

# Fashion, Futurity and Cultural Narratives: Virtual Influencer Kim Zulu in Cultural Tourism Marketing

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**Abstract:** This study investigates how narratives about South African virtual influencer Kim Zulu in media coverage position fashion as a part of cultural tourism marketing. A qualitative research design and an interpretive worldview were adopted to analyse media articles published between 2020 and 2025. The analysis was conducted with Voyant Tools for topic modelling using the Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) algorithm, cluster analysis and interpretive reading of the corpus supported by three theoretical lenses, namely cultural tourism, Destination Image Theory and Afrofuturism. The results indicate that fashion is not presented in isolation when reporting on Kim Zulu in media coverage. Rather fashion links to culture, futurity, and destination branding that strengthens South Africa's visibility and appeal in the global tourism market. The paper adds to the literature on cultural tourism marketing, digital culture, and virtual influencer marketing while adding to research on digital cultural tourism in the Global South.

**Keywords:** Cultural Tourism Marketing, Destination Image Theory, Fashion, Afrofuturism, Virtual Influencer

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## 1. Introduction

According to recent statistics, African tourism is on the rise. The UN Tourism World Tourism Barometer (May 2025) indicates that Africa's international arrivals increased by 9% in the first quarter of 2025, outperforming Europe, the Americas, and the Middle East. Interestingly, Africa outpaced pre-pandemic estimates by 16%, reflecting a demand in tourism despite global challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic and rising cost of living (UN Tourism, 2025). While the rise in tourism in Africa presents numerous opportunities for marketers in the tourism and hospitality sector to promote destinations, tourism marketing today extends beyond promoting destinations but also involves creating meaningful visitor experiences (Geng et al., 2024). Like its global counterparts, tourism marketing in Africa has become more digital because of technologies presenting more marketing opportunities (Mkwizu, 2019). Yet, studies indicate that many African tourism organisations still underuse digital tools, particularly those that showcase cultural identity through online storytelling (Abate, 2024).

In this context, the case of Kim Zulu, South Africa's first virtual influencer, provides an opportunity to examine cultural tourism branding in the digital age. Kim Zulu is a South African black virtual influencer created by The Avatar Company in 2020 and known for her presence in global fashion events with a model collection that represents the concept of Afrofuturism (see Sinwamali, 2020). As a cultural movement Afrofuturism combines aspects of science fiction, fantasy, and African heritage to envision different futures for people of African origin (Womack, 2013).

Destination branding provides a conceptual lens for this approach and refers to the strategic development of distinctive perceptions of a place that attract tourists through a coherent brand identity (Ruiz-Real et al., 2020). Brand identity and image interact, namely while identity reflects how marketers define and communicate a destination's uniqueness, image represents how audiences perceive it (Crompton, 1979; Zuo et al., 2023). Recent work shows that immersive digital technologies and virtual influencers can facilitate brand perceptions by integrating narratives, interactivity, and authenticity (Ezzatian et al., 2025). However, most destination branding research focuses on the Global North, with African perspectives underrepresented (Makumbi & du Preez, 2024).

Consequently, this study examines how media narratives about Kim Zulu represent culture through fashion and how such representations contribute to cultural tourism in the digital environment. It is argued that these narratives inform destination branding, portraying South Africa as an established cultural tourism destination. Consequently, this study attempts to answer the following research question: How do the media narratives about virtual influencer Kim Zulu position fashion as part of cultural tourism marketing?

In doing so, a qualitative research design and an interpretive viewpoint were adopted to analyse media articles about Kim Zulu published between 2020 and 2025. The analysis was conducted with Voyant Tools for topic modelling using the Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) algorithm, cluster analysis and interpretive reading of the corpus supported by three theoretical lenses, namely cultural tourism, Destination Image Theory and

Afrofuturism. The paper is structured as follows: First E-tourism and hospitality marketing are discussed, followed by digital culture and cultural tourism, influencer marketing, virtual influencers and the destination image theory. Thereafter the methodology and findings are discussed. The paper ends with a discussion of the findings and conclusion.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 E-Tourism and Hospitality Marketing

Due to the advancement of technologies, tourism and hospitality marketers have adopted numerous digital marketing tools to reach a wider target audience. These tools include but are not limited to traditional digital tools (SEO), social media, email, content marketing) emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI), virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR) and chatbots. In addition to these tools, interactivity and data-driven customisation are important considerations to influence travellers' intention and the image of the destination (Elrayah & Alshiha, 2024).

