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# **Influence of social media on corporate heritage tourism brand**

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## **Abstract**

Heritage tourism is an established research canon. However, corporate heritage tourism is an emerging research stream that integrates the heritage tourism canon and corporate brand attributes. This study, utilising a conceptual approach and proposing a conceptual model, explicates the role of social media (marketer and consumer-generated media) in fostering a sense of community among the corporate heritage tourism brand adherents and visit intention among members of the community. In addition, this study incorporates social identity theory to dilate group dynamics and to foster strong feelings and sense of identity among its community.

**Keywords:** corporate brand, heritage tourism, social media

## **1. Introduction**

Scholars' attention to explicating the evolutionary process of corporate brands has underscored its importance (Pitt et al., 2006; Rindell & Strandvik, 2010). The corporate heritage brand research stream has emerged to unravel the relevance of the organisations' past and contemporary concerns in order to influence future generalisations (Balmer & Burghausen, 2015). The corporate heritage literature is concerned with existing institutions having an enduring meaningful heritage and not those that are gone (Balmer & Chen, 2016). The evolution of corporate brand has been proposed to include both closed source and open source (Pitt et al., 2006). Pitt et al. argue that the closed source perspective rests the power and control of the brand on management, whereas the open source argument recognises the consumer as a co-creator and producer of corporate brand. In this argument, the consumer is no longer the passive recipient of marketing messages but rather is very active in controlling and co-building corporate brand (Rindell & Strandvik, 2010).

More recently, the corporate heritage brand research stream has been applied in tourism literature (Balmer & Chen, 2016). However, heritage tourism literature has been an established research canon (Poria, Butler & Airey, 2003). Heritage tourism research mostly relates to historical events and also evokes feelings of the present and a connection to traditional entities and national identity (Park, 2010; Balmer & Chen, 2016). Specifically, many tourism sites hold cultural, philosophical, and socio-psychological remnants that signify important and nostalgic events in the past, educational opportunities in the present and guides in the future. Metaphorically, heritage is not just the tangible elements represented by sites and artefacts but also the intangible elements that embody symbolic and spiritual meanings grounded in the material representation of the past (Park, 2010). The heritage industry is divided along the cultural, natural and built elements (Poria, Butler & Airey, 2003).

According to Balmer & Chen (2016), corporate heritage tourism brand is the blend of corporate heritage brand and heritage tourism. Thus, as corporate brands, can be 'tourism attractions in their own right' (Balmer & Chen, 2016. p.3). They bear cultural identities which resonate with the historical progression of the people. Their attractiveness to domestic and foreign visitors is anchored on its long-endured and living identities. Technically, they espouse the attributes of a destination brand, because, for instance, they have unique identities that differentiate them; however, not all destination brands qualify as corporate heritage tourism brands. In line with Balmer & Chen's (2016) argument, they are single tourism attraction, for instance, Tong Ren Tang, a Chinese traditional medicine shop founded in 1669.

Social media presents a solid platform for individuals to share content related to their feelings in the form of photos, videos and text. The feelings of social and cultural connection tie people to a community, and such a community can be enhanced through social media (Balmer & Burghausen, 2015). Similarly, social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), proposes that an individual's sense of self-worth is based on the group he or she belongs. An individual with a positive sense of social identity takes pride and derives self-esteem in the group. Consequently, social identity plays an important role in fostering community cohesiveness. Furthermore, the desire to advance the brand can metamorphose into we-intention. We-intention, according to Tuomela (1995, p. 9), is a "commitment of an individual to engage in joint action and involves an implicit or explicit agreement

between the participants to engage in that joint action.” Thus, corporate heritage tourism brand adherents can be cohesively united through the sense of social identity and social media foster we-intention whereby share, connect and advance the brand. In this study, the concepts of “corporate heritage tourism brand”, “site” and “destination” are used to represent the services or offerings that influence consumers’ visits.

However, although substantial efforts have been variously made in explicating corporate heritage, corporate heritage brand, and corporate heritage tourism brand (Balmer & Burghausen, 2015; Rindell & Strandvik, 2010; Balmer & Chen, 2016), knowledge is still scarce on the contributions of social media (marketer and consumer-generated media) on corporate heritage tourism brands. In addition, existing literature does not clarify how marketer- and consumer-generated media influence visit intention to a corporate heritage tourism brand. Finally, Balmer & Chen (2016) called for a study to incorporate social identity theory in the corporate heritage tourism brand literature. Therefore, conceptually, the objectives of this study are as follows:

- extend the corporate heritage tourism literature using the social identity theory;
- explain how marketer-generated media influence intention to visit a corporate heritage tourism site; and
- explain how consumer-generated media influence intention to visit a corporate heritage tourism site.

