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RWANDA AS A TOURISM DESTINATION: COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE ON
SECURITY AND RISK NARRATIVES IN MEDIA AND INSTITUTIONAL
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Abstract

Perceptions of security and risk significantly influence the construction of tourism destination images, especially in contexts marked by conflict, instability, or geopolitical tensions.

Rwanda provides a compelling case in examining this influence: while internationally recognized for its safety, tourism development, and economic progress, it remains closely associated with narratives of regional insecurity in the Great Lakes Region. This thesis investigates how security and risk narratives in international media and institutional communication construct Rwanda's image as a tourism destination. The research is guided by a central question: "How do security and risk narratives in international media and institutional communication construct the image of Rwanda as a tourism destination?" Drawing on securitization theory and the concepts of securitization narratives and risk perception, the study analyzes how international media, official tourism communications produced by the Rwanda Development Board (RDB) and Visit Rwanda, and travel advisories frame safety, security, stability, and risk, and how these frames shape Rwanda's image in the context of tourism. A qualitative design was employed, using thematic and narrative analyses of international media coverage and official tourism communications, supplemented by travel advisories and a semi-structured interview with a Rwandan tourism operator. The findings reveal that Rwanda's tourism image is shaped by the dynamic interplay of multiple, often competing narratives. International media commonly depict Rwanda as a stable, modern, and rapidly developing destination, yet frequently associate it with ongoing regional conflicts and insecurity, particularly in neighboring areas. In contrast, RDB communications foreground themes of safety, stability, resilience, and national development, while largely downplaying or omitting references to regional risk. Travel advisories occupy an intermediate position, acknowledging Rwanda as generally safe while emphasizing caution, given regional instability. Collectively, these narratives produce a complex and continually negotiated tourism image, marked by tension between reassurance and uncertainty. This study, therefore, contributes to research on tourism, destination image, and securitization by showing that security in tourism is not merely an objective reality, but is continuously constructed, challenged, and negotiated through communicative and narrative processes.

Keywords: Rwanda, tourism, securitization, risk perception, destination image, media narratives, post-conflict.

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“Forming your worldview by relying on the media would be like forming your view about me by looking at a picture of my foot... my foot is part of me, but it’s a pretty ugly part. I have better parts... It’s not that the picture of my foot is deliberately lying about me, but it is not showing you the whole of me” (Rosling et al., 2019, p. 185)

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the study

Tourism has become an increasingly important component of recovery in post-conflict destinations because of its potential to stimulate economic growth, rebuild destination image, and contribute to broader peacebuilding efforts (Causevic & Lynch, 2011). Consequently, tourism in post-conflict settings has attracted growing attention from researchers and tourism professionals alike. The work of Mansfeld and Pizam (2006) and Avraham and Ketter (2017) suggests these destinations face distinct challenges as they work to ensure and communicate safety while addressing the enduring impacts of conflict and their negative portrayal in the media. Understanding how post-conflict destinations develop their tourism sectors and shape international perceptions is therefore important for both academic research and tourism practice.

Against this broader backdrop, Rwanda offers a particularly compelling case of post-conflict tourism recovery. Following its post-genocide era, Rwanda has repositioned itself as a prominent tourism destination, making it a particularly valuable case for examining how narratives of safety and insecurity shape tourism development (Gahigana & Sharpley, 2014). Santana-Gallego and Fourie (2022) emphasize a leading challenge for post-conflict tourism destinations: overcoming the lasting influence of media narratives and travel advisories on perceptions of safety and risk. Understanding how these perceptions are constructed and communicated is therefore important, as they can continue to shape destination image and tourism development long after conflict ends. Thus, addressing perceptions of risk and security is regarded as an important element of sustainable tourism development (Semafor, 2025; The New Times, 2013; Byemba et al., 2024; Asongu et al., 2019).

Empirically, Rwanda offers a compelling case of post-conflict tourism recovery. Located in East-Central Africa, Rwanda is a landlocked country bordered to the north by Uganda, to the east by Tanzania, to the south by Burundi, and to the west by the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) (Briggs et al., 2016, p. 244; OECD, 2024, p. 19). Covering 26,338 km² (Rwanda Development Board [RDB], 2017, p. 5), Rwanda is widely known as the “Land of a Thousand Hills” for its mountainous landscape, volcanic terrain, extensive hills, numerous rivers, and more than twenty lakes (Briggs et al., 2016, pp. 2–3). Having gained its independence from Belgium in 1962, Rwanda’s population reached approximately 14.6

million in 2025, reflecting rapid demographic growth since the 1994 genocide (OECD, 2024, p. 19; United Nations Population Fund, 2025). Kigali is the capital, and the nation's official languages are Kinyarwanda, English, French, and Kiswahili (RDB, 2017, p. 5). The country's multilingual character reflects its historical development and regional migration patterns. According to Russell (2019, pp. 83–96), the country's use of English and French has been shaped by waves of return migration in recent history.

Tourism has become a critical economic sector for Rwanda and shapes the country's international image. According to Ndahiro et al. (2015, p. 181), mountain gorilla trekking in the Virunga Mountains is widely regarded as Rwanda's flagship tourist attraction and a defining element of the country's destination brand. High-profile initiatives such as Kwita Izina (the annual gorilla naming ceremony) further strengthen Rwanda's international visibility through extensive global media coverage and international participation (Ndahiro et al., 2015). Similarly, Briggs et al. (2016, pp. vii-viii) note that Volcanoes National Park established Rwanda as among Africa's premier gorilla tourism destinations and that the sector has expanded rapidly since the late 1990s, becoming the country's leading source of foreign exchange and an important source of employment. Beyond gorilla tourism, destinations such as Lake Kivu and Gisenyi further contribute to Rwanda's tourist appeal through established tourism infrastructure and leisure opportunities (Briggs et al., 2016, p. 183).

Despite more than three decades of stability, narratives of risk, insecurity, and regional instability continue to circulate in international media and travel advisories about Rwanda as a tourism destination (Young, 2022; Business Insider Africa [BIA], 2025). The country shares a border and longstanding historical and cultural ties with the Kivu region of eastern DRC (see Figure 2), an area that has experienced decades of conflict and instability (Mathys, 2017, p. 468). As a result, Rwanda's image as a safe destination is often shaped by broader regional security narratives, even when security concerns are confined to areas outside its borders. As Briggs et al. (2016, p. vii) observe, international media tend to focus on countries such as Rwanda during periods of conflict while paying considerably less attention to their post-conflict recovery.

Against this background, Rwanda offers an important case for examining how narratives of safety, insecurity, and regional instability are constructed and communicated across international media, travel advisories, and tourism-related communications. Understanding

how these narratives are constructed and communicated is especially important in post-conflict destinations, where perceptions of risk may continue to shape destination image and tourism development long after the conflict has ended.

1.2 Empirical context

In the decades following the 1994 genocide, tourism became a central pillar of Rwanda's national development strategy, supporting economic growth, peacebuilding, and the country's efforts to position itself as a stable destination in the Great Lakes region (Ministry of Trade and Industry [MTI], 2010). Tourism continues to drive Rwanda's economy, contributing significantly to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and supporting post-conflict recovery (Odunga et al., 2020). Rwanda's tourism sector has undergone substantial transformation in recent decades (Ndahiro et al., 2015, p. 180), as reflected in shifting visitor markets. Earlier statistics showed that most international visitors came from Europe and North America (Rwanda Statistics Department, 2003, p. 133), while recent data indicate that the East African Community (EAC) is now Rwanda's largest tourism market, followed by visitors from other African, European, and North American markets (RDB, 2024, p. 37).

At the same time, Rwanda operates within a complex context of regional security. Despite significant investment in destination branding and notable progress, security concerns stemming from regional instability continue to shape international perceptions of Rwanda as a tourist destination (Dubinsky, 2025; U.S. Embassy Kigali, 2025). The country's proximity to conflict in the east of the DRC means that regional developments frequently appear in international reporting and travel advisories. This appearance creates an important empirical phenomenon: Rwanda promotes itself as a safe, stable, and attractive destination, while international media coverage and official travel advisories often associate the country with broader regional insecurity. Recent reporting by BIA (2025) similarly highlights that ongoing insecurity in the Kivu region continues to affect Rwanda's tourism potential, underscoring the contemporary relevance of examining how narratives of safety and insecurity are communicated. Therefore, examining how these representations construct and communicate narratives of safety and risk presents an opportunity to better understand the challenges facing post-conflict tourism destinations operating within complex geopolitical environments.

1.3 Previous research

This sub-chapter reviews prior research on post-conflict tourism, risk perception, destination image, crisis management, and securitization in tourism. It identifies the key scholarly debates relevant to this thesis and highlights the knowledge gaps that motivate this thesis.

The growing field of tourism research in countries and regions affected by conflict has provided valuable insights into the connections among insecurity, risk perception, and tourism recovery. Butler and Suntikul (2013) discuss the significant impact of war and conflict on tourism. Related events often lead to destination abandonment, reputational damage, and lengthy recovery periods. These scholars argue that the effects of conflict are complex, affecting not only tourist numbers, but also narratives and perceptions surrounding destinations. Supporting this view, Glaesser (2003) highlights the importance of crisis management in minimizing these effects. He notes that successful recovery strategies rely on clear communication and quick action to restore travelers' confidence.

Slovic (1987) and Mansfeld and Pizam (2006) also emphasize the vital role of risk perception. They argue that risk perception is as influential as actual risk in shaping travel behavior, as individuals react based on their personal perceptions of risk rather than solely on objective circumstances. Collectively, these studies show that post-conflict tourism recovery is shaped by both actual conditions and narratives about stability, safety, and risk. These narratives emerge from and circulate within media and institutional discourses (Renn, 1998, 2004).

There is a growing focus in tourism communication research on how media portrayals shape destination images. For instance, Florido-Benítez's (2022) recent and comprehensive review of tourism promotion research highlights the role of promotional campaigns and institutional communication in shaping destination perceptions. This indicates that mediated representations are as impactful as direct experiences in shaping destination images (Kim & Stepchenkova, 2015). Ketter (2016) provides empirical evidence that the tone and volume of media — especially social media, but also broader media — influence destination image after a crisis. Chen (2018) also finds that media coverage of films and celebrities helps shape destination image and influences tourists' expectations before their visits. These studies show that media narratives crucially shape the reputation of tourism destinations (Avraham & Ketter, 2017). This influence is especially relevant for destinations affected by past conflicts

or regional political unrest. Together, these studies demonstrate that media portrayals greatly impact international perceptions of destinations, highlighting the need to analyze how safety and risk narratives affect tourism images.

The development of tourism in Rwanda has often been examined in the context of EAC (Okello & Novelli, 2014). Okello and Novelli (2014) have noted that Rwanda's tourism sector, which depends heavily on wildlife attractions, faces challenges common to landlocked EAC member states. Similarly, Anbalagan and Lovelock (2014) argue that the country's overreliance on gorilla tourism limits the growth of new tourism products, although opportunities such as coffee tourism are gaining momentum. These vulnerabilities make the industry especially susceptible to shifts in international perceptions of safety and stability. Supporting this observation, Ronald et al. (2020) found that Rwanda's strategic marketing efforts, such as partnerships with European football clubs (Arsenal) and the "Kwita Izina," have partly aimed to counter negative security narratives and improve the country's international image. Collectively, these studies show that tourism development in Rwanda has been closely tied to destination branding and to efforts to strengthen the country's international image as a safe and attractive destination.

Beyond destination branding, tourism research has increasingly examined how political processes, security discourses, and narrative construction shape destination representation. As the interplay among political decisions, security measures, and their effects on travel and destination branding demonstrates, tourism is closely linked to politics and securitization (Bianchi et al., 2020; Wendt & Bógdał-Brzezińska, 2024). Hall (1999) contends that the political aspects of tourism, such as governance, policy, and power structures, significantly influence its marketing and regulation. Building on this argument, Lisle (2016) examines the complex relationship between war and tourism, illustrating how conflict zones can become spaces of both danger and appeal. The author exposes the commodification of war in tourism, which generates a tense mixture of fear and fascination. Wendt and Bógdał-Brzezińska (2024) expand the discussion by incorporating a modern focus on securitization in tourism research, grounded in Buzan et al. (1998) core framework. Through this lens, securitization theory explains how discourses turn specific issues into security concerns, shaping how risks, threats, and stability are constructed and communicated.

A growing trend in tourism research is to analyze the field through its discourse and narrative construction. Recent research by Zreik (2025) shows that tourism texts, including social media narratives, actively shape destination images rather than merely reflecting neutral realities. Similarly, Salazar and Graburn (2014, pp. 1–28), in the first chapter of *Tourism Imaginaries*, highlight that such texts lack neutral descriptions, but instead create and circulate specific representations of destinations. As a result, media coverage and institutional communication on tourism-related topics influence perceptions of destinations, often portraying them as safe, risky, or politically sensitive (Hall, 1999; Salazar & Graburn, 2014; Zreik, 2025). Analysis of these narratives thus offers valuable insights into the portrayal of tourism destinations in international discourse.

Sönmez and Graefe (1998a) note that tourism demand initially declines under conditions of insecurity. However, empirical evidence shows a pattern of gradual recovery, contingent on effective risk communication and stakeholder strategies (Asilainen, 2023). Building on this evidence, Santana-Gallego and Fourie (2022) examine African tourism and demonstrate that insecurity leads to significant declines in both arrivals and revenue. They argue that recovery depends on internal stability and international perceptions. Furthermore, using synthetic control methods, Hu and Wang (2025) have measured the effects of war on tourism, showing that localized conflict has lasting impacts on demand. In line with these findings, Tang et al. (2026) examine the enduring effects of historical wars on tourism demand, suggesting that reputational damage can persist for decades. These discussions and findings are especially important for Rwanda, which continues to address lingering perceptions from the 1994 genocide, despite decades of peacebuilding efforts (Becker, 2019). These studies collectively demonstrate the strong influence of international perceptions and destination reputation on tourism recovery. They further highlight the importance of understanding how perceptions of risk, safety, and stability surrounding post-conflict destinations are developed and communicated globally.

Research by Causevic and Lynch (2011) has thoroughly examined strategies for restoring a destination's appeal after conflict. Supporting such strategies, Okafor and Khalid (2021) show that targeted security spending can significantly accelerate tourism recovery by reassuring travelers and enhancing the destination's image. Additionally, Gunness (2017) contends that rebuilding a destination's image after conflict requires carefully planned communication strategies. These strategies must address past crises while promoting safety

and a sense of renewal (Avraham and Ketter, 2017; Gunness, 2017). Consequently, these discussions underscore the importance of understanding tourists' fears and how tourism stakeholders can adapt their marketing strategies accordingly. While these strategies are generally applicable, their effectiveness varies by context.

In Rwanda, where tourism recovery dynamics are particularly important, much of the existing research has focused on tourism recovery strategies, economic development, and destination branding. Less attention has been paid to how security and insecurity narratives about Rwanda circulate through international media coverage, travel advisories, and institutional communication. Securitization has been used in other areas of Rwandan studies, such as genocide denial (Beloff, 2021), governance (McDoom, 2022), and security networks (Fisher & Anderson, 2015). Still, its treatment in tourism discourse and destination image research remains limited. Given tourism's substantial contribution to Rwanda's economy (Odunga et al., 2020), examining how narratives of safety and insecurity are constructed and communicated internationally is significant both academically and practically.

The analysis of existing literature has identified three key areas requiring further exploration. First, although global post-conflict tourism recovery has been extensively studied, Rwanda shows a significant gap in empirical research. Second, little scholarly attention has been paid to how risk and security narratives about Rwanda as a tourism destination are developed and propagated through global media, travel advisories, and official tourism communications. Wendt and Bógdał-Brzezińska (2024, pp. 2–5) describe securitization narratives in tourism as discursive constructions. These narratives depict environmental risks, pandemics, and terrorism as threats to destinations, national stability, and tourists. Third, further research is required to understand how media and institutional narratives of risk and security contribute to the construction of Rwanda's tourism image. To address these points, the study analyzes how international media and institutional tourism communications develop and disseminate narratives of safety and risk concerning Rwanda and its tourism sector.

1.4 Aim and research questions

This thesis investigates how narratives about safety, security, and risk surrounding Rwanda as a tourism destination are constructed and communicated through international media, official tourism communications, and travel advisories. It also examines how these narratives shape

Rwanda's tourism image amid regional instability in the Great Lakes region. The following questions guide this research:

Main question: How do security and risk narratives in international media and institutional communication construct the image of Rwanda as a tourism destination?

Followed by three (3) supporting sub-questions:

- How do international media narratives frame Rwanda's safety and regional insecurity as a tourism destination?
- How do Rwanda's official tourism communications present narratives of safety and destination stability?
- How do these various narratives influence Rwanda's tourism image?

The study is guided by securitization theory (Buzan et al., 1998) and the concept of risk perception (Mansfeld & Pizam, 2006), together forming the study's analytical framework for this research.

1.5 Data and research methodology

This thesis uses a qualitative approach to examine how narratives about Rwanda as a tourism destination are constructed and communicated across international media, institutional communication, and travel advisories. It adopts an interpretivist approach, focusing on how meanings of safety, insecurity, and destination image are socially constructed and communicated within tourism discourse (Jennings, 2010).

The primary research method is qualitative document analysis of international media materials and official tourism communications. To provide additional context, the analysis is supplemented by travel advisories from foreign governments, a semi-structured interview providing context, and a reflective research diary documenting the process of negotiating research access and navigating institutional procedures for fieldwork in Rwanda. These supporting materials contextualize broader narratives of security, risk, and tourism communication rather than serving as primary data.

Originally, this thesis was designed as fieldwork in Kigali to examine how tourism operators perceive, manage, and communicate security concerns to international tourists.

However, prolonged administrative delays and ethical concerns about the research conditions required an adaptation of the research design. Consequently, the study shifted its primary focus to the qualitative analysis of media reports and RDB documents. This change in research design was one of the adaptations this thesis underwent. Nevertheless, some elements of the original design were retained, including the semi-structured interview (see Chapter 4.2.2) and travel advisories as contextual sources.

Analytically, the study draws on securitization (Buzan et al., 1998), securitization narratives (Buzan et al., 1998; Wendt & Bógdał-Brzezińska, 2024), and risk perception (Mansfeld & Pizam, 2006; Slovic, 1987) as its primary analytical frameworks. Narrative and thematic analyses (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022; Riessman, 2008) are used to examine how narratives of safety, regional instability, and destination security are constructed and communicated across the selected sources.

1.6 Thesis structure

This thesis is organized into seven chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the research topic, presents the research aims and questions, and outlines the study's empirical context, literature review, methodology, and overall structure. Chapter 2 sets the empirical context by examining Rwanda's tourism sector, branding strategies, and the interplay among tourism, security, and regional instability. Chapter 3 outlines the theoretical framework, focusing on securitization theory, securitization narratives, and risk perception and introducing narrative analysis as the study's analytical lens. Chapter 4 outlines the methodology, including the research design, data collection, data analysis, ethical considerations, and my reflexive position. Chapter 5 presents the findings and examines how international media, official tourism communications, and travel advisories construct narratives of safety, security, stability, and risk. Chapter 6 discusses the findings in relation to the theoretical framework and previous literature and considers their implications for destination branding. Chapter 7 concludes by answering the research questions, summarizing the key findings, discussing the study's limitations, and offering recommendations for future research.