Similarly, Calisto and Sarkar (2024) point out that new technologies such as VR, AR, AI, and meta-universes can make tourism and hospitality marketing more effective due to immersive experiences. Catala Consulting (2025) adds that social media and influencer marketing (including nano-influencers), voice search optimisation, smart marketing automation, online booking platforms, and data-driven marketing strategies can personalise traveller experiences and create relationships between clients and tourism and hospitality organisations. In this regard, Gidumal et al.'s (2024) study found that AI will lead to mass personalisation and customisation in the tourism and hospitality sector, but also questions whether consumers will accept what they refer to as "hyper-personalization." Nonetheless, the use of technologies in the metaverse to enhance traveller experiences presents a notable development in the tourism and hospitality sector, not only globally but also in the African context.

### 2.2 Digital Culture and Cultural Tourism

Despite COVID-19 affecting cultural tourism, more recently it has become one of the fastest-growing segments of the tourism industry, especially when marketing destinations (Future Market Insights, 2025). How the cultural tourism sector has digitally transformed because of emerging metaverse technologies also contributed to how cultural heritage is interpreted (Shehade & Stylianou-Lambert, 2020). While culture and tourism have always been connected, more recent perspectives refer to cultural tourism as also including aspects such as creativity, lifestyle, and everyday culture, not only sites and monuments (Richards, 2018). This change of perspective is evident in the perspective of cultural tourism by the World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO, 2017) that states that travel is motivated by the desire to experience and engage with a destination's cultural expressions (both tangible and intangible) such as its art, heritage, cuisine, music, traditions, and ways of life. The UNWTO's (2018) report also indicates that cultural tourism has become broader and more inclusive of diverse cultural practices, with less emphasis on Western heritage. For this study, it is significant that the *World Tourism Organization and Università della Svizzera italiana* report (2025) highlights the connection between fashion and cultural tourism in that fashion enhances cultural expression, attracts visitors, and strengthens destination branding by promoting cultural heritage.

Cultural tourism benefits from digital tools that integrate technologies changing how cultural expression is accessed, shared, and marketed with visitors engaging with culture either remotely or online (Satiti & Udin, 2025). Digital culture can thus also enhance cultural tourism through virtual and augmented reality experiences, mobile applications and interactive platforms, making cultural experiences more accessible through global reach and visitor engagement. It can thus be argued that fashion expression through technologies not only enhances cultural tourism experiences but also redefines how heritage and creativity are communicated to global audiences. Using digital tools such as virtual reality, augmented reality, and immersive media, fashion can act as both a cultural artefact and an interactive platform since they enable tourists to experience cultural traditions in new ways while contributing to sustainable destination branding (*World Tourism Organization & Università della Svizzera italiana*, 2025).

### 2.3 Influencer Marketing in Tourism

Influencer marketing is "a marketing tactic in which advertisers or brands use social media influencers (SMIs) to promote their products, brands, or ideas and convey a brand message to a wider audience through native

advertising or product placement in the content shared by SMIs” (Polat et al., 2024, p322). It draws on aspects such as credibility, expertise, authenticity, popularity, and reputation to communicate brand messages through social media channels, which influence how other users respond and make purchasing decision (Buyn & Ahn, 2023). Due to its enormous potential to provide authentic information about destinations to a wide audience on social media, influencer marketing has also impacted the tourism industry. As a result, social media influencers have increasingly been used by tourism organisations to attract visitors to destinations (Femenia-Serra, & Gretzel, 2020). Social media influencers are classified by how many followers they have on social media, namely micro (between 10 000 and 100 000), macro (between 100 000 and one million) and mega (more than one million) (Hernández-Méndez & Baute-Díaz, 2023). Polat et al’s (2024) bibliometric analysis emphasises the need for more research on emerging technologies like the metaverse, virtual influencers, and AI-driven marketing in tourism marketing.