## **2. The corporate brand**

Within the broad stream of the branding literature, the product brand and the corporate brand appear synonymous but are actually different (Balmer & Burghausen, 2015). At the product brand level, consumers’ perceptions of the brand are influenced by the brand identity and brand image. Aaker (1996, p. 68) defines brand identity as ‘a unique set of brand associations that the brand strategist aspires to create or maintain’, whereas brand image ‘is how a brand is perceived by consumers’ (p. 71). Time, memories and associations influence the brand image (Rindell & Iglesias, 2014). To this end, the concept of brand heritage captures how these elements aggregate to form the consumer’s perception of the brand. Urde, Greyser & Balmer (2007, p. 4) define brand heritage as ‘a dimension of a brand’s identity, found in its track record, longevity, core value, use of symbols and particularly in its organisational belief that its history is important.’ As a result, the past and future influence the present brand strategies, practices and identity construction (Rindell, & Iglesias, 2014; Balmer & Burghausen, 2015).

Corporate brands develop out of corporate identities. According to Balmer (2012, p. 1072), ‘corporate identity refers to an organisation’s distinguishing identity features, and a corporate brand identity is associated with the associations and expectations linked to a corporate brand name and or marque etc.’ Corporate brands are considered as monetary assets and a way of building trust and stability in a turbulent and competitive market (Rindell & Strandvik, 2010). Contrasting extant studies on corporate brand image, Rindell & Strandvik (2010) argue that the concepts of image-in-use and image heritage have totally redefined corporate brand evolution. They posit that given consumers’ everyday interactions with multiple sources, brand images change over time in the minds of consumers. According to the authors, image heritage comprises the individual consumer’s prior company-related experiences arising from interactions with others on different platforms. Image-in-use refers to the value derived in the consumption context. The open source view of the brand image acknowledges the fact that the perception of the brand is influenced by everything consumers consider relevant to it (Rindell & Iglesias, 2014).

### **2.1 Corporate Heritage**

Heritage as a concept has been used in different contexts. In disciplinary terms, heritage occupies a prominent research stream in tourism, sociology and marketing (Balmer & Chen, 2016). Heritage applies to the tangible, intangible and metaphysical (Balmer, 2013). However, much of the academic discourse on heritage discusses it from a narrow prism on the built environment and visitor attractions (museums and sites) (Balmer, 2011). Balmer (2013, p. 296) contends that ‘corporate heritage institutions have living, durable but also – importantly – adaptable corporate identity traits.’

From the above understanding, Balmer & Burghausen (2015) posit that corporate heritage represents some aspects of the firm’s past that are still relevant in light of contemporary concerns and that are worth preserving for future generations. For an institution to qualify as having a corporate heritage, Balmer (2013) argues that it must possess the following criteria:

- Omni-temporality
- Institution trait consistency
- External/internal tri-generational hereditary
- Augmented role identities

- Ceaseless multigenerational stakeholder utility
- Unrelenting management tenacity

Corporate heritage identity comprises the artefacts, competencies, philosophies, etc. that existed in the past, that are relevant in the present and that will be meaningful in the future. Consequently, the time element is an important determinant of a corporate heritage identity.

### **3. Heritage tourism and corporate heritage tourism**

Heritage is culturally ingrained, a representation of a people's nationhood, epitomising identities, ethnicities and nationalities (Park, 2010). Heritage has evolved from the appellation of the cognitive dimensions such as 'implicating castles, plantation great homes, battlefields, old churches' as important cultural identities of a people to the affective dimensions such as the feelings and sense of connection to such cultural emblematisations (Weaver, 2011, p. 249). Heritage tourism has been an established research canon in the tourism literature (Poria, Butler & Airey, 2003). According to Chhabra (2010, p. 5), heritage tourism is defined as 'a phenomenon that focuses on the management of past, inheritance, and authenticity to enhance participation and satisfy consumer motivations by evoking nostalgic emotions; its underlying purpose is to stimulate monetary benefits for its various constituencies such as the museums, historic houses, festivals, heritage hotels, and other stakeholders.' Additionally, heritage tourism has been limited to the cultural, natural or built elements, with two main identified approaches to its study (Poria, Butler & Airey, 2003). One approach regards heritage tourism as historic places, in which case 'the presence of tourists is sufficient.' The second approach links the content of a place to the phenomenon, in which case motivations and experiences are underlying reasons for the trip.

