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Dialogic features of brand South Africa's website and tourists' intentions to visit

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Robert E. Hinson

Department of Marketing and Entrepreneurship, University of Ghana, Accra, Ghana and University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa

John Paul Basewe Kosiba

Department of Marketing, University of Professional Studies, Accra, Ghana

Henry Boateng

School of Communication, University of Technology, Sydney, Australia

Raphael Odoom

Department of Marketing and Entrepreneurship, University of Ghana, Accra, Ghana, and

Ransford Edward Gyampo

Department of Political Science, University of Ghana, Accra, Ghana

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Abstract

Purpose – Despite the recognisable importance of nation brand websites, they have seemingly not been the focus of dialogic communication interrogations of marketing and communications scholars. This paper is one of the initial attempts to address such research lacuna. The paper aims to examine the dialogic potential of the Brand South Africa website and its effect on the country's image, as well as the impact of this image on consumers' (tourists) visiting intentions.

Design/methodology/approach – Drawing from the dialogic communication and impression management theories, the authors applied partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) to analyse data solicited from 672 participants via an electronic survey.

Findings – This paper demonstrates that the dialogic communication principles of the Brand South Africa website have positive influences on the image impression of South Africa. Country image impression was also found to have a significant effect on intentions to visit.

Practical implications – This study is of potential benefit to researchers, government agencies and those responsible for nation branding.

Originality/value – This study contributes to marketing and tourism literatures, by drawing on theories of dialogic communication principles and impression management, to fill the gap regarding the effect of nation brand websites on country image impression and visiting intention of consumers (tourists).

Keywords South Africa, Emerging market, Website, Dialogic communication, Impression management, Nation branding

Paper type Research paper



1. Introduction

The emergence of websites and other technological innovations has created new avenues for organisations to interact, build, manage and negotiate relationships with their customers.

These technologies have also become an integral part of brand building and communication in organisations and among governments worldwide. [Ryan \(2003\)](#), for example, notes that the more an organisation incorporates dialogical principles into its website, the more likely it is to foster an interactive relationship with its stakeholders. Evidence from public relations literature also shows a relationship between the use of dialogic features on websites and higher rates of customer retention ([Gordon and Berhow, 2009](#); [McAllister, 2012](#)). Other studies have also revealed that overtly engaging external stakeholders from a dialogical perspective can also positively affect the public perception of the organisation ([Bruning et al., 2006](#)). Hence, the (mis)management of websites can affect an organisation's image perception and the quality of its communications with stakeholders ([Massey, 2003](#)). Further arguments from the corporate image literature suggest that consumers can form and alter their impressions about a company depending on their perceptions about the company's website ([Bravo et al., 2009](#); [De Chernatony and Christodoulides, 2004](#)). Therefore, to maintain a positive image, strategic action is necessary to influence perceptions, as image is "generated by the accumulation of impressions of the company" ([Villena Manzanares, 2017](#), p. 4).

In consonance with the understanding of image in the marketing literature, the tourism literature also argues that country image is a powerful tool for tourism, particularly to achieve competitive advantage on the market ([Foroudi et al., 2018](#)). Owing to the inadequate knowledge of many potential travellers about the destinations they want to visit ([Hakala et al., 2013](#)), it becomes imperative for nations to assist, by using websites, creating good impressions about their countries. These good perceptions could lead to the formation of favourable images of the countries to potential visitors. Positive country image is argued to be a catalyst for exports, attracting tourists and visitors, as well as residents and investments ([Alvarez and Campo, 2014](#)). In other words, the perception image created via a nation's website can impact tourists' decision to visit. Therefore, given the importance of a nation's brand website and its country image in improving the economic status of countries, [Foroudi et al. \(2018\)](#) have called for more robust empirical research to assess the outcomes of country image.

As previously mentioned, there is a relationship between a nation's website dialogical features and customers' (tourists') image perception of a country. We also argue that tourists' image perception of a country can influence their intentions to visit. We break new grounds by relying on impression management (IM) and dialogical principles to empirically test the relationships between a nation's website dialogical features, and tourist's image perception and visiting intentions. The rest of the paper is organised as follows. The next section discusses the theoretical background and develops the hypotheses. The context of the study, methodology, and data collection are then presented, followed by the study results. The paper ends with the identification of its limitations and implications for theory and practice.

2. Theories of dialogue and impression management

According to [Bohm \(1985\)](#), dialogue involves continual interactions between individuals as a form of interaction "in which collective learning takes place and out of which a sense of increased harmony, fellowship, and creativity can arise" ([Bohm et al., 1991](#), p. 2). Based on dialogue theory, [Kent and Taylor \(1998\)](#) propose five features of a dialogical website: dialogic loop, usefulness of the site, ease of interface, return visit and conservation of visitors. That is, these dialogical features of a website help organisations build, manage and negotiate relationships with customers. Additionally, dialogic communication via online platforms can also enhance an organisation's image ([Vernuccio, 2014](#)). Although [Bohm et al. \(1991\)](#) acknowledge that dialogue might not always lead to decision-making, in our view, the dialogical features of a website can result in positive consumer decision-making, especially