Human influencers have extended into virtual influencers, who have become a trend in marketing, including tourism marketing. According to Byun and Ahn (2023, p.293), virtual influencers are “computer-generated characters that serve as influencers, offer novel and cost-effective advertising strategies.” They have a social media presence and can do the same as human influencers, namely, post about their lives, such as travelling, portraying fashion or other daily activities while promoting a travel brand, whom consumers can perceive as authentic and credible (Byun & Ahn, 2023; Guthrie, 2020). Virtual influencers can also convey culture and knowledge about a destination (Bassano et al., 2019). Despite the increasing popularity of virtual influencers, human influencers remain important for destination marketing because they generate more credibility, connection, and behavioural intention (Hernández-Méndez et al., 2024). However, Byun and Ahn (2023) suggest that virtual influencers also have several advantages. For example, they can be fully controlled, easily scaled across markets, and are not involved in personal controversies or scandals. These characteristics make them appealing for use in cultural tourism.

Virtual influencers are more prominent in the fashion sector, where they act as models, ambassadors, and brand storytellers (Byun & Ahn, 2023). Since fashion is a cultural product, these virtual influencers also participate in cultural representation and cultural tourism marketing. In this regard Shin and Lee’s (2023) work shows that virtual influencers can mediate between fashion and cultural tourism and that destinations can be positioned through digital cultural narratives. Rossi and Revitti’s (2023) work have put forward virtual influencers involved in fashion as an innovative marketing tool that can complement virtual influencer marketing. In the case of Kim Zulu, this kind of mediation takes on an Afrofuturist character. With her futuristic styling, she draws directly from Afrofuturist traditions that blend African cultural heritage with imaginary, forward-facing narratives (Womack, 2013).

## **2.4 Destination Branding and Destination Image Theory**

Cultural tourism is linked to the concept of destination branding which is a strategic process of creating positive perceptions of a place among potential tourists via a distinct brand identity to attract them to visit (Ruiz-Real et al., 2020). A distinctive brand identity in tourism marketing allows tourists to identify the place they wish to visit, with culture often serving as the most distinctive sign of identity (Escobar-Farfán et al., 2024).

Recent literature argues that brand identity is also mediated through immersive technologies, including the metaverse, which create an opportunity for tourism marketers to integrate cultural narratives into destination branding efforts (Ezzatian et al., 2025). In this regard, this study positions Kim Zulu as a means of communicating South Africa’s cultural identity in cultural tourism marketing by also blending Afrofuturist elements with fashion.

While brand identity reflects how destinations strategically define and communicate their uniqueness, destination image theory helps explain how these messages are perceived, interpreted, and internalised by tourists. Crompton’s (1979) seminal definition defines destination image “as the sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions that a person has of a destination.” Destination image theory explains how cognitive perceptions (knowledge and beliefs about a place) and affective responses (emotions and feelings toward it) combine to inform tourists’ overall impression of a destination, which in turn impacts their behavioural intentions of visiting the destination. It also includes two dimensions, namely projected image and perceived image. In tourism studies, the image that Destination Marketing Organisations (DMOs) deliberately construct and disseminate through media channels is referred to as the projected image, while the impressions, beliefs, and emotions that tourists or potential tourists form about a place constitute the perceived image (Zuo et al., 2023). In destination image theory, cultural aspects influence both cognitive and affective perceptions of a location (Zhou et al., 2024).