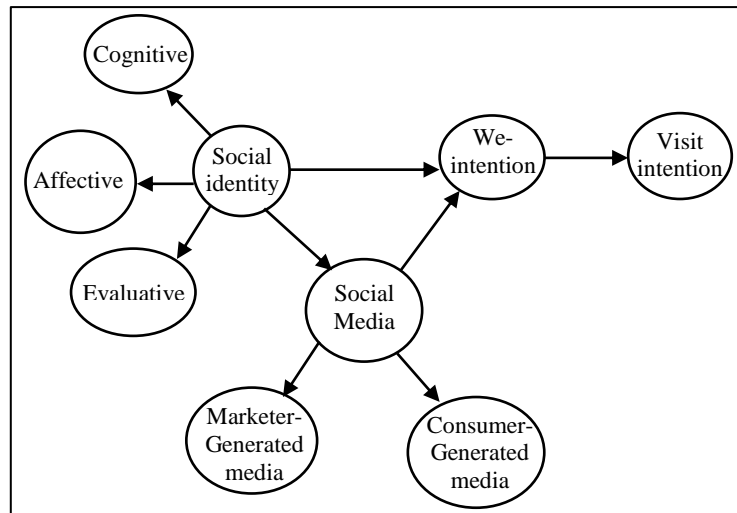
Established also in tourism literature is the concept of destination brands. Morrison & Anderson (2002) posit that destination brands consist of the unique identities that differentiate a destination from others. Customers' perception of a destination is based on the evaluative and cognitive judgements they hold about that destination. Consequently, managers' effort in destination branding is to combine all the elements of a destination to give it a unique image from competing destinations (Morrison & Anderson, 2002). However, Balmer's (2013) conceptualization of corporate heritage tourism brand consists of single tourism attractions; focuses on 'living' rather than 'defunct' heritage institutions. Moreover, it unifies traditionally held heritage tourism (Park, 2010) with corporate heritage espousals (Balmer, 2011a; Balmer, 2011b; Balmer, 2013). Thus, corporate heritage tourism blends heritage institutions/brands and through their origins and meanings attract tourists/customers (Balmer, 2013).

### **4. Social Identity Theory**

Social identity theory was developed by Tajfel & Turner (1979). It establishes the position of an individual as belonging to a social group. It holds that an individual's self-concept includes both his personal identity (the 'I') and the social group in which he or she belongs (the 'We'). The individual's sense of self is based on social categories that define him or her. An individual with a high level of social identity positively distinguishes her- or himself from other groups and has the tendency to identify with the group that provides him or her with a positive self-image. The theory also assumes that the individual's definition of self-worth is evaluated based on the community to which he or she belongs and involves cognitive, affective and evaluative components (Dholakia, Bagozzi & Pearo, 2004). In the cognitive sense, social identity is evident in the categorization processes. In this case, the individual spends time thinking about being a member of the community and also assesses similarities and dissimilarities with members and non-members, respectively (Dholakia, Bagozzi & Pearo, 2004). One central postulation of the cognitive social identity theory is depersonalization (Stets & Burke, 2000). Stets & Burke (2000) argue that depersonalization involves seeing oneself as an embodiment of the in-group rather than as a unique individual. Thus, the norms and meanings of the group membership are internalized and acted upon in accordance with those norms and a distinct perception of dissimilarities with outer-groups.

In the affective sense, social identity implies positive feelings towards being a member of the group and emotional involvement in the group's activities (Dholakia, Bagozzi & Pearo, 2004). Allen & Meyer (1996, p. 253) define affective commitment to the group as 'identification with, involvement in, and emotional attachment to the organisation.' Affective commitment is underpinned by two cardinal emotional prototypes: joy and love (Bergami & Bagozzi 2000). According to Bergami & Bagozzi (2000, p. 560), joy entails 'happiness arising from the organisation as a social category' whereas love consists of 'emotional attraction or affection towards the organisation as a social category'. Finally, the evaluative component of social identity implies the perception of similarity and bond with others in the community and the individual's evaluation of self-worth as a member of the group (Dholakia, Bagozzi & Pearo, 2004).