2. RWANDA’S TOURISM SECTOR AND BRANDING

This chapter examines the evolution of Rwanda’s tourism sector, its tourism development framework, and its national branding and destination image initiatives. It also discusses the lasting impact of historical conflict and security narratives on tourism. Special emphasis is placed on how Rwanda uses institutional branding and public communication to present itself as a safe, stable, and welcoming tourist destination.

2.1 Development of Rwanda’s tourism industry

Rwanda’s tourism industry has developed significantly in recent decades, becoming a key driver of economic growth and international engagement. Established in 2008, RDB is a government agency supporting economic growth by consolidating a range of services for businesses and domestic and foreign investors (RDB, 2023). According to RDB (2023, p. 5), its functions include encouraging investment, developing tourism, supporting exports, and building skills, all with the broader aim of positioning Rwanda as an attractive destination for business and visitors. As Snyman et al. (2023, p. 3) argue, RDB has played an instrumental role in Rwanda’s tourism development, which has proceeded rapidly since the early 2000s. As a result of these efforts, the tourism sector now contributes significantly to the country’s economic growth and international relations (Snyman et al., 2023; World Bank Group [WBG], 2023). Furthermore, Akamanzi (2018, p. 2) claims that Rwanda’s tourism and hospitality sector employed almost ninety thousand people in 2015. Such a share of employment is significant for a small country still recovering from its past, underscoring the sector’s growing economic importance and its role in national recovery.

Uvin (2001, pp. 180–186) notes that following the 1994 genocide, the Rwandan government prioritized stability, infrastructure development, and sustainable planning. These measures positioned Rwanda well to improve its tourism and boost the economy (World Travel & Tourism Council [WTTC], 2025). WBG (2023) reports that investments in conservation, marketing, and hospitality infrastructure were prioritized. These initiatives aimed to reshape Rwanda’s international image, presenting the country as stable, organized, and future-oriented. In turn, the initiatives contributed to economic growth and positive international relations (RDB, 2020).

The importance of security within Rwanda's broader development strategy is also reflected in government policy documents. As the Rwanda Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning (2002, p. 6) has stated, "the success of the Government's programme for economic growth and poverty reduction is based upon regional stability in general and Rwanda's security in particular." The MTI report (2010) further emphasizes tourism's importance to Rwanda's economic growth and peace, underscoring its role in the country's recovery and development. Security and regional stability were regarded as fundamental conditions for national development and economic growth, providing an important foundation for the subsequent development of the tourism sector.

Building upon existing research, Gahigana and Sharpley (2014, p. 62) note that gorilla trekking remains the primary attraction of Rwanda's tourism sector, both before and after the genocide, with new sectors such as coffee and cultural tourism also growing (Anbalagan & Lovelock, 2014; Gahigana & Sharpley, 2014; Okello & Novelli, 2014). Additionally, Rwanda implements marketing strategies, including the "Visit Rwanda" partnership with Arsenal and the "Kwita Izina" ceremony, to present itself as a safe and progressive destination (Ronald et al., 2020, p. 72).

Drawing on Spenceley et al. (2019, p. 724), Rwanda's tourism development centers on a "high-value, low-volume" approach. This strategy limits visitor numbers while promoting higher tourist spending, particularly in nature-based and conservation tourism (Spenceley et al., 2019, p. 724). Ndahiro et al. (2015, p. 181) and Spenceley et al. (2019, p. 724) further note that mountain gorilla trekking in Virunga Volcanoes National Park is Rwanda's premier tourism offering, establishing the country as a top destination in the African tourism market (RDB, 2020). The "high-value, low-volume" approach aims to increase economic gains, reduce environmental impacts, and foster biodiversity conservation (Ndahiro et al., 2015, p. 1182).

Beyond wildlife tourism, Rwanda's tourism sector now includes ecotourism, cultural experiences, and business travel. The capital, Kigali, has also become a key regional hub for meetings and conferences (RDB, 2020). According to the WTTC (2025), this diversification was enabled by strategic investments in infrastructure, digital services, and transport connectivity. Furthermore, Uwamariya et al. (2022, pp. 481–482) show that innovations such as mobile payment systems have improved service delivery and increased market participation in Rwanda's tourism sector. Additionally, Rwanda's tourism growth has

affected communities and supported conservation financing (Munanura et al., 2016). Munanura et al. (2016, pp. 1711–1714) state that revenue-sharing systems, especially in protected areas, aim to share tourism benefits with local communities and to encourage income support for conservation. Banerjee et al. (2018, pp. 1384–1386) suggest that tourism income supports protected area operations and influences local attitudes toward conservation.

In summary, Rwanda’s tourism industry is government-coordinated, with a strategically planned development path that aligns economic growth with environmental sustainability (RDB, 2020). However, tourism development depends not only on good infrastructure and environmental sustainability, but also on the country’s international reputation as a safe destination.

2.2 Branding and national image strategies

In addition to developing its tourism sector, Rwanda has implemented a proactive strategy for nation branding and destination image management. The strategy emphasizes modernity, order, sustainability, and professionalism. One element of the strategy, the “Visit Rwanda” campaign, is a prominent example, showcasing the country’s efforts to enhance its global image. As Voets (2023, pp. 150–151) notes, the campaign combines tourism promotion, international partnerships, sports sponsorships, and public diplomacy to position Rwanda as a symbol of innovation, conservation, and global connectivity. Consequently, Rwanda’s branding approach extends beyond promoting tourist attractions to present the country as a modern, well-governed member of the global community (Voets, 2023). An example of the latter is accompanying measures such as visa-on-arrival reform (Mbanda, 2020, p. 175).

Scholars of destination branding, including Beirman (2003, 2020), Causevic and Lynch (2011), and Avraham (2015), argue that destinations emerging from conflict face unique challenges in managing their image. Such destinations often experience a lag between improved security and shifts in international perception, as negative perceptions rooted in violence and instability persist (Avraham and Ketter, 2017, pp. 794–797). Avraham and Ketter (2017) emphasize that a successful branding strategy should acknowledge a country’s past while promoting recovery, stability, and order. Failing to acknowledge historical context can damage credibility, whereas overemphasizing security may inadvertently heighten perceptions of risk. In Rwanda, branding strategies emphasize future-oriented narratives and deliberately omit direct references to internal and regional security concerns in promotional

content. Rwanda's challenge is further compounded by its location in the Great Lakes region, an area often associated with instability, particularly in eastern DRC (Lemarchand, 2009). As a step to overcome the challenges, Rwanda's branding strategy has deliberately used existing tourism as a tool to further reshape international perceptions.

The effectiveness of branding strategies depends on how they interact with external narratives, as found, for example, in international media coverage and Western travel advisories. This challenge is further complicated by Rwanda's geographic proximity to the conflict in eastern DRC (BIA, 2025). Although Rwanda's official branding promotes safety and stability, these messages coexist with global narratives highlighting regional instability and the country's past conflicts. This contrast may limit the effects of branding as a standalone solution and underscores the importance of everyday communication practices within the tourism industry.

2.3 Historical and regional influence on present-day Rwanda

Although Rwanda has made significant progress toward stability and tourism development, the legacy of its past conflicts, particularly the 1994 genocide, continues to shape how the country is portrayed (Russell, 2019). Research, including that of Gahigana and Sharpley (2014, p. 63), shows that lingering memories of the genocide, regional instability, and media portrayals of insecurity and risk continue to influence the country's tourism image. More broadly, post-conflict research indicates that destinations emerging from conflict often experience a lag between improvements in security and shifts in external perceptions (Beirman, 2020; Causevic & Lynch, 2011).

Rwanda's geographic proximity to conflict in eastern DRC situates it within a broader regional context that international media often associate with instability (BIA, 2025). As Wall (2007, pp. 261–262) observes, Western media have often relied on simplified, crisis-oriented narratives that reinforce representations of African countries like Rwanda as unstable or insecure. These regional and historical associations are closely linked to the literature on tourism risk perception, which underscores the role of security narratives in shaping perceptions of destination safety (Avraham & Ketter, 2017; Mansfeld & Pizam, 2006; Reisinger & Mavondo, 2005). As discussed in Chapter 3.3, risk perceptions are strongly shaped by security narratives disseminated through international media, travel advisories, and official statements (Reisinger & Mavondo, 2005; Santana-Gallego & Fourie, 2022). Santana-

Gallego and Fourie (2022, p. 1004) note that even when security issues are external to a country, the broader regional context can still influence how international audiences perceive its safety. In this context, Rwanda has actively invested in cultivating a positive destination image. Voets (2023, pp. 146–147) notes that its branding strategies emphasize stability, recovery, and progress while deliberately downplaying security risks. Initiatives such as the “Visit Rwanda” campaign and the “Kwita Izina” ceremony (Ronald et al., 2020, p. 72) reinforce this strategy by positioning Rwanda as a modern, organized, and globally connected destination (Ronald et al., 2020; Voets, 2023).

Despite these proactive efforts, historical and regional associations persist, posing challenges for Rwanda’s tourism sector. More broadly, research on post-conflict and politically unstable destinations shows that periodic escalations of violence can trigger renewed safety concerns among potential visitors, as reflected in shifts in travel advisories and international tourist arrivals (Beirman, 2020; Santana-Gallego & Fourie, 2022). In Rwanda’s case, these dynamics are especially relevant, given the country’s proximity to conflict in neighboring areas. In response, Rwanda’s authorities have prioritized infrastructure, regional cooperation, and coordinated communication campaigns to reassure international audiences (RDB, 2024). Together with strategic branding, these measures underscore the ongoing complexity of managing destination image in a region marked by historical and geopolitical volatility.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND PURPOSE

This chapter outlines the theoretical and analytical foundation of this thesis. The research examines how security is communicated and interpreted in Rwanda's post-conflict tourism context. It focuses specifically on how narratives of risk, security, and safety are created and shared through international media, travel advisories, and tourism-related institutional communications. To analyze these processes, the chapter integrates securitization theory, securitization narratives, and the risk perception framework. Narrative analysis is also introduced as an analytical lens for examining how these narratives are constructed and communicated across various platforms. The methodological application of thematic and narrative analysis is discussed in Chapter 4.

3.1 Interpretivist and constructivist theoretical approach and rationale

This thesis uses an interpretivist and constructivist approach to examine how security and risk narratives related to Rwanda as a tourism destination are created and shared. In contrast to methods that focus solely on measuring objective risk or security levels, this study examines how security and risk are constructed and communicated through discourse. This approach is well suited to examining how security narratives emerge across various communication channels. In tourism, security is not a fixed condition, but a socially constructed process shaped through communication and interaction (Causevic & Lynch, 2011). Mansfeld and Pizam's (2006) argument seems to imply that perceptions of safety emerge through ongoing meaning-making processes in which risk is negotiated and communicated through international media, institutional discourse, and broader tourism-related narratives.

An interpretivist perspective rejects the notion of a fixed, objective social reality (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Instead, it emphasizes that social meaning is created through human interpretation (Jennings, 2010; Searle, 1995). According to Buzan et al. (1998), Mansfeld and Pizam (2006), and Balzacq (2010), security, insecurity, and risk are not given. They are shaped by experience, communication, and social context. Communication tends to define and spread these concepts, while lived experience and the social environment determine how they are understood and acted upon. Constructivism further supports this idea, highlighting that knowledge is constructed through dialogues and collective interpretations within groups and institutions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

Therefore, my study adopts interpretivist and constructivist paradigms rather than a positivist approach. This approach seeks to understand how security and risk narratives are constructed and communicated within tourism discourse, rather than quantifying these concepts as objective variables. Drawing on Botterill and Platenkamp (2012, pp. 147–148), a positivist perspective would likely assess risk using observable, measurable general factors, such as crime statistics, incident reports, and levels of political stability. Although these indicators can describe existing conditions, they may not fully capture how security is represented and communicated in tourism contexts. They may also offer limited insight into how destinations objectively considered safe can still be portrayed as risky or insecure in international discourse. As Santana-Gallego and Fourie (2022) note, this limitation is particularly important in post-conflict tourism, where perceptions can be influenced by historical memory, media narratives, and geopolitical associations that persist long after the conflict has ended.

According to Botterill and Platenkamp (2012, pp. 147–150), positivism has been fundamental to tourism research, fostering methodological rigor through its focus on objectivity, measurement, and transparency. However, Denzin and Lincoln (1994, p. 109) argue that a key characteristic of positivist epistemology is its emphasis on quantifiable, reproducible data aimed at reducing ambiguity and achieving objectivity. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009, pp. 57–58) also note that positivist assumptions are not easily reconciled with interview-based research, which relies on language, interpretation, and interaction to create meaning. Consequently, a strictly positivist approach could disregard the interpretive processes that shape security narratives in tourism.

In tourism, perceptions of safety emerge from the interplay of media channels, institutional communications, and wider public discourse (Causevic & Lynch, 2011; Mansfeld & Pizam, 2006). Safety is not a fixed quality; rather, personal interactions, institutional narratives, and media coverage define it. These elements combine to create a changing sense of security at a destination. In post-conflict settings like Rwanda, this understanding of perceived safety is relevant (Gahigana & Sharpley, 2014). The key issue is not only managing objective risks, but also understanding how security is framed and communicated (Causevic & Lynch, 2011; Mansfeld & Pizam, 2006). This thesis attends closely to how security is constructed and discussed in tourism. A positivist approach in this thesis would not capture how historical memory, media narratives of risk, and geopolitical associations continue to shape perceptions

of Rwanda as a tourism destination long after an active conflict (Causevic & Lynch, 2011; Santana-Gallego & Fourie, 2022). Additionally, it would limit the understanding of how such narratives are shared across different communication channels and their impact on Rwanda's image as a tourism destination (Balzacq, 2010).

To analyze how security and risk narratives are constructed and communicated, this thesis uses qualitative analysis of media reports, institutional documents, and related materials. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) argue that qualitative methods are inherently interpretive, emphasizing that meaning is created through language and context rather than simply discovered. Hall (2011, pp. 274–277) similarly argue that a qualitative methodology is particularly useful for examining subjective interpretations and complex social meaning. Following Denzin and Lincoln (1994, p. 492), this thesis focuses not on finding unbiased facts about security events, but on understanding how these meanings are socially constructed. Denzin and Lincoln (2018) and Silverman (2024) further argue that a qualitative approach is well-suited for settings characterized by uncertainty, conflicting narratives, and the prominence of symbolic representation.

These characteristics closely align with the focus of this thesis. Security and safety are examined through qualitative materials, including international media reports, institutional communications, and supplementary contextual sources such as travel advisories and interview data, rather than being treated as fixed, objective realities. Holstein and Gubrium (2012) similarly argue that narratives emerge within specific social and institutional contexts that privilege certain interpretations and downplay others. This perspective supports this study's focus on how different communication actors construct and circulate competing narratives of safety, security, and risk. Building on Maitlis and Christianson (2014), this study also recognizes that meaning often emerges in situations marked by incomplete, ambiguous, or contested information. This dynamic is particularly relevant to tourism communication, where security is interpreted through multiple, sometimes competing, representations, rather than through direct personal experience alone. An interpretive framework is therefore essential in examining how security and risk narratives are communicated, organized, and disseminated within tourism discourse.

In this thesis, securitization theory is used to analyze how security issues are framed as urgent threats (Balzacq, 2010; Buzan et al., 1998). Risk perception helps to explain how these narratives are constructed to shape and anticipate their reception in international discourse.

Narrative analysis examines how these narratives are structured, organized, and communicated across various contexts, illustrating how meaning related to risk and uncertainty is created through discourse (Bamberg, 2020; Bruner, 1990; De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2015; Riessman, 2008). As Denzin (2017, p. 13) argues, no single method can fully capture all aspects of social reality, and different methods often reveal different dimensions of the same phenomenon. Accordingly, my study includes multiple data sources to enable a more nuanced understanding of how narratives of safety, security, and risk are represented across different forms of communication contexts.

3.2 Securitization theory and narratives

This thesis is fundamentally based on securitization theory. According to Buzan et al. (1998), securitization is a process in which issues become security concerns through discourse rather than because of their actual danger. Thus, security is not inherent, but is constructed through discourse, metaphors, and institutional power. Stritzel (2007) and Balzacq (2010, pp. 19–21) further argue that securitization is an interactive process depending on how audiences interpret and respond to security narratives. Consequently, the theory of securitization is well-suited to this study because it defines security as a communicative and interpretive process. Furthermore, securitization theory is employed in this study to examine how threats are conceptualized and communicated through media narratives, institutional communication, and policy-related discourse (Balzacq, 2010; Balzacq et al., 2016; Buzan et al., 1998). In tourism research, this approach provides valuable insights into how media, institutional communication, and policy narrative shape perceptions of destinations as either secure or insecure (Avraham & Ketter, 2017; Causevic & Lynch, 2011; Mansfeld & Pizam, 2006). It also enables the analysis of security concerns in tourism through discourse, narratives, and communication practices, rather than as fixed, objective conditions. In the tourism industry, securitization affects how destinations portray threats, safety measures, and control mechanisms, which, in turn, impacts policy implementation and tourist behavior (Causevic & Lynch, 2011).

The central concept of this thesis is the securitization narrative, defined by Buzan et al. (1998) as specific narratives, framings, and communication techniques that convey security and insecurity in ordinary circumstances. Through these narratives, foreign governments (via travel advisories), international media, and institutional tourism communication actively construct perceptions of risk, safety, and trust (Ronald et al., 2020; Wendt & Bógdał-

Brzezińska, 2024). The impact of these narratives is particularly evident in post-conflict destinations. In these contexts, themes of recovery and stability are often intertwined with a persistent need for vigilance. Post-conflict narratives address the past conflict while highlighting ongoing stability and development (Causevic & Lynch, 2011). Significantly, securitization narratives are not exclusive to the state; they are continually translated and reshaped by nonstate actors (Balzacq, 2010). In tourism, these narratives spread through media coverage, official documents, and travel advisories, shaping how destinations are framed and perceived (Avraham & Ketter, 2017; Beirman, 2020). Therefore, instead of focusing on individual actors, this thesis focuses on how securitization narratives about Rwanda are constructed, spread, and portrayed in international media, travel advisories, and official tourism communications. Rather than assessing the accuracy of security policies, it investigates how these narratives influence and convey ideas of safety and security.

Building on its foundational principles, securitization theory now looks beyond formal politics. The early focus of securitization, as originally presented by the Copenhagen School and later by Buzan et al. (1998), was on elite speech acts and institutional authority. However, subsequent research has broadened this view, showing that securitization also unfolds through everyday practices, professional discussions, and sector-specific communication (Balzacq, 2010; Floyd, 2016; Stritzel, 2007). Moreover, this broader view is highly relevant to the tourism sector, where security issues are generally not handled through exceptional political strategies (Balzacq, 2010; Balzacq et al., 2016; Causevic & Lynch, 2011; Mansfeld & Pizam, 2006). In the tourism sector, securitization often occurs through nuanced, indirect communication rather than through explicit emergency declarations (Balzacq, 2010; Causevic & Lynch, 2011). As Avraham and Ketter (2017) highlight, destinations can acknowledge potential risks while emphasizing their control, competence, and stability. Through such narratives, institutional and media communication can manage security concerns without branding destinations as dangerous, thereby maintaining a balance between reassurance and credibility (Causevic & Lynch, 2011; Mansfeld & Pizam, 2006). Thus, securitization theory allows us to analyze how this balance is rhetorically constructed rather than assuming security is a constant state (Buzan et al., 1998).