### 3. Methodology

A qualitative research design with an interpretive research paradigm was adopted to explore how media narratives about virtual influencer Kim Zulu position fashion as part of cultural tourism marketing. An interpretative worldview was appropriate to understand the social phenomenon of a virtual influencer involved in fashion and its potential for cultural tourism marketing, as evident in the data (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2024). Since Kim Zulu’s social media presence consists of visuals that limited textual analysis, it was deemed appropriate to analyse media coverage spanning 2020 to 2025 through topic modelling, cluster analysis and a close reading of the corpus. Unlike visuals on social media, media coverage could provide narrative framing of Kim Zulu’s social media activities using words that could be studied (Zaklama, 2025; Geise & Xu, 2024). Furthermore, news articles circulate widely on platforms such as Facebook and X and are thus part of the social media ecosystem (Elliott, 2025). News articles were identified with a purposive sample through online searches using combinations of keywords such as Kim Zulu South Africa, virtual influencer South Africa and virtual influencers fashion. The inclusion criteria were as follows: 1) the articles were required to mention Kim Zulu and 2) the publication date had to fall within the period 2020 (since her launch) to 2025 (latest media coverage). A purposive sample was best suited for this study to find media coverage about Kim Zulu to answer the study’s research question because the selected articles had to meet the inclusion criteria (Emmell, 2013).

The selected articles were collated into a corpus for analysis by following different steps. Articles were first manually retrieved and converted into text in Word document format. Thereafter advertisements, images and unrelated links were removed. After data cleaning, the size of the final corpus included 16 815 total words and 2 861 unique word forms.

The corpus was imported into Voyant Tools, a free, web-based and widely used text analysis platform to analyse digital text (Hetenyi, Lengyel, & Szilasi, 2019) and proceeded in two phases.

During phase 1, the topics tool was used to retrieve a cluster of words taken from the first 1000 words. Clusters of recurrent terms and co-occurring concepts were important since they highlight latent discursive structures. Voyant Tools uses the Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) algorithm to group terms into clusters (or topics) that frequently appear together across the articles (Blei, Ng, & Jordan, 2003). The topic modelling tool was used to identify thematic clusters whereafter correlation analysis was performed to identify pairs of words whose occurrence patterns were statistically associated across the corpus (see Table 1). The second stage involved close reading of the corpus using the concordance and visualisation tools to interpret the thematic clusters through relevant theoretical lenses, namely destination branding, Afrofuturism, digital culture, cultural tourism and destination image theory. This interpretive phase thus also included reading the context and understanding the meaning of the computational outputs.

### 4. Results

After analysis five thematic clusters emerged supported by topic modelling results and correlation analysis. Topic modelling identified the main terms within each theme, the probabilities generated by the LDA algorithm (indicating the importance of each word in defining the topic), and the percentage coverage in the corpus (showing the prevalence of each theme in the corpus). Correlation analysis complemented these results by identifying pairs of words whose occurrence patterns were statistically associated across the corpus and were linked to the theory.

**Table 1: Thematic clusters supported by topic modelling and correlation analysis and theory**

Thematic Cluster	Topic Modelling (top terms, probability and coverage %)	Correlation Pair (Coefficient)	Theory
Fashion and brand identity	fashion (0.087), brand (0.075), ambassador (0.063), identity (0.059) Coverage: 22%	Boundaries ↔ Fashion (0.887)	Destination branding

Thematic Cluster	Topic Modelling (top terms, probability and coverage %)	Correlation Pair (Coefficient)	Theory
Africa and digital innovation	Africa (0.092), future (0.081), digital (0.077), innovation (0.072) Coverage: 18%	Africans ↔ Afrofuturism (0.895); Digital ↔ Fashion (0.847)	Afrofuturism and digital culture
Tourism and destination marketing	destination (0.095), tourism (0.082), marketing (0.074), culture (0.068) Coverage: 21%	Marketing ↔ Destination (0.913); Brands ↔ Destination (0.884)	Destination Image Theory
Global events and partnerships	event (0.088), New York Fashion week (0.071), Mercedes (0.066), company (0.062) Coverage: 16%	Connections ↔ Destination (0.885)	Cultural tourism Destination Image Theory
Positive appeal	appealing (0.083), benefit (0.069), entertaining (0.064), fans (0.059) Coverage: 23%	Appeal ↔ Marketing (0.879); Great ↔ Marketing (0.803)	Affective branding

The thematic clusters are as follows:

#### 4.1 Fashion and Brand Identity

Topic modelling revealed key terms such as *fashion*, *brand*, *ambassadorship*, and *identity* that made up 22% of the overall corpus. Notably, fashion showed a strong correlation with the concept of boundaries ( $r = 0.887$ ), indicating that Kim Zulu is often depicted as someone who transcends cultural divides while representing African identity within global cultural contexts. In this regard the media portrays Kim Zulu as a cultural ambassador whose look (bald head, dark skin, Afrocentric features) communicates authenticity.