# Corporate heritage tourism brand



**Fig. 1.** Conceptual framework

Consistent with the above, the nostalgic feelings and sense of identity that a corporate heritage tourism brand evokes (Park, 2010) among its community fosters strong we-intentions (Dholakia, Bagozzi & Pearo, 2004). Thus, according to Poria, Butler & Airey (2003), motivations for visit are strongly underpinned by the tourists' perceptions of such brands as their own heritage. As a result, commitment to the brand can also trigger a socio-psychological switching from outer-group members to the brand (Lam, Aheame & Schillewaert, 2010) and intention to visit. Consequently, **Figure 1** is the conceptual framework, derived on the strength of the literature and discussion above. It implies that social identity theory and social media foster strong we-intentions which influence visit intentions to a corporate heritage tourism brand.

**Table 1: Previous research on social identity theory to online social networks**

Author	Purpose	Context	Independent variables	Dependent variable(s)	Results
Cheung & Lee (2010)	To develop and test a model on intentional social action on online social network	Facebook users	Subjective norm, group norm, social identity (cognitive, affective, evaluative)	We-intentions	Social identity and subjective norm determine collective intention to use social networking site
Mehra, Kilduff & Brass (1998)	To examine the extent to which membership in demographic group influence social identification and interaction patterns	MBA students	Friendship network, homophily, sex, race	Identity network	A small group in a social context uses that group as a basis for shared identity and social interaction
Shen, Yu & Khalifa (2010)	To test a model that integrates social identity and social presence in virtual	Virtual community	Sensory social presence, affective social presence, cognitive social presence	Knowledge contribution, social identity	Both affective and cognitive social presence contributed to social identity in virtual communities

communities

Barker (2009)	To assess the motives for social network sites, group belonging and collective self-esteem and gender effect among older adolescents	Freshmen students	Entertainment, social compensation, positive collective esteem, negative collective esteem	Peer group contact	Those high in collective self-esteem have high motivation to communicate through social network site
Casalo, Flavian & Guinaliu (2010)	To explain consumers' intention to participate in firm-hosted online travel communities	Firm-hosted online travel community (Tourism)	Attitude, subjective norm, perceived behavioural control, perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, identification	Intention to participate	The integration of technology acceptance model, theory of planned behaviour and social identity theory presents a simple way to explain intention to participate in firm-hosted online travel community
Dholakia, Bagozzi & Pearo (2004)	To investigate group-level virtual community participation: group norm and social identity	Virtual communities	Social influence, social identity, value perceptions	Desire, we-intention, participation behaviour	Social benefits such as interpersonal connectivity and social enhancement are key drivers of participation in virtual communities

However, a review of the literature on the application of social identity theory to online social networks reveals an acute paucity of the theory's use in tourism. Thus, **Table 1** presents some of the studies and the context in which social identity theory was studied in online social networks.

## 5. Marketer-generated media and corporate heritage tourism brand

Social media has provided numerous opportunities for brand adherents to connect, share, popularise and add new members. Thus, in the context of this study, marketer-generated media are corporate-sponsored content on social media pages attached to websites owned, run and managed by corporate heritage tourism institutions. They include text, photos and videos intended to attract traffic to their corporate sites. They are used as a platform to disseminate new product knowledge, engage consumers and foster customer relationships (Dholakia, Bagozzi & Pearo, 2004). Some studies view marketer-generated media as an advertising platform (Bronner & Hoog 2010), as the means to disseminate information on new product (Chatterjee, 2011) and as a destination branding tool (Lim, Chung & Weaver, 2012).

Recently, social media has enhanced online brand community through the aggregation of wider audiences without geographical limitations (Järvinen, Tollinen, Karjaluo & Jayawardhena, 2012). An online brand community is defined as 'a specialized, non-geographically bound community based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand' in an online setting (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001, p. 412). Online brand communities can be corporate-sponsored (marketer-generated) or independently-owned (consumer-generated) (Adjei, Noble & Noble, 2010). Marketers ensure that content is regularly updated, has the ability to provide fun, is entertaining and provides educational benefits (Erdoğan & Cicek, 2012). In the context of corporate heritage tourism brands, consumers' value co-creation can be enhanced by uploading photos and videos that not only provide captivating and attractive scenes but also offer explanations on how to navigate the destination to ensure optimum satisfaction.

## 6. Consumer-generated media and corporate heritage tourism brand

Communication in online forums among brand adherents increases brand awareness and leads to purchase intention (Adjei, Noble & Noble, 2010). High involvement products such as tourism services requires consumers to rely heavily on information provided by fellow consumers, and so they resort to consumer-generated media

(CGM). CGM is defined as ‘media impressions created by consumers, typically informed by relevant experience and archived or shared online for easy access by other impressionable consumers’ (Gretzel, Kang & Lee, 2008, p. 100). CGM are more persuasive because they reflect the typical experience of the tourist, thus, consumers rely upon them more than marketer-generated content (Sparks & Browning, 2011).