A crucial part of securitization theory is audience acceptance. As Balzacq (2005, pp. 173–174, as cited in Buzan et al., 1998) argues, securitization succeeds only when the intended

audience accepts the security framing. Building on this understanding, scholars such as Möller (2007, pp. 181–189) and Balzacq (2010) have shown that audiences are neither passive nor homogenous. Instead, they actively interpret security narratives, informed by contextual knowledge, prior experiences, and institutional trust. This study views audience interpretation as part of the broader process of meaning-making in public discourse rather than as directly measured. Therefore, instead of focusing on individual interpretation, it highlights how security narratives are constructed to shape and guide interpretation in international discussions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Hence, securitization narratives are key to understanding this interpretive process. Rather than focusing solely on official threat statements, more recent research (e.g., Balzacq, 2010; Stritzel, 2007; Wilkinson, 2007) has highlighted how security is understood through narratives, interpretations, and everyday exchanges, building on Buzan et al.'s (1998) earlier work. Mansfeld and Pizam (2006) seem to claim that these narratives appear in tourism, especially in responses to inquiries about regional instability, in discussions of safety protocols, and in references to international travel advisories. These narratives shape how risk and reassurance are conveyed in everyday tourism communications (Avraham and Ketter 2017; Causevic & Lynch, 2011). Together, they help explain how perceptions of insecurity may emerge, circulate, and become reinforced through media narratives, institutional communication, and travel advisories.

Beyond direct interactions, tourism communication is influenced by broader discursive frameworks, including media coverage, institutional communications, and travel advisories. Using the securitization framework, these communication modes help identify specific situations as threats or manageable risks (Buzan et al., 1998; Wendt & Bógdał-Brzezińska, 2024). Beirman's (2020) case studies seem to suggest that securitization narratives in post-conflict settings serve additional symbolic functions. They must navigate the conflict's legacy while aiming to communicate progress, stability, and normalcy (Avraham & Ketter, 2017; Beirman, 2020; Causevic & Lynch, 2011). Additionally, Causevic and Lynch (2011) note that tourism in post-conflict destinations often requires a careful approach to this dilemma. Disregarding the past could erode trust, while focusing too much on risk could amplify negative perceptions (Avraham and Ketter 2017; Causevic & Lynch, 2011). Securitization theory offers a framework by which to analyze these narrative strategies as

deliberate methods of meaning construction, rather than viewing them as flaws or paradoxes (Balzacq, 2010; Wilkinson, 2007).

While securitization theory is analytically powerful, it has faced criticism, particularly for its broad conceptual scope and varied methodologies. As Stritzel (2007) notes, securitization theory has been used in many empirical studies, often without a consistent structure.

Similarly, Wæver's (2003, pp. 16–17) work suggests that securitization theory lacks a prescribed methodological approach, leading to diverse applications. Consequently, although its flexibility fosters wide use, it may produce inconsistencies and irregularities in research findings (Wæver, 2003). Some critics, such as Stritzel (2007), have also argued that securitization's disproportionate focus on discourse can lead to neglect of material aspects, such as infrastructure, institutional capacity, and the lived realities of insecurity. Wilkinson (2007) and Balzacq (2010) have also criticized securitization theory. They point out that early versions of the theory tended to favor state actors and elite discourse, often at the expense of everyday practices (Balzacq, 2010; Wilkinson, 2007).

Combining securitization theory, securitization narratives, risk perception, and narrative analysis this study's analytic lens addresses the above limitations. Rather than treating securitization theory as yielding complete and unambiguous explanation, this study uses it as a tool to help understand how security meanings are formed and conveyed in the context of tourism (Balzacq, 2010; Stritzel, 2007; Wilkinson, 2007). Ultimately, recent scholarship, including from Balzacq (2010) and Balzacq et al. (2016), emphasizes the use of securitization theory as an analytical tool to examine how security meanings are constructed and communicated. Consequently, this study uses securitization theory not to assess the effectiveness of security policy or threat level, but to examine the narration, interpretation, and mediation of security within Rwanda's tourism sector (Balzacq, 2010; Stritzel, 2007; Wilkinson, 2007). In line with the study's interpretivist principle, this framework provides a comprehensive understanding of how security is formulated, communicated, and negotiated in a post-conflict tourism destination (Balzacq, 2010; Stritzel, 2007).

3.3 Risk perception in tourism

Risk perception grounds analysis of how risk is framed and communicated in tourism discourse. Mansfeld and Pizam (2006, pp. 8–11) argue that risk perception is the subjective assessment of the probability and impact of adverse events, rather than being an objective evaluation of danger. Conversely, risk perception is also constructed through a combination of social, cognitive, and media-driven mechanisms that exceed personal experience (Kahneman, 2012; Kasperson et al., 2010). Hall (1999, p. 103) and Sönmez et al. (1999) suggest that these factors not only shape destination images, but also influence travel decisions, even when actual risk is minimal.

As Santana-Gallego and Fourie (2022) discuss, media coverage, travel advisories, cultural background, interpersonal communication, and personal experiences can shape risk perceptions. Consequently, destination representations may not align directly with objective security conditions because risk narratives and perceptions can influence how destinations are portrayed (Mansfeld & Pizam, 2006; Santana-Gallego & Fourie, 2022). Similarly, the study draws on the risk perception framework not to measure individual reactions, but to examine how risk and safety narratives are constructed and communicated within international tourism discourse (Mansfeld & Pizam, 2006, pp. 7–12). Mansfeld and Pizam (2006, pp. 8–19) further discuss how media coverage, travel advisories, prior knowledge, cultural background, and interpersonal interactions can influence tourists' perceptions of risk.

Beyond basic definitions, tourism research examines risk perception and differentiates among types of perceived risks associated with destinations (Reisinger & Mavondo, 2005). According to Reisinger and Mavondo (2005, pp. 213–223), these risks include physical risks such as violence or health issues, political instability or conflict, and reputational concerns that associate a place with danger or insecurity. In post-conflict destinations, reputational risk tends to persist, as negative perceptions can linger even after safety improves (Causevic & Lynch, 2011; Mansfeld & Pizam, 2006). Avraham and Ketter (2017, pp. 784–794) argue that managing reputational risk is particularly challenging because it is shaped more by history, media portrayals, and international perceptions than by current conditions. Risk perceptions in tourism are strongly influenced by information contexts and past experiences with destination security narratives (Reisinger & Mavondo, 2005). Sönmez and Graefe (1998a, pp. 123–125) argue that in contexts where direct knowledge is limited, perceptions rely heavily on media and government travel advice. Consequently, how a destination is represented can

vary across settings. Reisinger and Mavondo (2005, pp. 214–220) further emphasize that understandings of risk are influenced by cultural background, prior knowledge, and exposure to global narratives. This highlights that risk perception is not fixed, but created through communication, interpretation, and context (Mansfeld & Pizam, 2006; Reisinger & Mavondo, 2005).

In this sense, perceptions of insecurity are shaped not only by how those events are communicated, framed, and circulated within broader international discourse. Consequently, risk perception provides a framework to understand how narratives of safety and insecurity influence interpretations of tourism destinations (Buzan et al., 1998; Mansfeld & Pizam, 2006). The impact of risk perceptions on tourism is especially evident in post-conflict destinations. In these places, reputational damage from past conflict can linger after actual threats have disappeared. Thus, destinations may still be associated with perceptions of insecurity in international media coverage, despite actual improvements in security conditions (Santana-Gallego & Fourie, 2022; Tang et al., 2026). A crucial element of a post-conflict tourism destination is the gap between actual security and perceived risk. As Causevic and Lynch (2011) and Avraham and Ketter (2017) note, even in politically stable and safe countries, risk perceptions in post-conflict destinations often persist. Consequently, destinations are often judged based on their historical associations rather than on their current realities (Beirman, 2020; Causevic & Lynch, 2011). As studies by Causevic and Lynch (2011), Avraham and Ketter (2017), and Beirman (2020) show, destination image is often heavily influenced by lingering perceptions of risk, especially when these perceptions are reinforced by global media, policy narratives, and public opinion.

Consequently, risk perception in tourism is both cognitive and psychological. Aldao et al. (2025, pp. 409–412) argue that uncertainty and emotional reactions often influence perceptions more than objective safety assessments. Additionally, Avraham and Ketter (2017) further note that public reactions to destinations with a history of conflict can endure even after the security situation improves. Such persistence applies especially when global media and travel advisories consistently focus on past conflicts, regional instability, and traumas (Avraham and Ketter 2017; Beirman, 2020). Even with significant safety improvements, perceived risk can remain high irrespective of documented improvements (Causevic & Lynch, 2011). This disconnect between dated perception and current situation

highlights the need to focus on both factual safety and the narratives that influence how people see destinations.

Regarding Rwanda, media representations of risk and safety may still be influenced by the legacy of the 1994 genocide and by ongoing regional insecurity in the Great Lakes region. This pattern reflects broader trends observed in post-conflict destinations (Causevic & Lynch, 2011; Wendt & Bógdał-Brzezińska, 2024). These perceptions are reinforced by ongoing security alerts from foreign governments, which contribute to how Rwanda is portrayed in international media. Such warnings often stem from Rwanda's geographic proximity to the conflict zone in the Eastern DRC (U.S. Embassy Kigali, 2025), even though Rwanda has maintained internal stability and invested significantly in peacebuilding and post-conflict recovery (Dubinsky, 2025; Gahigana & Sharpley, 2014). Regional instability affects perceptions of Rwanda as an unsafe and risky travel destination. Even when risks and insecurity occur outside Rwanda's borders, travel advisories and global media reports often associate Rwanda with regional instability (Santana-Gallego & Fourie, 2022).

The extant tourism literature emphasizes that risk communication shapes perceptions of post-conflict destinations. Research by Pennington-Gray and Basurto-Cedeno (2023) and Dubinsky (2025) highlights that risk-related information is shared through various channels, such as institutional communications, media outlets, and crisis messaging. Similarly, Gunness (2017) and Okafor and Khalid (2021) demonstrate that strategies like reassurance, transparency, and the use of local knowledge are employed to address security concerns and maintain destination credibility. These strategies go beyond interpersonal exchanges and are also evident in broader forms of communication, such as in official tourism materials and public narratives. Within this framework, Mansfeld and Pizam (2016, pp. 10–20) argue that risk perception regards both individual reactions and how narratives of safety and insecurity are created, communicated, and disseminated. Accordingly, the current study uses the concept of risk perception to examine how securitization narratives influence and shape Rwanda's tourism image in international media, institutional communications, and travel advisories.

Drawing on the concept of risk perception, this thesis focuses on how safety and risk narratives about traveling to Rwanda are portrayed in media and institutional communications (Mansfeld & Pizam, 2006). The focus is on these perceptions and narratives rather than on the evaluation of the country's actual security. This framework underscores the

importance of perception over measurement and explains why destinations with strong safety statistics may still be perceived as unsafe and risky in international media. Through the lens of risk perception, this study analyzes the relationship between securitization narratives and messages about safety and insecurity. It examines how these narratives are conveyed through media, institutional channels, and travel advisories, ultimately shaping Rwanda's tourism image (Avraham & Ketter, 2017; Causevic & Lynch, 2011; Mansfeld & Pizam, 2006). Nevertheless, understanding how these narratives are interpreted and given meaning within media and institutional discourse requires attention to broader discursive processes. This attention is given through narrative analysis, as discussed in Chapter 4.3 (Bamberg, 2020; Bruner, 1990; De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2015; Riessman, 2008).

3.4 Conceptual framework

This thesis is guided by a framework integrating securitization theory, securitization narratives, risk perception, and narrative analysis to examine how security narratives are created and communicated in Rwanda's tourism-related discourse. The framework illuminates how these narratives are represented and sustained through different communication channels. It also demonstrates how they impact tourism communication and help shape Rwanda's tourism image in international discussions. Therefore, integrating securitization theory, securitization narratives, risk perceptions, and narrative analysis offers a clear analytical perspective for this thesis. Together, these elements create a framework by which to examine how security and risk narratives about Rwanda as a tourism destination are created and communicated across media, institutional communication, and travel advisories.

At the structural stage, securitization theory provides tools to reveal and explain how Rwanda's security is portrayed and communicated through global media coverage, Western travel advisories, and institutional discourses. In this context, security is a state encompassing material conditions but inflected by narrative stemming from societal forces and mediated by authority, historical events, and language (Balzacq, 2010; Buzan et al., 1998). Securitization narratives circulate through global media, institutional communication, and travel advisories, acting as the practical expression of securitization theory in everyday tourism communication. They practically express securitization theory in everyday tourism communication, where security is conveyed through discourse, representation, and communicative practices rather than being treated as fixed (Balzacq, 2010; Stritzel, 2007). Furthermore, these narratives shape how Rwanda is portrayed in relation to regional stability

and perceived risk. Instead of simply reflecting objective realities, these narratives influence the country's image in international discussions.

At the interpretive stage, the concept of risk perception offers insights into how safety and insecurity narratives are created and framed, influencing destination perception. Risk is seen as a socially constructed process shaped by media, historical memory, geopolitical factors, and institutional communication (Mansfeld & Pizam, 2006; Reisinger & Mavondo, 2005). Even as security conditions improve in post-conflict tourism destinations such as Rwanda, preexisting risk perceptions can persist and continue to influence international portrayals. Destinations may then continue to be evaluated through broader regional and historical associations rather than solely through present security conditions. At the discursive stage, narrative analysis offers an approach to examine how the meanings of security and risk are constructed and sustained across different forms of communication. As Kvale and Brinkmann (2009, p. 222) and Bamberg (2020, pp. 245–253) explain, narrative analysis examines both the meanings conveyed by a narrative and the linguistic, social, and temporal structures that organize it. More broadly, narrative analysis examines how meaning is constructed through the organization, selection, and structuring of narratives in various contexts (Bamberg, 2020; Bruner, 1990; De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2015; Herman, 2007; Riessman, 2008).

In Figure 1, the connections between the main theoretical framework of securitization, the concept of securitization narrative, and risk perception are mapped out to show how they collectively inform the response to the research question.

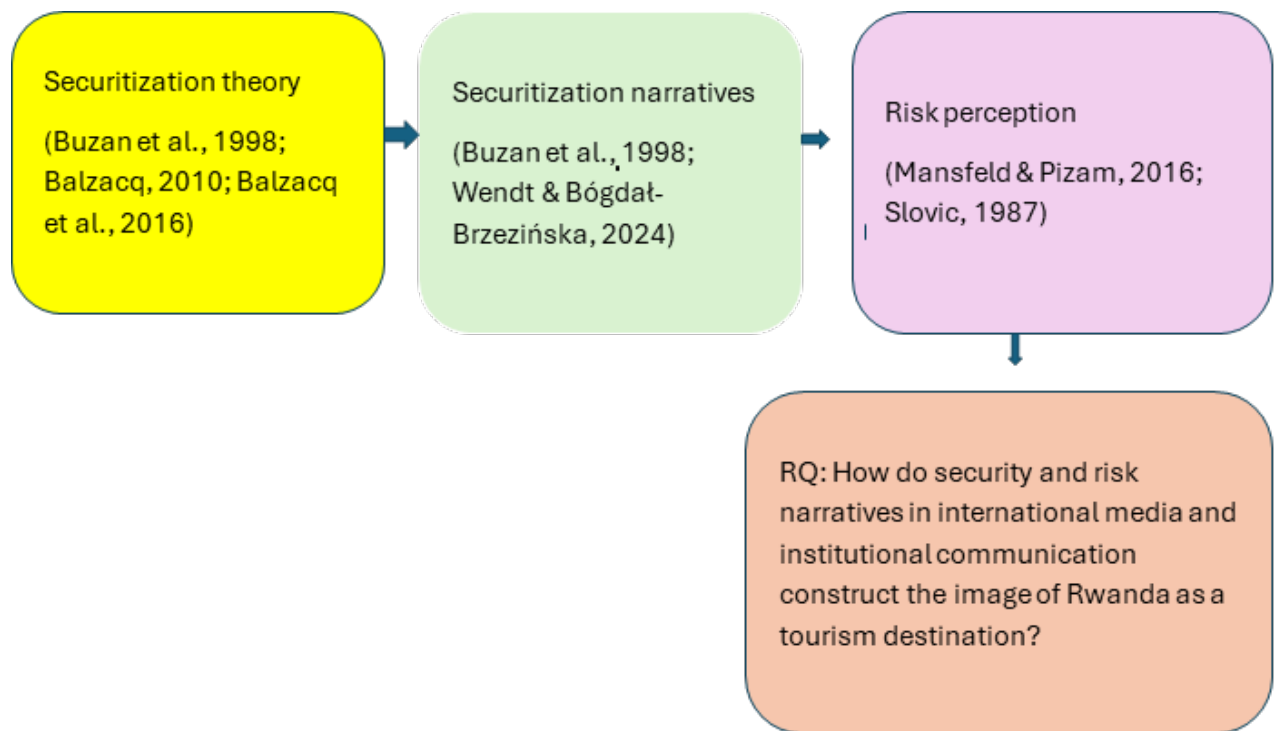


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the study. Adapted from Buzan et al. (1998) and Mansfeld & Pizam (2006).

Figure 1 illustrates the relationships among securitization theory, securitization narratives, and risk perception within the study’s analytical framework. Securitization theory provides the broader foundation to understand how issues are framed as security concerns through discourse (Balzacq, 2010; Buzan et al., 1998). Within this framework, securitization narratives are the communicative processes through which ideas of safety, threat, and stability are conveyed. Risk perception offers insight into how these narratives shape interpretations of destinations.

As a whole, this framework underscores that security narratives are constantly created and reinterpreted across various communication contexts. It shows how securitization narratives shape perceptions of risk, which are then organized and reinforced through broader discursive processes within discourse. The framework also supports empirical analysis by examining how media articles select, organize, and frame information about Rwanda, particularly through recurring references to safety, regional conflict, historical context, and political tensions. These patterns were used to identify how narratives of Rwanda, risk, and insecurity were constructed across the analyzed media coverage. Ultimately, it offers a clear structure to examine how security narratives are developed, communicated, and sustained in Rwanda’s post-conflict tourism setting.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research approach

This thesis does not focus on individuals' experiences of security; it examines how narratives of safety, risk, and stability in international media and in the official tourism communications of RDB. The analysis draws on public texts, specifically international media articles and institutional documents available in the public domain. Rather than collecting data from individuals, the study investigates how narratives are communicated through texts, including the selective emphasis or omission of safety- and risk-related issues, as well as how Rwanda's positioning within broader regional and global contexts. The study uses multiple qualitative sources to support the analysis. Its main empirical sources include international media narratives and public documents from RDB, which offer insight into Rwanda's representation in both external and institutional communication. Additionally, context is provided by Western travel advisories and supporting evidence from a semi-structured interview with a Rwandan tourism operator.