This theme also links to destination branding, where fashion emerges as a distinctive cultural indicator that links her fashion style to national brand identity (Makumbi & du Preez, 2024; Escobar-Farfán et al., 2024). This theme thus supports Rossi and Revitti's (2023) view that virtual influencers can serve as creative brand storytellers in a fashion environment.

#### 4.2 Africa and Digital Innovation

Topic modelling highlighted key terms like *Africa*, *future*, *digital*, and *innovation*, which together accounted for 18% of the corpus. Correlation shows strong associations between *Africans* and *Afrofuturism* ( $r = 0.895$ ), as well as between *digital* and *fashion* ( $r = 0.847$ ). This theme indicates that Kim Zulu is portrayed as blending cultural heritage with a sense of futurity aligning with how Afrofuturism is theorised by Womack (2013) and Eshun (2003). This positioning also strengthens the idea of digital culture in culture tourism by presenting South Africa as not only rooted in African traditions but also aligned with digital innovation.

#### 4.3 Tourism and Destination Marketing

Topic modelling revealed key terms such as *destination*, *tourism*, and *marketing* accounting for 21% of the corpus. Notably, strong correlations emerged between *marketing* and *destination* ( $r = 0.913$ ), as well as between *brands* and *destination* ( $r = 0.884$ ). This theme emphasises the integration of fashion within tourism marketing efforts in that fashion becomes part of the symbolic resources used to construct a destination's identity. Media narratives link Kim Zulu's fashion presence with tourism marketing suggesting that cultural style is not presented in isolation, but as a resource through which South Africa's attractiveness as a destination is represented. The results also align with Destination Image Theory which highlights how projected images inform tourists' cognitive and affective perceptions of a place (Crompton, 1979; Styliadis, Shani, & Belhassen, 2017).

#### 4.4 Global Events and Partnerships

Topic modelling revealed key terms such as *event*, *NYFW*, *Mercedes*, and *company*, accounting for 16% of the overall content. Correlations confirmed strong links between *connections* and *destination* ( $r = 0.885$ ), illustrating how media narratives situate Kim Zulu within global cultural industries while reinforcing destination identity. Fashion events in which Kim Zulu participates connect South Africa to global visibility and in doing so, strengthen the connection between culture and tourism. This theme thus reinforces the relevance of cultural tourism in that international fashion events and global partnerships with brands function as symbolic ways through which South African culture is portrayed to global audiences (World Tourism Organization & Università della Svizzera italiana, 2025). This theme also aligns with Destination Image Theory in that cultural associations formed in a global context contribute to both the projected and perceived images of a place (Crompton, 1979; Styliadis, Shani, & Belhassen, 2017).

#### 4.5 Positive Appeal

Topic modelling identified key terms such as *appealing*, *benefit*, and *entertaining* accounting for 23% coverage of the corpus. Correlations linked *appeal* and *marketing* [ $r=0.879$ ] and *great* and *marketing* [ $r=0.803$ ]. This unexpected cluster shows that media narratives are affectively portraying Kim Zulu’s campaigns as engaging and attractive. This theme resonates with Fedeli and Cheng’s (2022) caution that influencer marketing can blur the line between authenticity and persuasion, but at the same time it also puts forward the idea of affective branding in enhancing loyalty towards a tourist destination. Figure 1 below depicts how the results link fashion and cultural tourism which is further explored in the discussion section.

