbabwe, incorporating Pan-Africanism into its national identity fulfils two objectives. It brings together citizens through a story of freedom, pride and a sense of belonging. On a global scale, it places Zimbabwe within a broader continental effort for respect and self-expression. Hao *et al.* (2019) and Saad (2020) contend that nation-branding in the Global South should integrate cultural and ideological identity to enhance competitive advantage. By establishing itself as a guardian of African liberation history, Zimbabwe can assert moral and symbolic power in influencing Pan-African stories of strength and solidarity. Additionally, this strategy aligns with the heritage diplomacy developing in international conversations, where countries leverage historical memory as a means for global interaction (Hurn, 2016). Consequently, Pan-Africanism operates not just as a political ideology but also as a diplomatic dialect that conveys common values to international audiences. The discussion confirms that Zimbabwe's image problem is not permanent. Hence, the nation can rebuild a genuine and favourable identity that showcases its historical strength and contributions to the continent by converting heritage into a tool for communication and diplomacy.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This piece explores ways Zimbabwe can rebuild its international reputation via heritage-focused cultural diplomacy, utilising a qualitative meta-analysis of research published from 2010 to 2025. The synthesis indicates that although Zimbabwe has a rich legacy of liberation and Pan-African leadership, its global image is limited by externally shaped stories of instability and deterioration. These stories, frequently supported by sanctions and depictions in Western media, have established what Anholt (2010) refers to as a reputation deficit, where the true identity of the nation is eclipsed by outside viewpoints. The results emphasise that Zimbabwe's reputation crisis is primarily driven by narrative rather than by substance. Beneath the unfavourable depictions exist a strong nation with considerable cultural wealth, historical authenticity and intellectual legacy. Nonetheless, the lack of a coherent branding strategy and the insufficient use of heritage as a diplomatic asset have hindered the nation from converting these advantages into a unified national identity. The reconstruction of Zimbabwe's image needs to be directed by a comprehensive National Branding and Cultural Diplomacy Strategy, managed collaboratively by the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Tourism, and Culture. This approach must establish institutional roles, communication procedures and performance metrics. According to Pop *et al.* (2020), effective coordination among institutions is essential for maintaining a reliable and uniform national brand.

The Museum of African Liberation ought to be the centrepiece of Zimbabwe's cultural diplomacy. It can accommodate regional exhibitions, heritage conferences and academic partnerships that showcase Zimbabwe's liberation narrative as a legacy for the continent. Based on Hurn (2016), these museums have the potential to act as "living ambassadors" that connect with audiences beyond politics by means of common culture and history.

A well-organised digital diplomacy initiative needs to be created to foster favourable stories regarding Zimbabwe. Uniform storytelling across various media, documentaries, and digital exhibitions will aid in regaining narrative control and combating misinformation. Lahrech *et al.* (2023) contend that strategic communication plays a crucial role in restoring reputation, particularly for countries encountering ideological prejudice in international discussions. Zimbabwe ought to enhance cultural partnerships with African organisations and the diaspora to promote a cohesive Pan-African identity. Joint museum initiatives, cultural festivals and exchanges in the creative industry can strengthen continental unity while elevating Zimbabwe's leadership position in the diplomacy of African heritage (Hassan and Mahrous, 2019). A National Brand Observatory must be created at a prominent university or research institution to track worldwide perceptions, assess branding initiatives, and suggest modifications grounded in empirical data. Hao *et al.* (2019) highlight that sustainable nation-branding needs to be driven by data, adaptable and informed by research. Civic education and cultural initiatives ought to be established to strengthen local ownership of the national brand. Citizens should view themselves as brand representatives, showcasing positive stories about Zimbabwe through their behaviour, innovation and global engagements. Integrating cultural diplomacy into educational programmes can encourage intergenerational respect for tradition and national identity.

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