The interview with the tourism operator lasted about one hour and was conducted via Zoom video call. With the participant's consent, the interview was recorded and later transcribed for analysis. A semi-structured format was used to ensure a consistent set of topics while allowing the participant to elaborate on their experiences and perspectives. The interview was conducted in English, the participant's working language and a language in which they were fluent. The participant also preferred English over the local languages or French. During the video interview, attention was paid not only to the participant's verbal responses but also to relevant body language and visual cues. The interview was completed before the review of the media articles began, as it was originally conducted as part of the planned fieldwork. The participant was a university graduate and worked as a tourism operator in Rwanda.

Although these supplementary materials are not considered primary data, they deepen the contextual understanding of how security narratives are disseminated and sustained in multiple discourses. This study analyses how narratives of safety and insecurity are shaped by specific language choices, framing techniques, and representational patterns. By focusing on publicly available documents rather than on individual experiences, the study enables a systematic examination of how Rwanda's tourism image is represented across different

communication channels while preserving the complexity of the narratives under investigation.

4.2 Data sources and collection

The primary data consist of texts from international media and official publications from RDB, while travel advisories and a semi-structured interview provide additional context. Data collection focused on materials directly or indirectly addressing themes of security, risk, destination image, regional instability, and tourism communication. Within these themes, media articles and institutional documents were purposively selected for their relevance to Rwanda's tourism image and for their engagement with narratives of safety, conflict, development, or regional insecurity. The supplementary sources described in Chapter 4.1 were also consulted to provide additional contextual information.

4.2.1 Core empirical sources: Media and institutional documents

The analyzed international media materials include news articles published in English, French, and Finnish. Finnish news is sourced from Yle (Finland's public broadcaster), while the French and some English editions thereof are from France24, and the BBC for more English news articles. My fluency in each of these languages made their content accessible to me as a researcher and allowed comparison across languages, and the selection of these languages also reflects their importance to Rwanda's primary European tourism markets. All materials were reviewed in their original language, after which relevant passages were identified, extracted, and organized for thematic and narrative analysis. To ensure that the thesis remained consistent and accessible to readers, all quoted passages were translated into English. The original language quotations were retained throughout the analysis and informed the interpretation of the materials.

Selected media articles addressed themes such as regional insecurity in the Great Lakes region, the conflict in the eastern DRC, the memory of genocide, tourism branding, international diplomacy, and Rwanda's image as a tourist destination. After collection, the documents were organized chronologically and thematically. They were then read multiple times to identify recurring patterns, narrative structures, and representations of safety, insecurity, and Rwanda's tourism image, thereby preparing them for the thematic and narrative analyses described in Chapter 4.3.

Table 1 presents the international media sources included in the study.

Media	Language	Number of articles	Year/s
France24	French	10	2013-2025
France24	English	3	2019-2026
Yle	Finnish	4	2019-2025
BBC	English	6	2022-2025

Table 1. International media data sources by name, language, number, and year.

Table 1 presents sources of diverse international perspectives on Rwanda as a tourist destination. In particular, they feature narratives about security, regional instability, and post-conflict recovery. For analytical clarity, the media materials are assigned abbreviated labels based on media outlet and publication order. Yle articles are labeled YLE1–YLE4; France24 articles, FR1–FR13; and BBC materials, BBC1–BBC6. These identifiers are used throughout the analysis chapters when referring to the empirical materials as data rather than as scholarly references. A complete overview of the assigned labels is provided in Appendix 3.

The second primary data source consisted of official tourism communications and institutional reports published by RDB and its tourism promotion website, Visit Rwanda. As the organization responsible for branding Rwanda as a tourist destination, RDB centrally shapes narratives of safety, stability, development, and tourism growth. The institutional materials analyzed in this study, including annual reports, strategic development plans, tourism investment information, promotional materials, and website content, were published between 2020 and 2026, with undated website materials also included. This period was selected to examine recent institutional communication and branding strategies amid tourism development and post-pandemic recovery.

For analytical clarity, institutional materials from RDB and Visit Rwanda were assigned abbreviated labels based on the source organization and publication sequence. RDB materials were labeled RDB1–RDB5, and Visit Rwanda materials were labeled VR1. These identifiers are used throughout the analysis chapters to refer to the empirical materials as data rather than as scholarly references. A complete overview of the assigned labels is provided in Appendix 3.

Table 2 presents the institutional data sources included in the study.

Name	Language	Number of articles	Year
RDB: <i>Annual Report: Documenting Rwanda's Resilience to COVID-19</i>	English	1	2020
RDB: <i>Annual Report: Building Resilience for Sustained Economic Growth</i>	English	1	2023
RDB: <i>Annual Report: Sustaining Growth, Towards Transformation</i>	English	1	2024
RDB: <i>Accelerating Rwanda's Economic Transformation: Five-Year Strategy 2025–2030</i>	English	1	2026
VisitRwanda Website	English		n.d.
RDB Website	English		n.d.

Table 2. Institutional data sources by title, language, number, and year.

Table 2 lists materials highlighting themes of stability, modernization, development, sustainability, and tourism growth, collectively portraying Rwanda as a safe and attractive tourism destination.

4.2.2 Supporting and contextual materials

Alongside the primary data, the study includes one semi-structured interview with a Rwandan tourism operator, as well as travel advisories from the U.S. Department of State, the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA), the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), Ireland's Department of Foreign Affairs, and the Government of Canada, in effect in 2025–2026. These materials are not treated as primary empirical data, but are used to provide additional contextual insight into how narratives are circulated and interpreted. For analytical clarity, the travel advisories were assigned abbreviated labels (TA1–TA5) according to their publication dates. These identifiers are used throughout the

analysis chapters to refer to the advisories. A complete overview of the assigned labels is provided in Appendix 4.

These materials emerged from the study's original, fieldwork-oriented research design, which aimed to investigate how tourism operators in Rwanda communicated and managed security-related issues. As part of the planned fieldwork, one semi-structured online interview with a Rwandan tourism operator was scheduled to precede in-person observations and interviews in Kigali. However, after the original fieldwork plan was revised, the interview was retained as contextual material. Additionally, international travel advisories were included to provide further insight into how official risk narratives about Rwanda were communicated internationally. Finally, a reflective diary documenting the research permit process was kept throughout the study. It was not used as empirical material for thematic analysis; it was used as a reflexive methodological tool. As detailed in Chapter 4.5, it recorded the evolution of the research process, research access negotiations, and methodological adaptation.

4.3 Data analysis

This study used both thematic and narrative analyses to examine how perceptions of security and risk are constructed and communicated in international media and institutional communication about Rwanda as a tourist destination. Thematic analysis was used to analyze and interpret the empirical data collected in this study. Using terminology from Braun and Clarke (2019a, pp. 593–594), the analysis was both iterative and reflexive, with themes continually developed, assessed, and adjusted as engagement with the data deepened. This methodological flexibility enabled rich, attentive engagement, allowing patterns to be identified across sources while remaining sensitive to each source's unique context. To ensure transparency and consistency, clear connections among data, codes, and themes were maintained throughout the analysis. Coding decisions and theme development were documented systematically and traced back to the original data, consistent with recommendations for rigorous thematic analysis (Nowell et al., 2017, pp. 5–11).

Consistent with Braun and Clarke (2022, pp. 247, 254) and Riessman (2008, pp. 12, 63–64), thematic analysis was complemented by narrative analysis. Thematic analysis identified recurring patterns across the empirical materials, whereas narrative analysis examined how narratives of safety, security, and risk were structured, organized, framed, and communicated across media and institutional texts. The latter examination is particularly relevant in tourism

discourse, where narratives may emphasize safety and stability or focus on conflict and risk, thereby shaping perceptions of destinations (Deng et al., 2023; Mura & Sharif, 2017, pp. 195–198). Recent tourism studies have used narrative analysis to examine how destinations are presented through discourse and storytelling, particularly regarding safety, instability, and destination image (Gelter et al., 2021; Pasquinelli & Trunfio, 2020). Together, these approaches enabled the identification of recurring themes and the examination of how meanings were constructed and represented within the selected materials.

To engage fully with the materials, the analysis drew on both traditional manual methods and specialized software. Consistent with Saldaña's (2013, p.13) "pre-coding" practice, I began by carefully examining the documents multiple times, both on screen and in print, highlighting and underlining notable passages. This process fostered thorough familiarity with the material, reflecting Botterill and Platenkamp's (2012, pp. 33–35) emphasis on flexibility and discernment in qualitative analysis. The analysis in this study was organized into four key phases:

1. I conducted multiple readings of all materials I collected to identify content relevant to narratives on security, risk, destination image, and regional instability.
2. I then selected paragraphs directly relevant to these narratives.
3. I later included paragraphs that, while less obviously relevant when broken into sentences, conveyed meaningful themes when read as whole.
4. Finally, I compared and identified similarities in narratives across the selected content.

Empirical materials were reviewed multiple times to identify content relevant to narratives about security, risk, destination image, and regional instability. Relevant paragraphs were selected and coded both manually and with qualitative analysis software (NVivo and Atlas.ti), following Saldaña's (2013) "pre-coding" practice. To enhance rigor, coding was conducted both digitally and manually in parallel.

During the initial coding stage, I focused on individual words related to core themes. In subsequent coded cycles, I analyzed sentences and, eventually, broader paragraphs to capture contextual nuance. As Saldaña (2013, p. 10) notes, coding is an iterative process, and initial codes were refined through repeated comparison and reflection. Throughout the process, I repeatedly compared patterns across media narratives and institutional communications.

Initial codes were grouped into broader thematic categories and refined through iterative analysis. These broader themes included the following:

- The framing of safety and risk in tourism communication,
- Narratives of regional instability and their relationship to Rwanda's security image as a destination,
- Strategies used to present Rwanda as a safe stable tourism destination, and
- Variations in how security narratives were framed across media, institutional communication, and travel advisories.

After thematic coding, narrative analysis was conducted to examine how the identified themes were organized and presented across the selected media articles and institutional documents (Riessman, 2008). The analysis focused on how narratives of safety, regional instability, development, and post-conflict recovery were constructed within each text. Particular attention was given to event sequencing, recurring patterns, the selection and omission of information, and the ways different sources framed Rwanda as a tourist destination. Throughout the analysis, comparisons were made across media and institutional texts to identify similarities and differences in narrative construction. Coding decisions and analytical observations were documented throughout the process to ensure consistency and transparency.

4.4 Ethical considerations

Instead of viewing ethics merely as a compliance requirement, this research treated it as a persistent, relational process. Data collection and analysis were aligned with the “politics of presence” (Love & McDonnell, 2025), which advocates a research approach that prioritizes emotional awareness, attentiveness, and accountability (Love & McDonnell, 2025, pp. 404–406). Relatedly, Halse and Honey (2007, pp. 340–344) have acknowledged that systemic ethical protocols may, at times, prioritize risk mitigation and dominance over fostering genuine human relations. Consequently, this study adhered to institutional guidelines and implemented ethical practices rooted in empathy. The research protocol followed the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity guidelines (TENK, 2023). Since the primary empirical sources were publicly accessible media articles and institutional documents, direct interaction with multiple research participants was unnecessary for this study. Nonetheless, the interpretation and presentation of these materials were guided by fundamental ethical

principles, and efforts were made to prevent sources from being misrepresented, selectively interpreted, or taken out of context (Bowen, 2009).

In addition to ensuring ethical data interpretation, the research prioritized the ethical treatment of the interview participant. For instance, before the interview, the participant was thoroughly briefed on the nature of the study, and the participant provided informed consent in written form (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 70). Participation was voluntary, and the participant could withdraw at any time. The semi-structured interview was transcribed using Microsoft Word's transcription function and then manually reviewed for accuracy. Kaiser (2009, pp. 1635–1638) has argued that achieving full anonymity is difficult in research with small or specialized groups. To support confidentiality, identifying details were removed during transcription, and the participant was assigned the pseudonym “Milk,” consistent with Creswell and Poth's (2025, p. 220) recommendation to remove identifying information as early as possible in the research process.

The transcript was then stored securely and used solely for academic purposes related to this thesis. Although external participants were not involved in the reflective research diary, the process still required a strong commitment to ethical reflexivity (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). The diary documented my personal experiences throughout the research permit application process. Ellis et al. (2011, pp. 274–282) argued that researchers' personal experiences naturally shape the research process, influencing decisions even in institutional settings. In line with this perspective, I recognized that my background and experiences would inevitably inform how the research was conducted and interpreted. Therefore, personal reflections were included in this thesis, with respect for all persons and organizations involved.

Building on Finlay and Gough (2008, pp. 4–8), this approach aligned with reflexive qualitative methods that recognize the researcher's personal experience as a valuable source of knowledge. Accordingly, this view informed my decision to use a reflective research diary and to treat my interactions with relevant authorities as meaningful contextual data. The reflective research diary documented interactions with relevant authorities, who were not considered research participants but were viewed as part of the broader research context. The identities of all officials were kept confidential, and private communications were not quoted directly. Data were stored securely and encrypted using industry-standard protocols for both data at rest and in transit to protect the interview participant's privacy. Data access was

restricted to the thesis author. The transcript was used solely for academic purposes related to this thesis.

4.5 Reflexive consideration

Given my treatment of authorities as part of the research context, this reflexive consideration focuses on my experience with institutional procedures rather than on evaluating individual actors or organizations. Drawing on Braun and Clarke (2019a, pp. 590–592; 2022, pp. 5–8), reflexivity is a key component of qualitative research because the researcher is actively involved in data interpretation, selection, and analysis. For example, Jennings (2010) and Schwandt (1994) note that in interpretivist and constructivist research, knowledge is context-dependent and shaped by interaction, interpretation, and experience rather than entirely objective or detached. Therefore, reflexivity in this thesis involved critically reflecting on how the research process, methodological decisions, institutional interactions, personal interpretations, and my position shaped the study's development.

My background and experiences are intertwined with regional narratives and perceptions. For most of my life, I believed my origins were in the Kivu region of the DRC, an area closely linked to Rwanda through shared history and the 1994 genocide. However, in 2021, DNA testing revealed that my ancestry is primarily Rwandan, with connections to Burundi, Uganda, and Kenya in the Great Lakes region. This discovery prompted me to visit Rwanda for the first time as an adult in 2022. During my visit, I found a country that did not align with the international image of conflict and trauma. I was particularly struck by the organized, stable, and innovative tourism sector, which stood in stark contrast to the risk-focused narratives in media coverage and travel advisories. These observations became the foundation of this thesis. As a result, I approach this research with both an academic interest in post-conflict tourism and a personal connection that has made me acutely aware of the gap between Rwanda's lived reality and its international representation. My position shapes this study's analysis of how narratives of security, risk, and stability are portrayed and shared through international media and official tourism channels.

This self-reflection draws on a reflective diary written from November 2025 to February 2026, during the planning and organization of fieldwork in Kigali, Rwanda. It recorded general reflections on institutional communication, administrative procedures, emotional responses, and methodological decisions throughout the research process. In this thesis, it

functioned as a reflective methodological tool, offering insight into how the research process evolved in practice.

Reflexivity was an ongoing process throughout this study, supported by regular journaling. According to Braun and Clarke (2022, p. 270), a reflexive journal is not merely a record of thoughts, but a tool for sustained, critical reflection on one's assumptions, responses, and research practices. This ongoing engagement fostered continuous reflection on assumptions and analytical decisions, helping to keep the analysis open to alternative interpretations and to reduce the risk of unexamined bias.

Initially, the study was designed as a fieldwork-based project involving interviews with tourism operators and on-site observations in Kigali. Early communication with institutions created optimism that access to the field would be relatively straightforward. However, as the process progressed, prolonged waiting periods, shifting administrative requirements, and uncertainty about research permissions increasingly undermined the feasibility of the original research design. The process revealed multiple layers of institutional complexity, in which administrative procedures and access negotiations shaped both the direction and the practical implementation of the research. Moreover, the experience underscored that qualitative research is rarely linear or fully predictable. As Denzin and Lincoln (2018, pp. 9–10) argue, qualitative research typically unfolds in a nonlinear, iterative manner, requiring ongoing adaptation to emerging circumstances.

Instead of following a fixed methodological path, the study required continuous flexibility and reassessment. As uncertainty about field access grew, alternative strategies emerged alongside the original plan. Consequently, the research design evolved in response to practical constraints, shifting from a primarily fieldwork-oriented study to a qualitative analysis of media narratives, institutional communication, and travel advisories.

Concurrently, a semi-structured online interview with a Rwandan tourism operator was retained as supporting contextual material for the broader analysis. This methodological adjustment was not driven by a single event, but by an accumulation of experiences that affected the feasibility of conducting fieldwork within the timeframe of a master's thesis.

The research process also involved emotional and interpretive dimensions that shaped decision-making throughout the study. Periods of optimism, frustration, uncertainty, and determination influenced how situations were interpreted and how methodological choices

were made. These experiences underscored the importance of reflexivity in qualitative research, as highlighted by Finlay (2002), particularly in studies of sensitive issues related to security and institutional communication in post-conflict destinations. According to Berger (2015, pp. 220–228), these emotional responses do not exist outside the research process but are integral to the development of interpretation and research judgment over time.

The role of supervision further shaped the research process. Throughout the study, the supervisor provided guidance while allowing a high degree of independence in managing institutional communication and methodological decisions. This balance fostered both confidence and critical reflection on the thesis project's scale, feasibility, and ethical dimensions, as highlighted by Wisker (2012). Consequently, reflexivity became important to understand the empirical topic and examine how the research process unfolded amid uncertainty and evolving methodological constraints (Finlay, 2002).

5. FINDINGS

This chapter presents the key findings from an analysis of international media articles and official communications from the Rwanda Development Board (RDB), focusing on how risk, insecurity, safety, and stability are represented. The analytical approach uses qualitative thematic analysis to identify and synthesize recurring patterns across the selected materials. The chapter also draws on foreign travel advisories and a semi-structured interview, which provide contextual material for the analysis. The chapter first examines the narratives emerging from the international media coverage, before turning to RDB's representation of safety and stability narratives. It then brings these contrasting representations together to examine how risk and safety are communicated across the analyzed sources. The evidence presented here is organized thematically, beginning with an analytical explanation of the narratives, followed by supporting examples and brief explanations.

5.1 Analytical overview and identification of overarching narratives in international media

The chapter is structured around three narratives. According to the first narrative, "Rwanda is a stable destination in an unstable region." It highlights how Rwanda is frequently portrayed as a country characterized by domestic stability and safety, particularly in relation to tourism and economic development. However, this stability is often contextualized within broader discussions of regional conflict, especially the ongoing instability in neighboring eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The juxtaposition of Rwanda's internal order with regional insecurity shapes perceptions of risk and security in the media coverage.

The second narrative reveals the persistent influence of the 1994 genocide as a frame through which present-day Rwanda is understood. Media articles routinely referenced the genocide when discussing contemporary developments in governance, tourism, and politics. This historical context remained central to the portrayal of Rwanda, linking past violence to present challenges and achievements.

The third narrative highlights "progress alongside insecurity," wherein positive representations of Rwanda's development, safety, and tourism were frequently paired with reports of regional conflict, political tensions, or human rights concerns. Rather than appearing as separate themes, these contrasting perspectives were often integrated in the

same articles, producing a complex image of Rwanda as both a model of recovery and a country facing ongoing risks.