Timeliness, relevance, frequency and duration are important communication qualities that necessitate consumer-to-consumer online brand community engagement (Adjei, Noble & Noble, 2010). A consumer’s intention to visit is influenced by the consumer’s past experience, the source credibility and the content’s characteristics. Consequently, a consumer’s offline experience with the brand will improve the brand attitude when that brand features in a consumer-to-consumer online discussion forum (Xue & Phelps, 2004). In addition, the prior knowledge of social media platforms and level of involvement with the products and benefits sought can influence intention to use the content and visit the destination (Kang & Schuett, 2013). Not all consumer-generated media are credible, thus, source credibility, expertise and degree of similarity between the user and the creators of the content influence intention to visit (Herrero, Martin & Hernandez (2015). Finally, the content novelty, the understandability and the ability to generate positive feelings as a result of well-designed layout can effectively increase readers’ intention and positive feelings, thereby positively influencing visit intention (Chen, Shang & Li, 2014).

## **7. Discussion**

Brand associations are aspects of the brand linked to a consumer’s memory (Rindell, Edvardsson & Strandvik, 2010), and they influence the consumer’s evaluation culminating into purchase or visit intention. Brand associations are classified into categories: attributes, benefits and attitudes (Qu, Kim & Im, 2011). According to Qu, Kim & Im (2011), attributes relate to the features that make up the brand; benefits are the values consumers derive from using the brand, and attitudes are the sum total of consumers’ evaluations of the brand. Similarly, corporate heritage tourism brand attraction depends on the consumer’s identification of the attributes, benefits and attitudes that consumers attach to the destination. Although mainstream branding literature cedes the power of brand building and control to the firm, recent studies reveal that through the open source view, the consumer is an active agent of brand evolution and emergence (Pitt et al., 2006; Rindell & Strandvik, 2010; Rindell, 2013). Thus, according to Rindell (2013, p. 208), ‘academic researchers and commentators have emphasized a change in thinking about brands from their role as identifiers to their function as consumer-generated dynamic and social process.’ The increase in developing new social media platforms and consumers’ inelastic interest in ‘being current’ indicate that the platforms are most powerful in brand information dissemination.

Consistent with the above, the open source argument recognises the consumer as a co-creator and co-producer of corporate brands, thus moving the consumer from a passive recipient of marketing messages to being very active in controlling and co-building corporate brands. Social media has provided an actual platform where consumers, through comments and reviews, have actively contributed to corporate-sponsored content thereby influencing the firm’s branding efforts. Similarly, online communities independently run and managed by consumers have generated content that present sincere and honest positions on the firm’s products and services. Additionally, through social identity, there is a union of purpose among the adherents of the brand. Social identity also motivates participation towards the achievements of the interest of the group. Therefore, social media as a platform fosters that collective interest by providing a platform for members to share and advance the brand.

### **7.1 Contributions of the study**

Our study is unique and contributes to existing knowledge in the following ways. First, our study is unique as it incorporates social identity theory into the emerging corporate heritage tourism brand research stream. Although this theory has been variously used and found suitable in studying social networks and virtual communities, its application in the tourism literature remains scarce. This theory is especially important because it unravels the dynamics of in-group behaviours that are very relevant to the corporate heritage tourism brand. Our study opens a new frontier for subsequent studies in this area. Second, our study demystifies social media and explains how the two major components of social media can be applied to foster the corporate heritage tourism brand. Accordingly, social media can genuinely influence corporate heritage tourism brands either by management’s corporate-sponsored content on their social media pages or through independent consumer-generated content. Either way, comments and reviews made by fellow consumers on such forums can foster we-intention and subsequently influence visit intention.

### **7.2 Limitations and future research directions**

One major limitation of our study is that it is conceptual and did not collect data to test the proposed conceptual model. Moreover, our study did not consider the different social media platforms and how they variously influence intention to visit a corporate heritage tourism brand. Additionally, our treatment of marketer- and



consumer-generated media was general without showing how they affect individual visitors and group visitors. We therefore propose that future researchers should first consider qualitative research by interviewing respondents or conducting focus group interviews. We also suggest that future research should consider the different social media platforms and show how each influences the image of a corporate heritage tourism brand.

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