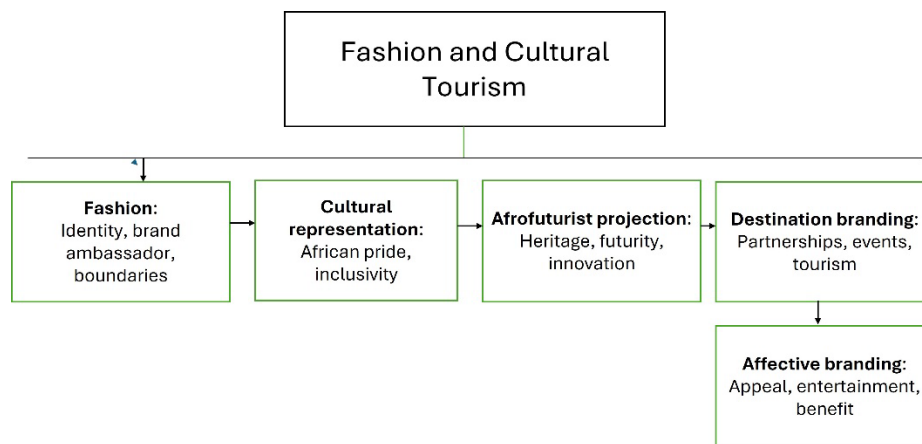


Figure 1: How fashion and cultural tourism are linked based on the results.

### 5. Discussion

Using topic modelling and correlation analysis with Voyant Tools, the study explores how the media narratives about virtual influencer Kim Zulu position fashion as part of cultural tourism marketing. Topic modelling and cluster analysis confirm that fashion is not presented in isolation when reporting on Kim Zulu in media coverage but links to culture, futurity, and destination branding.

Returning to the research question, the results indicate that media narratives about Kim Zulu position fashion through cultural representation, Afrofuturist projection, destination branding and affective branding that illustrate Kim Zulu’s role as a digital ambassador who bridges African heritage with global digital culture. The correlation analysis’ overall results summarised in Figure 1 indicate that the media do not describe South Africa only as a physical place, but also as part of a broader futuristic African vision. In this regard, Kim Zulu’s fashion’s role is to cross boundaries, link with fashion events, brands and partnerships to connect African identity with inclusivity and futurity. Also, the media narratives present marketing activities as inseparable from informing South Africa’s tourism cultural identity as supported by the Destination Image theory (Zhou et al., 2024; Rossi and Revitti, 2023). Media portrayals about Kim Zulu tie cultural pride to futuristic narratives, presenting Africans as both established and innovative. These results align with literature that virtual influencers can be used to convey culture and knowledge about a destination (Bassano et al., 2019) in that they can be customised and controlled without any personal controversies (Byun & Ahn 2023). Metaverse technologies such as creating virtual influencers can thus contribute to how a destination’s cultural heritage is interpreted (Shehade &

Stylianou-Lambert, 2020). The results align with the World Tourism Organization and Università della Svizzera italiana report (2025) that fashion can play a role in cultural expression to drive cultural tourism. Tourism marketers now have an opportunity to integrate cultural narratives into destination branding efforts using virtual influencers (Ezzatian et al., 2025).

## 6. Conclusion

The results indicate that media narratives about virtual influencer Kim Zulu position fashion as both a cultural expression, a strategic destination and affective branding tool that strengthens South Africa's visibility and appeal in the global tourism market. In the context of Kim Zulu as a visual influencer, fashion is not merely artistic but is positioned as part of cultural tourism marketing. However, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study relied on a specific dataset, which may not represent different interpretations surrounding Kim Zulu. The corpus was also limited to English-language content, potentially excluding narratives in other languages. The results also do not fully account for visual semiotics or audience reception which are important in understanding the impact of virtual influencers in tourism marketing. Future research could expand on these results by conducting audience-centered studies to explore how users engage with and interpret virtual influencers across diverse cultural or demographic groups.

## Ethics and AI Declaration

The study has received ethics approval on 20 October 2025 from the University of South Africa's College of Human Sciences (Ref #: 10904). No AI tools were used to write this paper.

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