The following sub-chapters examine each of these narratives in detail, drawing on illustrative media examples to substantiate the patterns identified. By organizing the analysis around these overarching narratives, the chapter provides a coherent framework for understanding how risk and insecurity are constructed in representations of Rwanda by international media in the datasets.

5.1.1 Rwanda as a stable destination in an unstable region

This sub-chapter examines the first overarching narrative identified in the international media coverage of Rwanda: the portrayal of Rwanda as a stable country surrounded by regional insecurity. Building on the analytical overview, this sub-chapter relates directly to the previous discussion by focusing on how the media construct Rwanda's stability in contrast to conflict in neighboring regions. This focus is central to the research question because it demonstrates how risk and security narratives were developed and contextualized in the dataset. Across the international media articles analyzed, Rwanda was consistently depicted as a country characterized by domestic stability, particularly in comparison to the ongoing unrest in eastern DRC. This narrative of stability is closely tied to Rwanda's perceived safety, its appeal as a tourism destination, and its rapid economic development. For example, BBC News 2022 and YLE 2019 reported the following observations:

Visitors to Rwanda are often blown away to find a country where things seem to work efficiently. It is neat and tidy with lush green views... the government calls it "one of the world's safest nations" ... Western nations are impressed by Rwanda's rapid economic development since the genocide and by the fact corruption appears not to be an issue. (BB1)

On the surface, Rwanda looks like a model country: the roads are as smooth as silk, and the houses are modern. The country's safety and the mountain gorillas have made Rwanda's tourism flourish, and even Arsenal football club advertises "Visit Rwanda" on their shirts. (YLE1)

However, the theme of stability was often accompanied by an undertone of uncertainty. YLE1 reported that the “Rwandans’ greatest fear is that the country could slip back into civil war” (YLE1). BBC1 further added that “underlying this compliance and Kigali’s landscaped flower beds is a collective fear” (BBC1). These statements suggest that while Rwanda is presented as a secure country, its stability is framed as contingent and potentially fragile, adding nuance to the narrative.

Furthermore, the positive depictions were regularly juxtaposed with reminders of regional insecurity. Many articles in the dataset referred to Rwanda’s proximity to conflict-affected areas in eastern DRC and allegations of Rwanda’s involvement in regional affairs. For instance, BBC News 2024, 2025, and France24 2025 reported the following developments:

... UN experts say, warning that a rapidly escalating crisis “carried the risk of triggering a wider regional conflict”. The UN experts said that Rwandan troops were “matching if not surpassing” the number of M23 fighters, thought to be at around 3,000 in mid-April, on Congo soil. (BBC2)

“There was no question that there are Rwandan troops in Goma supporting the M23,” said UN peacekeeping chief Jean-Pierre Lacroix, though he added that it was difficult to tell the exact numbers on the ground in Goma. (BBC3)

The draft resolution submitted by the DRC calls on the M23 and Rwanda to “immediately cease” their violations in the provinces of North Kivu and South Kivu... The international community and mediating countries like Angola and Kenya are trying to find a diplomatic solution to the crisis, fearing a regional conflagration. (FR7)

This depiction reinforces one of the dominant narratives in international media datasets, highlighting Rwanda’s domestic stability, modern infrastructure, and growing appeal as a safe destination for tourism. At the same time, the sources pointed to Rwanda’s controversial role in the ongoing conflict in eastern DRC. Thus, the narrative of stability is complicated by allegations of Rwanda’s involvement in regional conflict, situating the country within a broader context of insecurity. The relevance of geographic proximity was further illustrated in Yle News 2025:

The situation in the eastern DRC, in Goma, is chaotic and horrifying... there is no safe place to flee to, and the situation is changing rapidly. Thousands of people are fleeing the fighting in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo to Rwanda. ... The M23 rebel group, led by members of the Tutsi ethnic group, says it is protecting the Tutsi minority. The UN and the Democratic Republic of Congo believe that neighboring Rwanda supports the rebels. Rwanda has not admitted this. The United States, Britain, and France condemned Rwanda's support for the M23 at the UN Security Council. (YLE2)

This excerpt illustrates how the analyzed articles often established the broader regional context by describing the deteriorating security situation in eastern DRC. Although the instability and risk reported in the media dataset are geographically outside Rwanda, the country was nonetheless frequently referenced in relation to that conflict because of its alleged involvement. For instance, FR13 has reported that "US Senior Adviser for Africa Massad Boulos blamed the M23 and Rwanda for the latest violence in DR Congo" (FR13). This excerpt is another illustration of media reports on the conflict in eastern DRC being accompanied by references to Rwanda, linking the country to broader regional insecurity despite the violence not occurring within its borders. However, the statements in these media articles do not directly attribute violence to Rwanda. Instead, they highlight the country's alleged involvement in the conflict and its proximity to provinces experiencing ongoing unrest.

At the same time, other media accounts underscored that "Rwanda remains entirely safe for tourism and business" (BBC5), with visitors stating, "Honestly, for me, it was all safe. I didn't feel anything like I was close to conflict, really. I didn't see it. I didn't feel it" (BBC5). YLE1 also noted that "Rwanda's security has contributed to the flourishing of its tourism industry and has helped make Kigali a popular destination for international meetings" (YLE1). The contrast is made explicit in the same YLE 1 article, which describe Rwanda as "on the surface, like a glossy picture" (YLE1). This metaphor conveys an appealing, orderly impression while also suggesting that underlying problems may lie beneath the surface.

This interplay of proximity and narrative is illustrated visually in Figure 2. The figure illustrates the geographical relationship between Rwanda and the conflict-affected areas of eastern DRC discussed in the analyzed media coverage. In particular, Goma in North Kivu and Bukavu in South Kivu are located close to Rwanda's western border. This geographical

proximity is significant because several articles in the dataset discussed conflict in these locations and referred to Rwanda and its alleged involvement.

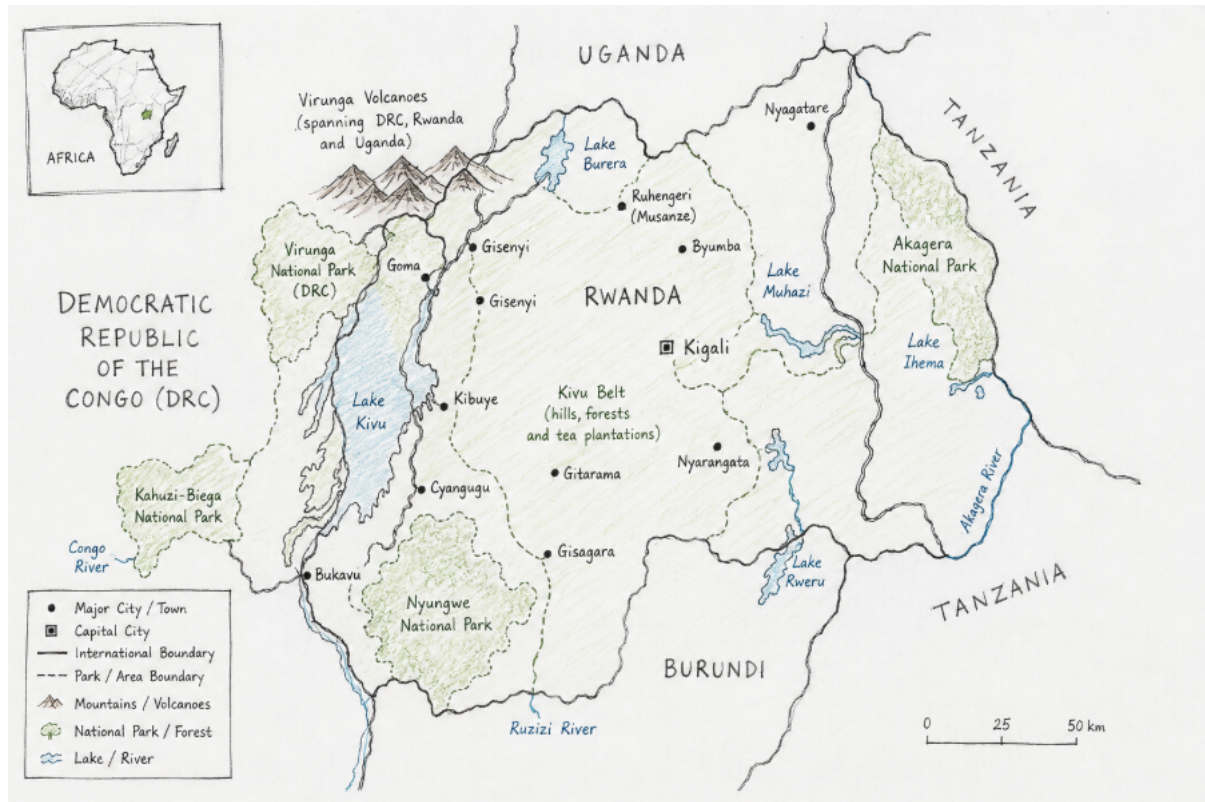


Figure 2. Map of Rwanda's famous tourist attractions and their proximity to the conflict region of DRC. Adapted from Briggs et al (2016, p. 244) and locations cross-checked against Briggs (2023). Copyright 2016 Bradt Travel Guides. Adapted with permission.¹²

Figure 2 underscores Rwanda's proximity to the conflict zone in eastern DRC—a factor particularly relevant to understanding its representation in the analyzed media coverage. For instance, reports from BBC, France24, and Yle repeatedly referred to Goma and Bukavu when discussing the M23 conflict and alleging Rwanda's involvement (BBC2; BBC3; FR7; YLE2). At the same time, other articles portrayed Rwanda itself as a safe and stable tourism destination (BBC1; BBC5; YLE1). The figure, therefore, provides geographical context for the contrasting narratives identified in the media coverage: while the reported violence occurred in eastern DRC, Rwanda's close proximity to the conflict-affected areas contributed to its recurring presence within broader regional security narratives.

¹ Please note that this map is included for illustrative tourism purposes only.

² Source: Author's own map, drawn in Sketchpad with AI assistance.

Taken together, the datasets' international media coverage portrays Rwanda as a country whose domestic stability stands in stark contrast to persistent regional insecurity. While reporting frequently highlights Rwanda's safety, progress, and appeal as a tourist destination, these positive portrayals are often complicated by references to instability in neighboring eastern DRC and allegations of Rwanda's involvement in regional conflict. The frequent mention of cities like Goma and Bukavu, as shown in Figure 2, illustrates how geographic proximity reinforces Rwanda's association with broader security narratives. Ultimately, the media construct Rwanda's image through a dual lens: as a haven of relative stability in a volatile region, but also as a nation whose security is presented as contingent and continually shaped by developments beyond its borders.

5.1.2 The genocide as an ongoing interpretive frame

This sub-chapter addresses the second major narrative found in international media representations of Rwanda: the continued centrality of the 1994 genocide as a lens through which both historical and current events are interpreted. This narrative connects to the previous sub-chapter by showing how stability and insecurity are not only contemporary themes but are deeply rooted in, and continually referenced to, Rwanda's past. The analysis of the dataset reveals that references to the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi are a persistent and central feature in the international media coverage of Rwanda. These references serve as a frame for understanding present developments in governance, tourism, and regional affairs, thereby shaping both the country's current image and perceptions of risk.

For example, YLE1 highlighted the legacy of the genocide with emotionally charged language: "The genocide took them all" (YLE1), underscoring the profound extent of trauma and loss. This focal point was reinforced by references to the lasting social impacts of the 1994 genocide: "Due to unaddressed trauma, there is much violence in homes" (YLE1). These instances illustrate that the genocide is not only remembered as a historical event, but its effects are also presented as ongoing and deeply embedded in Rwandan society. Similar patterns often appeared in French and English media, where the genocide was used as a central lens for understanding Rwanda's present. For example, FR6 reported that "Today, more than 70% of Rwanda's population of 13 million is aged 30 or younger" (FR6). This example frames Rwanda within a post-genocide generational context. The demographic fact is given meaning through its connection to the genocide, reinforcing the sense that the past continues to shape Rwanda's present identity (FR6; YLE1).

Similarly, a BBC report stated, “For Kagame, the context all comes down to the Rwandan genocide that took place over 100 days in 1994” (BBC3). This tendency is further illustrated in the following excerpt from BBC News 2022:

Critics who flee the country have been pursued and assassinated by Rwandan agents in exile. After the genocide — in which 800,000 people were killed — Rusesabagina became a Belgian citizen and used his fame to speak out against what he said was President Kagame’s repressive rule. ... Many Western leaders — those who may feel the guilt of not doing more to stop the genocide that defines Rwanda for many outsiders — are enamoured by him [Kagame]. (BBC1)

In this report, the genocide is explicitly named as the defining context for contemporary political developments, demonstrating its continued interpretive power. The historical narrative was also closely linked to current regional dynamics: “Hutus fled to eastern DRC, where the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) still operates...” (YLE2). This perspective was mirrored in BBC coverage:

The ethnic Hutu militia involved in killing up to 800,000 people—the vast majority from the Tutsi community—fled to what is now DR Congo, some forming the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) (BBC3)

These examples show that the genocide is used as a reference point to explain ongoing regional insecurity and the current presence of armed groups in eastern DRC. Throughout the dataset, the 1994 genocide is invoked not only to explain Rwanda’s internal challenges and recovery but also to contextualize its role in regional affairs. The persistent association with the genocide ensures that risk and insecurity are understood as both historical and ongoing phenomena.

These diverse narratives show that post-conflict destinations are often portrayed through overlapping accounts of renewal and lingering risk, as the past continues to inform current perceptions (Beirman, 2020; Causevic & Lynch, 2011). Thus, Rwanda is seen as both a model of progress in tourism and business and a country deeply shaped by its past—a combination that may influence how prospective tourists perceive it.

5.1.3 Progress alongside insecurity

This chapter analyzes the third major narrative identified in the international media coverage of Rwanda: the juxtaposition of progress and insecurity. This narrative builds upon the previous sub-chapters by showing how positive portrayals of Rwanda's achievements are frequently presented together with discussions of regional conflict, political tension, or human rights concerns. This approach highlights the complexity of Rwanda's international image and the multifaceted nature of risk representation in the media.

A dominant trend in the dataset is the simultaneous presentation of Rwanda as a country of impressive progress—particularly in tourism, economic development, and governance—alongside references to insecurity, especially relating to the situation in eastern DRC and allegations of Rwanda's involvement in regional conflict. For example, BBC Sport 2025 reported on Rwanda's ambitions and achievements in tourism and sports, but immediately situated these positive developments in the context of regional instability:

A state-of-the-art track is being built to F1 standards close to Kigali's new Bugesera airport ... with a vision which aims to blend motorsport with sustainability and natural beauty ... Rwanda's bid to stage a grand prix is also part of a larger strategy to position the country as a global sports hub, but the F1 project is under threat because of escalating tensions in the region. Rwandan-backed M23 rebels have attacked Congolese government forces in the South Kivu province ... Rwanda has been accused by a group of United Nations experts of not only backing the M23 but also of materially benefiting from the mineral wealth that is being smuggled into the country. Rwanda has denied this and said that it is only interested in shoring up its border. (BBC4)

This excerpt demonstrates how the media coverage integrates Rwanda's vision and development goals with ongoing concerns about regional security and political controversy, reinforcing the narrative of progress alongside insecurity. Similarly, another BBC Sport 2025 report said,

Cyclists who took part in the Tour du Rwanda have told the BBC that they "felt safe" despite concerns over security at this year's race ... Rwanda's government has been accused of investing in sport to enhance its global image and mask what one organisation has described as "an abysmal track record" on human rights — a strategy

described as “sportswashing”. ...The Rwandan government dismissed such accusations, with chief tourism officer Irene Murerwa calling them “a distraction” from the “amazing and outstanding achievements the country has made.” (BBC5)

In this report, visitors’ positive experiences and Rwanda’s promotion as a safe destination are juxtaposed with criticism regarding human rights, and achievements are presented within a context of persistent skepticism and scrutiny. YLE News 2019 also reflected this dual narrative:

Child mortality has been reduced by almost half in ten years. In December, it was reported that over 90 percent of Rwandans are covered by public health care... It is also known that the country’s parliament is majority women. The economy has grown at an annual rate of 6 – 8 percent in recent years... But Kagame’s ironclad rule also has its dark side... Many researchers and journalists who have criticized Kagame are no longer allowed to enter the country... Besides ethnicity, there are other things that are not appropriate to talk about. Like the fact that the country has participated in the plunder of minerals and precious metals in DRC. And Kagame’s Tutsi forces killed tens of thousands of Hutus who had fled Rwanda in Congo after the genocide (YLE1)

The passage emphasizes Rwanda’s success and positive image but immediately introduces reminders of its violent history and ongoing regional tensions, further reinforcing the narrative of progress amid insecurity. These examples demonstrate how international media coverage in the datasets rarely presents Rwanda’s progress in isolation; rather, positive developments are consistently paired with discussions of conflict, risk, or political controversy. This duality shapes a complex image of Rwanda as both a model of recovery and a country still linked to regional instability.

Collectively, these examples show that Rwanda’s tourism image is shaped by multiple, sometimes competing, media narratives rather than a single, unified story (Avraham & Ketter, 2017; Beirman, 2020; Causevic & Lynch, 2011). The country is portrayed as both attractive and safe for visitors, yet it remains associated with the region’s persistent insecurity. This dual positioning creates a nuanced, shifting image in which reassurance and uncertainty coexist, shaping how potential tourists may perceive and assess the destination (Sönmez & Graefe, 1998b). The results outlined here lay the groundwork for the subsequent

chapter, which examines how Rwanda's official tourism communication navigates and responds to these complex media representations.

5.2 Institutional representation of safety and stability by the Rwanda Development Board

In contrast to the international media focus on regional instability and historical risk, the Rwanda Development Board (RDB) constructs and promotes a consistent narrative of safety, stability, and national progress. Its official communications are characterized by a purposeful and strategic approach to destination branding, emphasizing Rwanda's domestic authority, effective governance, and forward momentum. Rather than treating safety as a standalone factor, RDB materials interweave it with themes of economic growth, innovation, and good governance. This approach also aligns with arguments in the destination image literature (Avraham & Ketter, 2017; Beirman, 2020). This chapter analyzes how RDB's annual reports and strategy documents construct Rwanda's image as a secure and attractive destination. The chapter focuses on the most salient examples to avoid redundancy and enhance analytical clarity. Although these reports are intended for a broad range of stakeholders, RDB is in charge of managing Rwanda's image. Thus, the themes in these reports are also relevant to the present analysis because they illustrate how Rwanda is officially portrayed in relation to development and stability.

5.2.1 Safety through governance and institutional competence

RDB constructs Rwanda's image as safe and stable primarily through narratives of effective governance, institutional competence, and national resilience, rather than by explicitly discussing security threats. Across RDB's annual reports and strategy documents, Rwanda is consistently portrayed as a well-governed country that can manage adversity and sustain long-term development. For example, RDB's chairman described Rwanda as a "beacon of hope and resilience amid global uncertainty" (RDB2, p. 10), while the 2025–2030 strategy report emphasized that "Rwanda has maintained a stable and investor-friendly climate with strong governance" (RDB4, p. 45). These statements frame stability as an outcome of leadership and institutional capacity. This narrative is reinforced by references to government-led economic recovery and institutional performance. RDB highlighted its pivotal role in spearheading national resilience efforts as follows:

As an institution, we were at the forefront of government efforts to ensure that the economy recovers. RDB spearheaded government initiatives aimed at building economic resilience. These initiatives include the Economic Recovery Fund ... [which] this year has demonstrated Rwanda's unrivalled resilience in the face of adversity. The government's management of the pandemic has been pivotal to all our recovery efforts as a country and institution. Its decisiveness in tackling the pandemic has been lauded internationally. (RDB1, pp.vi & vii)

With Rwanda's strong governance, and strategic investment in ICT, infrastructure, and innovation, the country is well-positioned to capitalize on these opportunities and drive sustained economic growth (RDB4, p. 6)

Rather than presenting safety simply as the absence of threats, these materials associate it with effective, responsive institutions and recognized benchmarks of governance. Rwanda's achievement of ranking first in sub-Saharan Africa in the World Justice Project Rule of Law Index is further presented as "Rwanda achieved a remarkable milestone by ranking 1st in sub-Saharan Africa in the World Justice Project Rule of Law Index..." (RDB2, p. 13). This further exemplified this image, positioning strong governance and the rule of law as key indicators of stability. RDB also emphasized Rwanda's "stable and investor-friendly climate with strong governance" (RDB4, p. 45) and spotlighted initiatives such as Special Economic Zones (SEZs) (RDB2, p. 65), which collectively construct Rwanda as a predictable, well-governed country where economic development is possible.

In summary, RDB communicates safety indirectly, placing governance, resilience, rule of law, and institutional performance in the foreground as the foundation for stability. Modernization and institutional competence, rather than the absence of risk, become the primary indicators of safety in Rwanda's official narrative.

5.2.2 Safety through development and modernization

RDB presents Rwanda's safety and stability as inseparable from its achievements in economic growth, innovation, and modernization. Rather than discussing safety as the absence of threats, the annual reports connect development milestones to the construction of a modern, competitive, and forward-looking national image. For example, the 2023 annual report highlighted the following milestones:

In 2023, RDB recorded USD 2.4 billion in new investment registrations, which are expected to create over 40,000 jobs. This is a remarkable 50% increase compared to the previous year. (RDB2, p. 4)

This upward trajectory continued in 2024, with investment commitments rising to “USD 3.2 billion and 51,635 anticipated new jobs” (RDB3, p. 10). Tourism revenues also demonstrated sustained growth, reaching “USD 620 million in 2023 and USD 647 million in 2024” (RDB2, p. 12; RDB3, p. 10). For a small country still overshadowed by past conflicts and ongoing regional instability, these figures may be especially significant. They serve not only as evidence of Rwanda’s economic progress but also as powerful signals of resilience and transformation (RDB4).

Technological advancement and infrastructure are also consistently showcased as evidence of modernization: “Rwanda boasts of 95% 4G LTE network coverage and a 7,000 km national fiber network” (RDB1, p. 2). The One Stop Centre is described as providing “a seamless, predictable, and investor-friendly experience by integrating over 400 essential government services under one roof” (RDB3, p. 58), and Rwanda’s efficient administration allows businesses to be registered in as little as six hours (RDB1, p. 46). These achievements are not presented as stand alone statistics, but as interconnected elements of a broader narrative. RDB frames modernization and efficiency—across investment, infrastructure, and tourism—as indicators of stability and predictability. Growth in revenue from meetings, incentives, conferences, exhibitions (MICE), hosting of international events, and the development of tourism infrastructure further reinforce Rwanda’s image as a preferred destination for global conferences and leisure travel (RDB2, p. 12; RDB3, pp. 6, 8).

Moreover, communication strategies in RDB’s annual reports reflect Rwanda’s earlier post-genocide policy objectives of national rebuilding and economic recovery. This continuity was illustrated by the government report, *Rapport d’orientation du budget 2000* [ROB2000] (1999, p. 38), originally published in French:

[A]s a result, the country has few means to fundamentally transform society and the economy, since entrepreneurship, creativity, and wealth creation remain extremely limited. It is necessary to create services in Rwanda to stimulate investment in exports and in the development of economic activity in general (ROB2000, 1999, p. 38)

This statement highlights the government's recognition of the limited capacity for economic transformation and the need to develop services that stimulate investment in exports and broader economic activity. Although the report does not explicitly link these objectives to tourism or destination branding, it suggests that economic transformation was viewed as central to Rwanda's post-conflict reconstruction strategy and was considered a prerequisite for long-term stability and national reconstruction. In later years, official communication, such as RDB's annual reports, linked economic growth, entrepreneurship, and investment to broader efforts to strengthen Rwanda's international reputation and foster an environment attractive to business and tourism. By consistently highlighting development, stability, and global partnerships, these materials portray Rwanda as a progressive and secure destination—an image reinforced across multiple annual reports, where tangible achievements are regularly tied to broader messages of innovation, competitiveness, and economic growth.

Thus, RDB constructs safety and stability through the lens of national development and modernization. By linking economic growth, technological advancement, and institutional efficiency, the official narrative presents Rwanda as a progressive country that can provide a secure and predictable environment for tourism, business, and investment.

5.2.3 International recognition and partnerships

RDB also constructs Rwanda's safety and stability in part through external recognition and high-profile international partnerships. Rather than relying solely on domestic achievements, RDB materials emphasize endorsements from reputable global organizations and collaborations with internationally recognized brands to validate Rwanda's attractiveness as a destination. A prominent example is Rwanda's status as one of the first destinations globally to receive the World Travel and Tourism Council's safety and hygiene stamp (RDB1, p. vii). This external validation is used to assure potential visitors of Rwanda's commitment to international tourism standards, reinforcing both safety and quality.

Strategic partnerships are also central to RDB's communication strategy. The Arsenal football club partnership, for instance, is highlighted for its measurable impact on Rwanda's tourism image. According to RDB1 on the impact of the organization's partnerships:

“Improved perceptions of Rwanda thanks to [the] Arsenal Partnership,” there was an increase from 35% to 41% (2019–2020) in the number of fans who were aware of the

Arsenal partnership and reported that they were more likely to visit Rwanda. (RDB1, p. 36)

The reports also noted other instances of international engagement, such as the visit by PSG football club Féminines first-team players, which showcased Rwandan tourism experiences to a global audience (RDB3, p. 50). In addition, the significance of international collaboration was illustrated through the following partnership with ARC Power:

ARC Power, a leading British renewable energy developer, has signed a Strategic Power Partnership with the Government of Rwanda. This historic collaboration marks the first-of-its-kind initiative, where ARC Power will work hand in hand with the government to develop the grid extension and deploy grid-tied solar generation units across Rwanda, with the aim of providing electricity to at least 40,000 households for the first time and enhancing the country's clean energy mix. (RDB2, p. 65)

These examples show that RDB leverages global recognition and partnership branding to strengthen its narrative of Rwanda as a credible, modern, and globally integrated destination. International engagement is presented as complementing and amplifying domestic progress and institutional competence. Thus, RDB materials use external validation and global partnerships to reinforce Rwanda's image as a safe, attractive, and competitive destination. Safety is communicated not just as a domestic achievement, but as a quality recognized and endorsed by the international partnerships.

5.2.4 Historical and cultural representation

RDB materials also incorporate Rwanda's historical and cultural heritage into tourism communication, though references to the country's past are relatively limited. For example, the reports highlighted the preservation of cultural and historical sites through tourism signage along the Liberation History Trail and at the Kibeho sanctuary, as well as support for genocide survivors (RDB2, pp. 59 & 76; VR1). Whilst the Kigali genocide memorial is presented as a place that "allow visitors to reflect on how we all have a personal responsibility to prevent discrimination and mass atrocity" (VR1). The Kigali Cultural Village is similarly presented as an initiative to

promote and conserve the rich cultural heritage and environment of Rwanda, generate diversified tourism income for the country, and open up new social and entertainment

amenities and services... [It] aims to enhance Kigali's tourism offering and to showcase Rwanda's attractions to both local and international tourists. (RDB5)

Thus, RDB incorporates history and culture into a broader tourism narrative focused on heritage preservation, tourism development, and national identity. However, because such references were relatively limited in the analyzed materials, historical and cultural representation formed a smaller part of RDB's overall communication than narratives of development, governance, and international engagement. While RDB acknowledges Rwanda's historical and cultural heritage, these references play a supporting role in comparison to the focus on progress, modernization, and international partnerships in its official narrative.

5.2.5 Constructing safety through narrative control in RDB reports

Findings from RDB datasets indicate that Rwanda's official tourism discourse does not directly address security issues. Instead, it constructs safety through a cohesive narrative framework centered on national development, good governance, and modernization—a strategy that aligns with global tourism communication practices, where omitting or downplaying risk is common in order to maintain tourist confidence (Avraham & Ketter, 2017; Beirman, 2020).

A key theme emerging from the findings is that development signals safety. Indicators such as economic growth, increased investment, and job creation are consistently framed as markers of both prosperity and underlying stability. This aligns with tourism scholarship, which finds that development is often seen as a sign of reduced risk (Mansfeld & Pizam, 2006). Moreover, these narratives build on earlier post-genocide reconstruction discourses that prioritized stability and national renewal. Accordingly, present-day communications extend this pattern, casting Rwanda's achievements as both validation of and support for its image as a reliable and secure destination for tourism and investment.

In addition to development, governance, and institutional strength are central to the construction of safety in the analyzed reports. RDB narratives focus less on the mere absence of conflict and more on effective leadership, high rankings, international commendations, and strong institutional performance, which projects an aura of stability and control. Ultimately, Rwanda's history is retold with deliberate care. The genocide is integrated into RDB's

messaging as part of a broader narrative of resilience, unity, and cultural celebration, instead of as an ongoing vulnerability. Through initiatives such as heritage trails and cultural sites, the past is presented as something to be protected and understood, not feared. This approach aligns with the idea that new narratives are instrumental in reconstructing a shared identity and shaping expectations for the future (Grayson et al., 2019).

In summary, Rwanda's official tourism communication offers a clear, domestically grounded narrative of safety that contrasts with the more ambiguous, relational depictions of risk in international media (see Chapter 5.1). This analysis shows that institutional communication not only reflects but also actively shapes how safety is communicated to international audiences. Chapter 6 discusses these findings in relation to the wider literature and considers their implications for understanding Rwanda's international image based on how both the media and RDB portray it, and the broader contributions of this study.

5.3 Narratives in external advisories and sensitivity of tourism

Travel advisories provide official guidance on travel risks and safety. Across the advisories analyzed, references to regional instability, border security, and conflict in eastern DRC appeared along with practical travel recommendations. Rather than describing Rwanda solely in terms of its domestic security situation, the advisories consistently placed the country within a broader regional security context. For instance, the Swiss advisory originally published in French stated the following:

The intensification of violence in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo is also having an impact on the Rwandan border area. Exchanges of gunfire between Rwandan and Congolese security forces have occurred on several occasions, resulting in casualties ... [T]ensions between Rwanda and Burundi are high. Sporadic clashes between Rwandan and Burundian security forces cannot be ruled out. (TA2)

This advisory shows that instability in neighboring countries is routinely linked to perceptions of risk in Rwanda, even when the direct threat lies outside its borders. By highlighting events such as cross-border violence and heightened tensions with neighboring states, the advisory places Rwanda within a broader landscape of regional insecurity, reinforcing the need for caution among travelers.

Standardized recommendations were also given in such advisories by the government of Canada: “[Ex]ercise a high degree of caution in the section of Volcanoes National Park...along the border with the DRC due to occasional unclear conditions and the presence of rebel groups in the DRC” (TA5). Similarly, the UK’s Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) advised against all but essential travel within 10 kilometers of the border with the DRC, including areas around Lake Kivu and Kamembe Airport, citing security concerns (TA3). These examples illustrate how broader geopolitical developments are translated into practical guidance for travelers. At the same time, these advisories did not portray Rwanda as uniformly unsafe. Some explicitly stated that travel to Rwanda was generally considered safe, while simultaneously recommending increased caution in areas bordering eastern DRC. For example, a Swiss advisory stated, “travel to Rwanda is generally considered safe” (TA2), and an Irish advisory added,

Rwanda is generally safe and crime levels are relatively low in the country. It’s safe to visit gorillas or climb volcanoes in Parc National des Volcans as long as you are part of an organised tour. (TA4)

Taken together, the analyzed advisories presented a mixed assessment: Rwanda was generally described as a safe destination, but certain border areas were identified as requiring additional caution. A common feature across the advisories was the distinction between geographical areas in Rwanda. The Swiss advisory also noted that violence in eastern DRC had affected the Rwandan border region and warned that “risks cannot be confined to defined areas” (TA2).

These examples show that the advisories consistently distinguished between Rwanda’s border region and other parts of the country, with recommendations varying by proximity to the regional insecurity. As shown in financial research by Gbohoui et al. (2023), sub-Saharan Africa is frequently subjected to a “risk premium” in global markets, driven by perceptions that may not align with local realities. Although their analysis concerned financial markets, a similar pattern of externally driven, uneven risk perception can be observed in the travel advisories. By specifying risk at the regional level, the advisories repeatedly distinguished between border regions and other parts of Rwanda while situating the country within a broader regional security context. As supplementary contextual sources, these advisories offer an official perspective on how regional security conditions are communicated to

prospective travelers and complement the broader media narratives discussed in the previous chapters.

Notably, these responses may be shaped primarily by external perceptions rather than by tourists' actual experiences in Rwanda. As the interview participant, Milk, points out,

Some people might get afraid to come because there is war ... in Congo, even though for Rwanda specifically, there is no issue at all ... there are persistent stereotypes about Africa. For example, during periods of conflict in Congo, some travelers hesitate to visit Rwanda for gorilla trekking because the gorilla parks are near the Congolese border. When people see Virunga National Park on the map, they may mistakenly feel that visiting these areas in Rwanda is equivalent to being in Congo, despite the difference in safety and context between the two countries ... Western media and travel advisories warn their citizens against coming to Rwanda because there's war in Congo. (INT1)

According to Milk, tourists may associate Rwanda with insecurity because of its proximity to eastern DRC despite the differences between the two countries. This viewpoint illustrates how perceptions of regional instability extend to Rwanda and influence its tourism image. The participant further noted that heightened focus on the regional conflict led to:

Almost two months with very few people visiting,” and “40% to 60% cancel holiday[s] since the war started in Goma... also sometimes customers who book early call to ask if it is safe and if there are dead bodies on the street” (INT1)

To address these concerns, those working in Rwandan tourism adopt an active approach of reassurance. Milk emphasizes the need to “convince [visitors] that they will be safe” and to serve as “ambassadors of the right information” (INT1). This approach highlights the proactive role Rwandan tourism operators like Milk play in managing risk perceptions and countering external narratives of insecurity.

Taken together, the analysis of travel advisories shows that Rwanda is generally portrayed as a safe destination, yet regional instability—especially near the eastern DRC border—continues to shape official risk messaging. These advisories underscore a persistent divide between Rwanda's border areas and its interior, often amplifying perceptions of insecurity by linking the former to neighboring conflicts. The findings demonstrate that external, regionally

focused risk narratives can strongly influence prospective travelers' perceptions, sometimes outweighing on-the-ground realities. Consequently, tourism operators in Rwanda must actively reassure visitors and counter externally generated concerns, highlighting the ongoing negotiation between local realities and global risk perceptions.

5.4 The influence of contrasting narratives in the construction of risk and safety

The findings from the media analysis, RDD, travel advisories, and the interview together indicate that perceptions of Rwanda's safety are communicated through multiple channels and are shaped by competing representations. International media and travel advisories often situate Rwanda within a broader regional landscape of instability, emphasizing its proximity to conflict zones and the potential for spillover risk. As Avraham (2015, p. 226) observes, the negative image of one region can "spill over" to neighboring destinations through association and media representations, while Beirman (2020) notes that destinations associated with risk must actively manage their international image and rebuild trust. This dynamic was evident in Chapter 5.1, where Rwanda was frequently discussed in the context of regional instability despite repeated references to its domestic stability.

In contrast, RDB communications construct safety through a focus on domestic stability, development, and institutional competence, rarely foregrounding regional threats. The analyzed travel advisories similarly draw a distinction between Rwanda, which is generally considered safe, and specific border areas requiring greater caution due to their proximity to conflict in eastern DRC. The interview further underscores the real-world impact of these external narratives, revealing that perceptions of risk—shaped primarily by international media and advisories—can significantly influence tourism demand, sometimes resulting in booking cancellations and reduced tourist activity during periods of heightened regional instability.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that Rwanda's tourism image is not defined by a single narrative but is continually negotiated through the interplay between international, institutional, and experiential accounts. As a result, perceptions of Rwanda as a destination remain dynamic, shaped by both reassurance and uncertainty, and continually redefined within broader regional and historical contexts.

6. DISCUSSION

This chapter synthesizes the study's empirical findings with key arguments and debates from the academic literature on destination branding, risk perception, and post-conflict tourism. It begins by examining how international media narratives and official RDB communications align with, or diverge from, established theories and research. The discussion then explores the role of securitization and narrative tension in shaping perceptions of risk, emphasizing how competing representations may influence traveler behavior and tourism demand. Finally, the chapter considers the broader implications of these findings for destination branding and international image construction, both in Rwanda and in other contexts marked by regional instability or geopolitical uncertainty.

6.1 Parallels between media narratives and the literature

The empirical findings in Chapter 5.1 demonstrate key themes and arguments from the academic literature on risk perception, destination image, and post-conflict tourism. The three major media narratives identified—Rwanda as a stable destination within an unstable region, the genocide as an ongoing interpretive frame, and progress alongside insecurity—both reflect and contribute to broad scholarly debates. In this chapter, I will discuss how these media narratives align with or diverge from established theories in the literature, analyze their implications for understanding Rwanda's international image, and consider the broader significance of these findings for the study of post-conflict destination branding and risk perception.

The literature highlights that destination safety is influenced not only by internal conditions but also by broader regional contexts and relational understandings of risk (Mansfeld & Pizam, 2006, pp. 2–4; Reisinger & Mavondo, 2005, pp. 213–215). Thus, even positive reports of Rwanda's stability are often accompanied by reminders of insecurity in surrounding areas. Similarly, scholars such as Causevic and Lynch (2011, pp. 784–786), Avraham and Ketter (2017, pp. 3–5), and Beirman (2020, pp. 90–94) argue that post-conflict tourism destinations are frequently represented through simultaneous narratives of domestic stability and external threats shaped by regional circumstances and media portrayals. The findings from this analysis align with these arguments, as the media persistently present Rwanda as domestically stable while situating it within a context of ongoing regional insecurity.

A second recurring narrative is the enduring influence of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi on media representations of Rwanda. References to the genocide frequently appear alongside stories about Rwanda's development, governance, and tourism sector, embedding historical context in present-day coverage. This continued reference to the genocide aligns with research on post-conflict destinations, which emphasizes that historical events can shape the image of a destination long after conflict has ended, influencing perceptions of safety, risk, and recovery (Avraham & Ketter, 2017; Beirman, 2020). This also supports Anholt's (2007, p. 27) observation that a country's image often changes more slowly than the reality it aims to represent. Such interpretive patterns reinforce Rwanda's dual image as both a site of progress and a place marked by a traumatic past, shaping how international reports both the opportunities and threats associated with the country.

The third narrative, "progress alongside insecurity," further parallels academic research. The analyzed articles often present Rwanda's achievements in tourism, economic development, and safety alongside references to ongoing regional conflict, political tensions, and human rights concerns. This duality creates a complex image in which reassurance about safety coexists with uncertainty about the region's broader stability. As research on post-conflict destinations suggests, simultaneous narratives of renewal and risk are common in media portrayals, influencing how international audiences may perceive safety, opportunity, and insecurity (Avraham & Ketter, 2017; Beirman, 2020; Causevic & Lynch, 2011).

This synthesis is further supported by literature on risk perception. Kasperson et al. (2010, pp. 3, 22) argue that media narratives can amplify risk perceptions, causing destinations to be associated with broader patterns of conflict even when local conditions remain stable. Hall (1999, p. 103) similarly notes that perceptions of risk, rather than objective conditions alone, can strongly influence tourism-related decision-making. Sönmez and Graefe (1998b, pp. 173–176) suggest that risk narratives shaped by the media may override objective conditions, leading travelers to perceive entire destinations or regions as unsafe. Rosling et al. (2019, pp. 48, 66, 71) and Kahneman (2012, pp. 130, 138) add that negative and dramatic information is particularly memorable, giving such narratives lasting impact.

Overall, the findings from the media analysis demonstrate that Rwanda is portrayed in the international media through overlapping narratives of progress, safety, and regional insecurity. These representations combine reassurance with risk-focused themes, reflecting and reinforcing academic arguments about the complexity of post-conflict destination image

formation. The persistent associations between Rwanda and regional conflict, especially through references to the genocide and the situation in eastern DRC, illustrate the powerful role of media narratives in shaping perceptions of both opportunity and risk.

6.2 Parallels between the RDB narratives and literature

The narratives identified in RDB materials closely mirrored broader patterns observed in the literature on destination branding and strategic communication. The emphasis on positive developments, international recognition, and high-profile partnerships reflects the strategic use of communication to shape destination image (Avraham & Ketter, 2017; Beirman, 2020). Furthermore, RDB's portrayal of good governance, institutional performance, and modernization as indicators of stability aligns with research that links trust in institutions to perceptions of security (Reisinger & Mavondo, 2005). This emphasis echoes Reisinger and Mavondo's (2005) assertion that security is perceived not only through material realities but also through institutional trust. Concurrently, Reyntjens (2024) argues that such communication is intentionally strategic, designed to bolster confidence amid challenging and unpredictable circumstances.

Consistent with Avraham and Ketter (2017) and Beirman (2020), the RDB materials selectively emphasized positive achievements while limiting references to regional instability, political tensions, or security threats. This approach is typical of destination communication strategies that seek to reassure and attract international audiences by minimizing perceived risks. The use of heritage in tourism communication—though limited—also reflects literature on post-conflict narratives and nation branding, where history and culture are incorporated to strengthen national identity and collective memory (Grayson et al., 2019).

6.3 Securitization as narrative practice in tourism

This thesis demonstrates that security in tourism is both a tangible reality and a narrative construct, shaped by how it is communicated. Safety is not merely a function of concrete threats; it is also produced through the narratives and perspectives that define how destinations are portrayed and perceived. These dynamics align with the concept of securitization, in which issues become matters of security through narrative practices that shape understanding and prompt particular actions (Balzacq, 2010; Buzan et al., 1998).

In tourism, securitization occurs through ongoing narrative and communicative practices that frame destinations as either safe or threatening (Avraham & Ketter, 2017; Buzan et al., 1998). This process is especially evident in how media and official communications shape public perceptions of travel risk (Beirman, 2020). Media outlets, travel advisories, and official tourism channels help to situate destinations within specific security paradigms. The findings show that international media and travel advisories often portrayed Rwanda in relation to regional instability, emphasizing its proximity to conflict zones. Frequent references to “spillover,” border tensions, and unpredictability heighten perceptions of risk and situate Rwanda within a broader context of instability. Drawing on Kasperson et al. (2010), these findings illustrate that risk is not merely communicated, but it is also socially constructed through narrative processes that frame destinations within broader landscapes of security and insecurity. In contrast, Rwanda’s official tourism messaging offers an alternative narrative centered on stability, progress, and effective governance. Communications from RDB frame safety within broader themes of modernization and order, emphasizing that predictability and strong governance are key indicators of a secure environment. Building on Avraham and Ketter’s (2017) analysis, this relationship shows that securitization can also occur through reassurance, as safety is actively constructed through narratives that highlight control, resilience, and institutional strength.

These findings show that securitization in tourism is not a linear or singular process; rather, it is negotiated among multiple actors, each constructing security through overlapping and sometimes competing narratives of risk and protection. This study expands securitization theory by showing that, in tourism, security is not simply “declared” through isolated speech acts, as Balzacq (2019, pp. 332–335) suggests. Instead, it is continuously constructed and contested through the circulation of narratives across media, institutions, and tourism practices. Securitization is therefore a dynamic and sustained process of narrative formation rather than a singular event. Furthermore, competing constructions of risk and safety have tangible effects on securitization. The tour operator’s account shows, for instance, how narratives of regional unrest, generated outside Rwanda, lead to booking cancellations, reduced demand, and ongoing reassurance efforts. This account aligns with Reisinger and Mavondo (2005) and Avraham and Ketter (2017), who demonstrate that tourism is highly sensitive to perceived risk and the influence of mediated information. Notably, these impacts occur even in the absence of immediate local threats, underscoring the power of narrative in shaping tourism outcomes.

In parallel with these competing constructions of risk and safety, tourism actors engage in counter-securitization. Through ongoing communication, reassurance, and proactive image management, they challenge prevailing risk discourses and reframe the destination as being secure. The ongoing challenge to prevailing risk discourses and the reframing of the destination as being secure underscores that securitization is not imposed unilaterally, but is dynamically negotiated among actors seeking to influence perceptions. Therefore, this study contends that securitization in tourism is fundamentally a narrative process. Security is not static or purely objective; it is continually shaped, debated, and circulated through communication. For destinations like Rwanda, tourism development thus depends both on ensuring safety and on skillfully managing and redefining the narratives that shape perceptions of safety and risk.

6.4 Narrative tension and risk perception

The presence of competing narratives goes beyond generating contrasting images of Rwanda; it actively shapes how potential travelers perceive and interpret risk. When people are presented with both assurances of safety and alerts about regional instability, they do not weigh these contrasting messages equally. Drawing on Kahneman (2012), risk perception in this context arises from selective interpretation, in which some pieces of information carry more weight than others. According to Reisinger and Mavondo (2005), individuals assessing unfamiliar destinations typically place greater trust in mediated information—such as news reports, travel advisories, or social media posts—than in firsthand information gained through their own travel experiences or direct accounts from people they personally know (Zreik, 2025). For prospective travelers choosing a destination, uncertainty about safety is a significant factor in their decision-making—especially when the available information is mixed or contradictory. Although risk may be localized, such as in border areas, the lack of clear boundaries may lead travelers to extend their sense of threat to the entire destination. Advisory statements such as “risk cannot be confined to defined areas” (TA2) further blur geographic boundaries and amplify overall uncertainty.

Furthermore, the persistence of risk perceptions surrounding Rwanda reflects broader patterns in Western representations of African conflict. Wall (2007, p. 271) argues that media coverage of the Rwanda crisis often reproduced simplified, stereotypical portrayals of African violence, reinforcing perceptions of instability rather than providing deeper contextual analysis. Such representations contribute to the enduring tension between

Rwanda's contemporary image of stability and external narratives that continue to associate the region with conflict and insecurity. Behavioral decision-making research offers further insight into this phenomenon. Kahneman (2012, pp. 130–131) notes that people are generally more attuned to potential losses than gains, often prioritizing negative or threatening information in their judgments. Thus, in Rwanda's case, mentions of conflict, spillover, or instability may have a stronger effect on risk perceptions than reassurances about safety or development. This asymmetry explains why efforts to provide reassurance often fail to overcome the impact of risk-oriented portrayals.

These narrative contradictions heighten uncertainty, which can prompt travelers to act more cautiously or to avoid perceived risks altogether. Despite these concerns, Rwanda has also been internationally recognized for its safety. For instance, Euronews (2022) reported that a survey ranked Rwanda as Africa's safest country and the sixth-safest destination worldwide for solo travelers. Similarly, Numbeo's 2026 safety ranking identified Rwanda as Africa's safest country and placed it among the safest globally (Numbeo, 2026a, 2026b). However, the Euronews (2022) article also raised concerns about instability in neighboring countries and the risk of conflict spilling into Rwanda. This contrast highlights the multifaceted nature of Rwanda's tourism image, in which depictions of safety and stability coexist with portrayals of regional instability and risk.

When travelers receive both reassurances of safety and warnings about conflict nearby, they may adopt a more cautious approach. As Slovic (1987), Reisinger and Mavondo (2005), and Kahneman (2012, pp. 140–145) note, even in the absence of concrete signs of danger, uncertainty and potential risk alone can lead to changes in behavior. Travelers' responses are shaped both by actual situations and by how information about those circumstances is communicated and interpreted. Kasperson et al. (2010, pp. 22–27) affirm this interaction, suggesting that while perceptions of risk are shaped by events themselves, so too are they shaped by how those events are communicated, framed, and socially interpreted. Consequently, uncertainty may intensify when media, public discourse, and travel advisories repeatedly highlight specific threats and security concerns.

Kahneman (2012, pp. 138–142) further indicates that individuals are generally more attentive to negative or threatening information than to positive reassurance, a tendency that can shape risk perceptions and influence behavior. Accordingly, perceptions of a destination may be unduly influenced by references to conflict, instability, or insecurity, regardless of the actual

stability of local conditions. Drawing on Sönmez and Graefe (1998a, pp. 118–138), this phenomenon helps explain why risk narratives and warnings tend to have a greater impact on travelers than those emphasizing safety and stability. This dynamic explains the acute sensitivity of tourism demand to external messaging and portrayals.

This study shows that shifts in media coverage and the wording of travel advisories can quickly alter tourism behavior, even when local conditions remain stable. Risk perception does not directly mirror reality; it emerges instead from how information is selected, emphasized, and interpreted. Narrative tension, therefore, significantly shapes people's risk perception by creating uncertainty and amplifying the impact of negative or ambiguous messages (Kahneman 2012; Kasperson et al., 2010). Thus, for destinations like Rwanda, the central challenge extends beyond simply promoting safety; it also involves addressing how risk is mentally constructed and perceived by potential visitors amid conflicting narratives.

6.5 Implications for destination branding and international image construction

The findings indicate that efforts to brand Rwanda as a destination unfold within a communications landscape that is tightly managed by national institutions through their official narratives. However, this landscape remains highly contested due to the influence of external media and travel advisories, which are international actors outside Rwanda's control. Although national institutions focus on projecting an image of safety, stability, and progress, this portrayal is continually shaped and occasionally contested by external narratives from the media and travel advisories. As Avraham and Ketter (2017) and Beirman (2020) argue, the image of a destination is never the product of official messaging alone; rather, it emerges through ongoing negotiations with external representations, which can reinforce or undermine national branding efforts. Consequently, Rwanda's international image as a tourist destination emerges at the intersection of deliberate branding strategies and the ongoing interplay of other competing narratives.

This strategy aligns with Avraham and Ketter's (2017, p. 784) observation that destination branding often highlights positive attributes while minimizing perceived risks. Moreover, omitting or downplaying risk is not unique to Rwanda. Avraham and Ketter (2017) and Beirman (2020) note that official tourism organizations across diverse contexts tend to avoid emphasizing potential threats because doing so may undermine tourist confidence.

An important implication is that Rwanda's branding initiatives are inherently constrained by its location in a volatile region. Perceptions of the country are largely shaped by its neighbors' instability rather than by Rwanda considered in isolation. Frequent references to conflict in eastern DRC and neighboring areas place Rwanda within a broader landscape of perceived risk, regardless of its internal circumstances (INT1). Furthermore, as discussed earlier in Chapter 2.3, Wall (2007, pp. 261–271) argues that media coverage of African conflict has often relied on simplified, crisis-oriented narratives shaped by organizational pressures and limited contextual understanding. This perspective offers a broader lens for understanding how representations of African countries, including Rwanda, may be influenced by wider regional portrayals of instability.

Thus, elements of Rwanda's image as a travel destination are shaped by external factors and associations beyond its direct control. Riessman (2008, p. 5) argues that narratives impose meaningful patterns on events that might otherwise seem disconnected. From this perspective, the findings suggest that international media narratives weave together regional conflict, historical memory, and contemporary security issues into coherent representations that shape Rwanda's tourism image. This finding also aligns with Anholt's (2007, p. 27) argument that national image—shaped by international media narratives and public perceptions—often changes more slowly than the realities those narratives are meant to reflect. Consequently, countries undergoing rapid transformation may continue to be viewed through long-established perceptions and associations, even when those perceptions no longer accurately reflect contemporary conditions.

Another key implication concerns the unequal influence of communication actors. As Avraham and Ketter (2017, pp. 789–791) show, travel advisories, for example, carry institutional weight and are often regarded as trustworthy and impartial sources. Their emphasis on uncertainty, spillover, and regional tensions can overshadow or undermine the effectiveness of national branding efforts. Therefore, national marketing narratives must compete with, rather than fully displace, images generated by external actors (Avraham & Ketter, 2017; Beirman, 2020).

The findings further indicate that destination branding in a post-conflict tourist destination is inherently adaptive and ongoing. Rather than merely promoting a fixed image, tourism professionals must continually address evolving perceptions, challenge unfavorable narratives, and restore trust. In Rwanda, tourism operators regularly addressed concerns,

actively promoted positive perceptions, and encouraged visitor confidence (INT1). Consequently, branding functions less as one-way communication and more as an ongoing negotiation of narratives, shaped by external forces and shifting streams of information (Avraham & Ketter, 2017).

These findings also suggest that Rwanda's official tourism communications do not fundamentally alter existing destination branding practices, but instead adapt them to the context of regional insecurity. This approach aligns with Glaesser's (2003, p. 192) observation that crisis management often requires adapting established marketing instruments to changing circumstances rather than replacing them. Human Rights Watch (2023) similarly notes that the Rwandan government has pursued an ambitious strategy to strengthen the country's international image and promote tourism, major international events, and investment. This objective is evident in the analyzed RDB materials, which emphasize development, modernization, and good governance as central elements of Rwanda's official tourism communication. The communication strategies identified in the analyzed RDB materials have attracted scholarly criticism as well. For instance, Reyntjens (2024, pp. 173–174) argues that Rwandan official communication is less about providing reassurance than about strategically shaping narratives. He illustrates this point with the concept of “Ubwenge,” a context-aware practice in which communication is deliberately crafted to maintain confidence amid complexity.

The study underscores that a destination's international image is shaped more by perceptions than by objective facts. It also highlights that representations of Rwanda, particularly those shaped by travel advisories and regional narratives, can quickly influence traveler behavior, leading to cancellations and reduced demand. The influence of regional insecurity on Rwanda's tourism image supports Anholt's (2007, p. 10) observation that perceptions often carry more weight than objective realities. This interpretation also aligns with Riessman's (2008, p. 8) argument that narratives serve as “sense-making tools that do more than describe events; they justify, persuade, and shape how people interpret the social world.” In this study, narratives of safety, stability, and regional insecurity similarly construct and communicate specific interpretations of Rwanda as a tourist destination. This interpretation is consistent with research showing that perceptions of risk feature in travelers' destination choices (Reisinger & Mavondo, 2005).

The case of Rwanda reveals that successful destination branding is as much about managing external influences as about projecting positivity. This insight also reflects Anholt's (2007, p. 1) observation that international audiences often rely on simplified perceptions and stereotypes when forming views of countries. As a result, branding is increasingly defined by the need for agile adaptation rather than strict control, given the unpredictability of today's broader communication environment. This interpretation aligns with Glaesser (2003, p. 85), who argues that regional images are intentionally constructed through destination marketing but also emerge unintentionally through ongoing news coverage. Such images can shape perceptions of tourism, independent of official promotional efforts.

The significance of these results extends beyond Rwanda to other destinations facing broader geopolitical uncertainties. For instance, they may apply to Northern Europe, where recent developments include incidents involving drones and critical infrastructure (Helsinki Sanomat, 2026; Poliisi, 2026; Yle News, 2026), as well as ongoing public discussions about regional security, Nordic defense cooperation, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) presence in Finland's Lapland (Helsinki Security Forum, 2025; Regjeringen, 2026). These examples illustrate that perceptions of safety may be shaped by local conditions together with broader geopolitical dynamics.

Although Finland is generally regarded as a safe destination, these examples highlight how external risk narratives and regional uncertainty can influence destination image and tourist confidence. The findings of this thesis, therefore, suggest the value of future research examining how destinations near zones of geopolitical tension, such as Finland's proximity to Russia, proactively manage external security narratives and maintain their tourism image amid broader regional uncertainties. Thus, insights from the Rwandan context may offer valuable perspectives on the complex interplay among geopolitics, risk perception, and tourism in diverse global settings.

7. CONCLUSION

7.1 Main findings

This thesis sought to answer a central research question: “How do security and risk narratives in international media and institutional communication construct the image of Rwanda as a tourism destination?” Guided by securitization theory, securitization narrative, risk perception, and narrative frameworks, this study examined how international media, travel advisories, and official tourism communications shape and contest Rwanda’s tourism image. Three supporting sub-questions guided the analysis, each of which is addressed in this chapter. The findings show that Rwanda’s tourism image is constructed not by a single, unified narrative but by the dynamic interplay of multiple, often competing, narratives of safety, stability, and risk. Across international media, travel advisories, and official tourism communications, Rwanda is often portrayed as internally stable and secure, but it remains linked to broader narratives of regional instability. Consequently, its tourism image is shaped by the ongoing interplay between narratives of reassurance and those that emphasize risk.

The first sub-question to address was, “How do international media narratives frame Rwanda’s safety and regional insecurity as a tourism destination?” The findings suggest that international media portray Rwanda through contrasting perspectives of internal stability and persistent regional insecurity. In many accounts, Rwanda emerged as a stable, efficiently managed, and rapidly developing destination. The country’s accomplishments in tourism, economic transformation, environmental conservation, and hosting of major international events contributed to its reputation as an innovative and desirable modern destination. Nevertheless, alongside these positive representations, there were recurring references to the ongoing instability in neighboring regions, particularly eastern DRC. The media reports analyzed frequently highlighted Rwanda’s geographic proximity to conflict zones and political unrest, often noting allegations of the country’s involvement in regional conflicts and raising concerns about potential spillover effects. The dual representation reflects a broader media pattern that grounds narratives in Rwanda’s advancements while highlighting its connections to both historical and current regional instability (Hall, 1999; Mansfeld & Pizam, 2006; Wall, 2007). Thus, perceptions of risk are constructed not only from local threats, but also from Rwanda’s relational standing among neighboring countries in the Great Lakes Region. Even as Rwanda’s remarkable recovery is recognized, the continued salience of the 1994 genocide as a lens for interpreting current events maintains the country’s link to

insecurity. Accordingly, international media portray Rwanda through both reassuring and cautionary narratives, combining accounts of safety and stability with ongoing references to regional risk.

The second sub-question was, “How do Rwanda’s official tourism communications present narratives of safety and destination stability?” The analysis shows that RDB and the Visit Rwanda platform promote a narrative that stands in marked contrast to prevailing international representations. These communications repeatedly emphasized stability, safety, modernity, and national resilience. Safety was not explicitly addressed in RDB narratives; instead, it was portrayed as emerging organically from advances in the economy, good governance, institutional capacity, technology, and international reputation. The strategic promotion of investment data, infrastructure development, good governance, and international awards helps solidify Rwanda’s reputation as a secure and inviting destination for tourism and investment. Notably, these official communications highlight favorable developments, while references to regional instability, political challenges, and regional security risks are either downplayed or omitted. Whenever these matters appear, directly or indirectly, they are framed as external obstacles that can be competently handled rather than as internal vulnerabilities. The retelling of Rwanda’s history, especially the genocide, is reframed as a story of resilience, restoration, and national transformation, reinforcing the consistent narrative that Rwanda is a safe and stable destination for tourism. This approach aligns with other findings in destination branding research, which indicate that authorities often craft unified, positive images to build trust and distinguish their destination from less favorable regional narratives (Avraham & Ketter, 2017; Beirman, 2020).

Regarding the third sub-question, “How do these various narratives influence Rwanda’s tourism image?”, the findings reveal that the dynamic between these competing narratives decisively influences perceptions of Rwanda as a tourist destination. International media, travel advisories, and official tourism communications offer unique perspectives, resulting in a destination image that is both complex and, at times, ambiguous. Although RDB and Visit Rwanda highlight themes of stability and reassurance, media narratives and travel advisories often introduce caution and uncertainty by repeatedly citing conflict, border instability, and the risk of conflict spreading. Travel advisories, specifically, take a middle ground by acknowledging Rwanda as “generally safe” while highlighting the need for caution and drawing attention to risks stemming from regional instability. This dynamic produces a

tourism image that resists simple classification; instead, it reflects a constant tension between reassuring and cautionary narratives. The study findings also reveal that these conflicting narratives likely determine prospective tourists' perceptions of, and behavior regarding, risk. Consistent with the established discussion on risk perception (Kasperson et al., 2010; Kahneman, 2012; Reisinger & Mavondo, 2005), negative associations and uncertainty often carry more weight than positive reassurances, leading to increased caution and inconsistent visitor numbers, even when Rwanda is objectively safe.

These contrasting narratives result in outcomes felt directly within the tourism sector. Insight from a tourism operator shows that shifts in media coverage and travel advisory messaging can prompt immediate changes in tourism behavior, including cancellations and shifts in demand, regardless of local safety conditions. Consequently, Rwanda's tourism sector is highly responsive to external narratives and shifts in the broader information landscape.

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that Rwanda's tourism image is shaped by an ongoing process of narrative negotiation, influenced by both internal strategies and external forces. The securitization of tourism should, therefore, be understood as a dynamic, contested process in which diverse actors, including the media, travel advisories, institutional bodies, and travelers themselves, compete to construct and legitimize narratives of safety, risk, and desirability. The contrast between externally originating risk narratives and internally advanced messages of stability highlights the broader challenges facing destinations in volatile regions. Consequently, achieving sustained tourism growth depends not only on visible advancements and competent leadership, but also on the ability to proactively navigate and influence the narratives circulating in global media.

This study contributes to securitization theory by showing that security in tourism is shaped by communicative and narrative practices as well as by objective realities. Perceptions of safety and insecurity are dynamically formed, contested, and revised through ongoing narrative, representational, and practical processes. Thus, the findings reinforce the views of Buzan et al. (1998) and Balzacq (2010), indicating that the construction and dissemination of security narratives rely on a range of communicative processes rather than on objective events alone. Additionally, these results also corroborate existing research on risk perception, which states that communication, interpretive frameworks, and social amplification dictate risk perception (Kasperson et al., 2010; Slovic, 2010). Moreover, the study shows that the development of a tourism image in post-conflict settings is flexible, context-dependent, and

particularly susceptible to external factors. Rwanda's destination image emerges from a combination of internal branding and external actors' representations, which can bolster, challenge, or nuance official messaging. In this context, destination managers must consistently work to manage public perceptions, address sources of uncertainty, and maintain the trust of prospective travelers. This ongoing effort is especially important because media narratives can shape and reinforce public perceptions of broader issues, such as regional security and risk, even when those perceptions do not reflect local realities (Glaesser, 2003, p. 26). Therefore, Rwanda's tourism image emerges as a continually negotiated construct shaped by competing narratives of safety, stability, and risk.

7.2 Study limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the results of this study. First, the empirical materials for the study were collected and analyzed in three languages: English, French, and Finnish. Given my familiarity with all three languages, I analyzed the materials in their original languages. However, to maintain consistency and readability, all quotations were translated into English. Despite careful attention to preserving the original intent and context, some nuances, cultural elements, or subtle meanings may have been altered or lost in translation. Moreover, the absence of Kinyarwanda and other regional languages may have led to an incomplete representation of certain viewpoints.

Second, the study relied chiefly on international media and institutional sources, leaving the perspectives of local communities, multiple tourism operators, and tourists themselves relatively underexplored. The semi-structured interview with a Rwandan tourism operator provided valuable contextual insight into tourism communication and destination perceptions, but it did not capture the full diversity of perspectives across Rwanda's tourism sector. Furthermore, the interview was conducted in English, which was neither the participant's nor the researcher's first language. As a result, certain meanings, expressions, or contextual nuances may not have been communicated or interpreted with complete precision. The online format also limited the observation of nonverbal and broader contextual cues that could have enriched interpretation. Additionally, the virtual setting may have influenced the depth and spontaneity of the interaction compared to face-to-face fieldwork. The incorporation of additional interviews could have offered more comprehensive perspectives; therefore, the findings remain partly dependent on the limited contextual insight provided by this interview.

Third, both thematic and narrative analyses entail methodological considerations. The flexibility of thematic analysis enables the identification and interpretation of diverse patterns in qualitative data, but it also requires researchers to make numerous decisions about coding and theme development (Braun & Clarke, 2022, pp. 69–72; Nowell et al., 2017). As Boyatzis (1998), Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 97; 2022, p. 7), and Holstein (2018, p. 403) highlight, the range of possible analytical approaches can pose challenges to developing consistent procedures for higher-level interpretation. Similarly, Riessman (2008, pp. 11–13) argues that narrative analysis not only examines what different narratives communicate, but also how they are constructed, for whom they are told, and which meanings they convey within social contexts. Narrative interpretation therefore inevitably involves analytical judgment, meaning that different researchers may reasonably emphasize different aspects of the same material. Furthermore, drawing on Riessman (2008, pp. 6–11, 21–25), a researcher’s position, perspective, and context play an inescapable role in shaping narrative interpretation and construction. Although systematic coding, repeated engagement with the material, and qualitative analysis software were used to strengthen analytical rigor in this study, the process of theme development and narrative interpretation remained shaped by my interpretive decisions.

Finally, the results are based on materials collected in a specific time frame and context. As Denzin and Lincoln (2018) emphasize, qualitative research findings are situated within particular temporal and contextual settings and may evolve as circumstances change. Given that media narratives and perceptions of risk are not static, shifts in political, social, or regional contexts may lead to different conclusions over time. Accordingly, these findings should be viewed as representative of the materials examined in this study, rather than as an exhaustive account of all narratives about Rwanda as a tourism destination.

7.3 Suggestions for future research

While the findings of this study offer valuable insights into narrative construction in post-conflict tourism, they also highlight several opportunities for future research. First, subsequent research could broaden the scope by analyzing how security and risk narratives are constructed in other locations near regions experiencing geopolitical strife. The findings of this study indicate that tourism destinations may be influenced by broad regional developments and external security narratives. These considerations are especially important for destinations bordering conflict zones or geopolitically sensitive areas. For instance,

Finland's proximity to Russia, combined with recent public discourse on regional security, critical infrastructure incidents, increased drone activity, and NATO engagements, shows how perceptions of safety can be shaped by regional geopolitics, regardless of domestic stability. Future research could examine how destinations in similar circumstances communicate about safety, address external concerns and risk narratives, and build tourist trust. Such studies would provide further insight into the construction of securitization, risk perception, and destination image in contemporary tourism settings.

Second, future studies could investigate how different stakeholder groups interpret and experience security and risk narratives. Although this analysis was primarily limited to media and institutional accounts, subsequent research could draw on the experiences of tourists, local populations, tourism practitioners, and policymakers to offer valuable insights into how safety and risk narratives are interpreted and negotiated in real-world settings. Such research would complement the present study by providing a deeper understanding of how mediated narratives intersect with the lived experiences and decision-making processes of tourism stakeholders.

Third, long-term studies would be particularly useful for examining how destination images and risk perceptions change in response to evolving circumstances. Changes in political circumstances, media interests, and regional contexts may alter the narratives surrounding tourism destinations over time. Therefore, a long-term analysis of media, advisory, and official tourism communications could reveal how a destination's image is continually built, challenged, and reconstructed in response to changing contexts. Such research would also provide valuable insights into how national reputations evolve over time and whether international perceptions eventually reflect changing realities (Anholt, 2007, p. 27). Finally, conducting comparative research across destinations could deepen researchers' and society's understanding of how security narratives shape tourism development and influence destination image. Comparative analyses of Rwanda alongside other post-conflict destinations, as well as destinations facing different forms of geopolitical uncertainty, could reveal both shared patterns and context-specific differences in how safety, risk, and destination image are constructed.

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APPENDIX 1. Interview questions and structure

1a. Background/ Warm-up

- Could you tell a little bit about your typical working tasks/ day?
- How long have you been working in the tourism industry in Rwanda?
- Could you tell me about the organization you are working for and its role in Rwanda?

1b. Perception of Security and Risk

- As a tour provider in Rwanda, how would you describe the current situation there?
- How would you then describe the on-the-ground security situation to an international tourist who knows nothing about Rwanda apart from what they read in the media?
- What concerns do you think most influence tourists' sense of safety while visiting Rwanda?

2. Influence of External Narratives

- How do you stay informed about international communications on safety in Rwanda? How have these been recently, in your opinion?
- Have you noticed changes in tourists' attitudes or behaviors after security alerts, such as those related to regional instability? Can you share an example?
- Have tourists' concerns changed over time? If so, how?
- How do Western travel advisories compare with your own assessment of risk on the ground? Why do you think so?

3. Communication and Securitization Narratives

- When tourists raise security concerns, how do you usually respond? (Why?)
- Can you share specific stories or messages you use to reassure tourist?
- Are there any guidelines within the organization you work for for responding to tourists' concerns?
- How do official messages from the government or tourism boards influence what you say about safety?

4. Operational Strategies and Experiences

- What practical operations does your organization take to make tourists feel safe?
- How are the staff trained to discuss safety, risk, and sensitive topics such as regional conflict?
- Can you describe a moment when a tourist was afraid to be here? What did you do?

5. Reflexivity and Tensions

- Is there something challenging about discussing Rwanda's security situation with international tourists?
- How do you handle questions about genocide or regional conflict (Are there certain guidelines for these?)
- Are there situations where discussing safety or context requires careful judgment? How do you approach those conversations with visitors?

6. Impact and Reflection

- How important would you say your role is in shaping tourists' perceptions of safety, and what changes do you think could further improve Rwanda's image internationally?
- Is there something else related to the topic you would like to add?

Thank you for your time

APPENDIX 2. Letter of Consent

LETTER OF CONSENT

Dear Sir/Madam,

My name is Achat Gallute. I am a master's student in the Tourism, Culture, and International Management (TourCIM) program at the University of Lapland in Rovaniemi, Finland. My thesis is supervised by Senior Lecturer Dr. Minni Haanpää (minni.haanpaa@ulapland.fi, Tel.00000). I am writing to invite you to participate in my master's thesis study, "Navigating Risk Perceptions: Securitization and Tourism Development in Post-Conflict Rwanda."

My research examines how tourism professionals in Rwanda communicate destination image and reassurance to international visitors.

All collected data will be used exclusively for academic purposes and handled in strict accordance with the University of Lapland's ethical guidelines, the principles of responsible research conduct from the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity, and the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

By signing this letter, you consent to the use of the interview material solely for research purposes. All data will be processed using pseudonymization. Participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw your consent at any time after signing this letter by notifying me through the contact information below.

Please note that, in addition to my master's thesis, the collected data may be used in future academic research, provided it complies with relevant ethical guidelines and data protection regulations.

If you have any questions or need further information about the study or the use of the research data, please feel free to contact my supervisor or me.

Sincerely,

Achat Gallute

TourCIM Master student

Phone: 00000

Email: agallute@ulapland.fi

I consent to the interview being used as data for the purpose stated above.

Signature

Date

Print Name

APPENDIX 3. Overview of empirical materials

Label	Source	Language	Article title	Publication date	Analytical focus
YLE1	Yle Uutiset	Finnish	Ruandassa: Kansanmurhasta on 25 vuotta ja trauma on yhä käsittelemästä – “Jos emme pysäytä sitä nyt, tämä jatkuu sukupolvesta toiseen”	0.7. 04.2019	Genocide memory and historical trauma
YLE2	Yle Uutiset	Finnish	Tilanne on hirveä, sanoo Pelastakaa lasten maajohtaja – tästä Kongon konfliktissa on kyse	28.01.2025	Regional instability and humanitarian crisis
YLE3	Yle Uutiset	Finnish	Kongosta saapunut pakolaisia ja sotilaita Ruandan rajalle – YK varoittaa etnisestä väkivallasta	29.01.2025	Border insecurity and regional conflict
YLE4	Yle Uutiset	Finnish	Kongo demokraattinen tasavalta ja Ruanda allekirjoittivat rauhansopimuksen	27.06.2025	Regional diplomacy and peace crisis
FR1	France24	French	Marche de colère à Goma après de nouveaux tirs d’obus au Nord-Kivu	24.08.2013	Cross-border insecurity narratives
FR2	France24	French	Kigali accuse l’armée congolaise de bombardier son territoire	29.08.2013	Regional tensions and security discourse
FR3	France24	French	Les rebelles du M23 battent en retraite dans le nord de Goma	31.08.2013	Conflict representation and regional instability
FR4	France24	English	Rwanda inks deal with PSG football club to promote tourism	05.12.2019	Destination branding and tourism promotion
FR5	France24	French	Au Rwanda, Antony Blinken fait part de son inquiétude pour les droits humains.	11. 08.2022	Governance, rights, and international perception

FR6	France24	French	Génocide des Tutsi au Rwanda : une plongée dans l'horreur	07.04.2024	Historical memory and post-conflict narratives
FR7	France24	French	RD Congo, traite d'êtres humains au Nigeria, village fantôme en Angola: l'hebdo Afrique	07.02.2025	Regional instability and humanitarian narratives
FR8	France24	French	ONU : Le Conseil des droits de l'Homme lance une enquête sur les exactions dans l'est de la RD Congo	07.02.2025	Regional insecurity and conflict narratives
FR9	France24	English	M23 troops advance into DR Congo's second city as UK warns of escalation	16.02.2025	Regional escalation and security perception
FR10	France24	French	RD Congo: Kinshasa et le M23 signent un accord de cesser-le-feu au Qatar	19.07.2025	Diplomacy and regional conflict narrative
FR11	France24	French	En RD Congo, ouverture du procès de l'ancien président Joseph Kabila pour "crimes contre la paix	25.07.2025	Regional conflict and political instability
FR12	France24	French	Accord de paix RD Congo-Rwanda: une première réunion après l'accord de paix RD Congo-Rwanda	01.08.2025	Peace process and regional diplomacy
FR13	France24	English	"M23 and Rwanda' to blame for latest violence in DR Congo: US senior advisor for Africa	16.02.2026	Alleged involvement and regional insecurity
BBC1	BBC News	English	UK asylum deal: Is Rwanda a land of safety or fear?	14.04.2022	Security, safety, and destination image
BBC2	BBC News	English	Two armies accused of backing DR Congo's feared rebels	09.07.2024	Regional instability and conflict narratives

BBC3	BBC News	English	The evidence that shows Rwanda is backing rebels in DR Congo	29.01.2025	Political ties and regional insecurity
BBC4	BBC Sport	English	F1 ‘monitors’ conflict amid Rwanda grand prix concerns	12.02.2025	Narrative tension between tourism and insecurity
BBC5	BBC Sport	English	Cyclists felt safe in Rwanda despite security concerns	05.03.2025	Safety narratives and tourism perception
BBC6	BBC Sport	English	Arsenal to end sponsorship deal with Visit Rwanda	19.11.2025	Tourism branding and international image
VR1	Visit Rwanda Website	English	Volcanoes National Park & Stories	n.d.	Destination branding, conservation tourism, safety and attractiveness Safety narratives and destination attractiveness
RDB1	RDB Annual Report	English	Annual report 2020. Documenting Rwanda’s Resilience to COVID-19	2020	Recovery, resilience, tourism development
RDB2	RDB Annual Report	English	Annual report 2023. Building Resilience for Sustained Economic Growth	2023	Economic growth, resilience, stability
RDB3	RDB Annual Report	English	Annual report 2024. Sustaining Growth, Towards Transformation	2024	Development, modernization, tourism strategy
RDB4	RDB Annual Report	English	Accelerating Rwanda’s Economic Transformation. Five-Year Strategy 2025-2030	2026	National transformation and long-term development vision
RDB5	RDB Website	English	Invest in Tourism	n.d.	Investment promotion and destination attractiveness

APPENDIX 4. Supporting and contextual materials

Label	Source	Language	Title	Publication date	Analytical focus
TA1	US	English	Rwanda travel advisory	July 2025	International risk perception and travel safety
TA2	Swiss DFAE	French	Conseils pour les voyages - Rwanda	22.08.2025	Regional instability and travel precaution
TA3	GOV.UK.	English	Foreign travel advice: Rwanda – FCDO advises against all but essential travel to part of Rwanda	18.12.2025	Official risk communication and regional security warnings
TA4	Ireland DFA –	English	Rwanda: Security status	28.01.2026	Security framing and travel risk representation
TA5	Government of Canada	English	Rwanda travel advice	28.04.2026	Official travel guidance and risk communication

Label	Participant pseudonym	Method	Date	Purpose
INT1 (“Milk”)	Rwandan tourism operator	Semi-structured Zoom interview	January 2026	Contextual insight into tourism communication, destination image, and perceptions of Rwanda as a tourism destination

APPENDIX 5. Reflective research diary

Materials	Description	Timeframe	Function
Reflective research diary	Reflective diary written between November 2025 and February 2026 documenting the research permit application process, fieldwork preparation, and methodological adaptation	13.11.2025 - 25.02.2026	Used reflexively to examine methodological adaptation, institutional procedures, research access negotiations, and the practical challenges of conducting research in a post-conflict destination

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