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

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

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
when a good impression is created. Extant management research demonstrates that corporate communication on a digital platform can create a favourable image of an organisation (Roulin, 2014; Rosenberg and Egbert, 2011). Consequently, we argue that dialogic communication via websites can be used to create a favourable image of a place. However, to present a favourable image of themselves to others, individuals or organisations tend to manage their impressions.

Impression management (IM) refers to “any behaviour by a person with the purpose of controlling or manipulating the goal attributions and impressions formed of that person by others” (Tedeschi and Reiss, 1981, p. 3) and also describes “the conscious or unconscious attempt to control images that are projected in real or imagined social interactions” (Schlenker, 1980, p. 6). Scholars propose that individuals’ abilities to manipulate how others perceive them can affect the definition of situations and, thereby, establish expected norms, roles, and behaviours (Jones et al., 1982). To the extent that IM is a purposive effort that entails the tactical communication intended to establish, maintain, or protect desired identities (Rosenfeld et al., 1995), an actor engaged in IM enacts such behaviours or “performances” designed to affect some relevant target audience (e.g. tourists) in a manner favourable to the actor. We argue that IM could be applied not only to individuals but also to entities such as nation brands. We further argue that, because many IM behaviours are conscious and can be controlled, countries can also consciously manage images and stories via their nation brand websites by positively influencing potential tourists’ perceptions on the nations’ brand image.

3. Hypotheses development

High-quality websites are essential because tourists are increasingly searching for information online when making decisions related to purchases or travel (Gursoy and McCleary, 2004). The interactivity of website design has been recognised as a fundamental element for building a brand through image perception (Voorveld et al., 2013). Additionally, websites have been perceived to influence decisions on visiting destinations (Dion and Woodside, 2010). Consequently, websites are a critical component of country image formation, as they shape consumers’ opinions and create positive perceptions that impact their behaviours (Hinson et al., 2018). Owing to the importance of websites, consumers (tourists) expect website content to be engaging, provide useful information, and have simple navigation interfaces (Van der Heijden, 2003; Chung and Law, 2003). These expectations entail effective and efficient website design. Therefore, using Kent and Taylor’s (1998) dialogic communication principles, we argue that a country’s brand website that is interactive and creates a positive image of the country could impact customers’ intentions to visit that country. This is premised on the idea that perceptions are the most basic form of interaction individuals have with a webpage (Parsons, 2015).

As previously discussed, our central assertion is that nation brand websites that exhibit Kent and Taylor’s (1998) dialogical features – dialogic loop, usefulness of information, ability to elicit repeat visits, ease of interface use and ability to conserve visitors – tend to influence the country image perception that consumers (tourists) may have of a nation. We will now explore Kent and Taylor’s (1998) dialogical principles in turn and discuss them in relation to a country’s image perception management.

3.1 Relationship between country brand website dialogical features and a country’s image perception

Theoretically, one of the most appropriate ways to engage in dialogic communication with stakeholders is by using the dialogic loop (Kent and Taylor, 1998). The dialogic loop relates
to the ability of a website to allow visitors to query organisations (by extension, countries) and offer these nations the opportunity to respond to visitors’ questions, concerns, and problems. According to Ramasubbu et al. (2008), when customers receive a speedy response to their queries, they perceive higher service quality, which improves their overall satisfaction. Therefore, we argue that the use of a nation brand website to promptly respond to potential tourists’ questions, concerns, and problems may lead to the formation of an impression. If, for instance, queries, concerns and problems are addressed expeditiously, website visitors would form a favourable perception of that country. On the other hand, a static website is liable to increased, frustrating search efforts and, as a result, reduces tourist satisfaction (Shankar et al., 2003). Further, negative impressions could also be formed about a country based on an unresponsive website.

Moreover, the usefulness of information relates to the provision of contact details for the relevant national departments and agencies to website visitors. Kent et al. (2003) assert that websites must contain information relevant to the visitor. For a nation brand website, relevant information could include interesting places to visit, accommodation options, and a brief history of the country. Countries that aim to impress potential tourists generally provide such information tailored to meet their needs and also answer pertinent questions concerning the country. We believe that a nation’s brand website that provides relevant information to potential tourists and portrays itself positively by the nature of the information it provides will generate a positive impression on tourists.

Another way to engage in dialogic communication with stakeholders using a website is through return visits to the website. The website should thus provide exciting and attractive features to encourage repeat visits such as updated information, special forums, new comments, virtual question and answer sessions and the availability of online “experts” to answer interested visitors’ questions. According to Thompson et al. (2008), an attractive formatting enhances a website’s appeal. Zusman and Landis (2002), based on a survey of company website visitors, consider that the attractiveness of a web page affected respondents’ perceptions of quality from their viewing of the website favourably manner and their desire to work in such organisations. This suggests that attractive websites may not only create a positive impression of the entity, but also have greater propensity to attract return visits. We therefore maintain that a website with exciting and attractive features could convey a positive impression of a country, resulting in its positive image perception.

The ease of use of the website interface is another way by which stakeholders can be encouraged to engage in dialogic communication. Previous studies on this topic have proven it has the ability to elicit favourable responses through the impression it creates on target audiences. For instance, Thompson et al. (2008) found that the perception that site visitors had of the overall website design translated into a pursuit of a job with that organisation. Extending this to the context of a nation brand website, we argue that websites with easily navigable interfaces would create positive perceptions of tourists, which would in turn lead to a positive image of that nation.

Finally, the conservation of visitors of a website is another means to engage stakeholders in dialogic communication. Kent et al. (2003) assert that websites should include only “essential links” with marked paths that trigger visitors’ return and avoid “links” that can lead visitors off the website. We consider that the longer a potential tourist remains on a nation’s website, the more he/she learns about the country, engendering the creation of perceptions about the country, which translates into the formation of an image of the country.

Consequently, we argue that the principles of dialogic communication (dialogic loop, usefulness of information, ability to elicit repeat, ease of interface use and ability to conserve
visitors) for a website can assist countries in influencing country image perception. Therefore, we propose the following set of testable hypotheses:

\( H1a \). A nation brand website's dialogic loop positively influences country image perception.

\( H1b \). Nation brand website's usefulness of information positively influences country image perception.

\( H1c \). Nation brand website's ability to elicit repeat visits positively influences country image perception.

\( H1d \). Nation brand website’s ease of interface use positively influences country image perception.

\( H1e \). Nation brand website’s ability to conserve visitors positively influences country image perception.

3.2 Consequences of country image: country image and intention to visit

Kotler and Gertner (2002) argue that country image is “the sum of beliefs and impressions people hold about places” as “images represent a simplification of many associations and pieces of information connected with a place” (p. 250). Anholt (2007) describes a country’s image as the perceptions held by both natives and foreigners of that country. Every country has an image with or without engaging in branding activities (Fan, 2010). Images guide and shape the behaviour of people and the perceptions they create, although these could be either true or untrue, real or imagined (Barich and Kotler, 1991, p. 95). It has been suggested by Hakala et al. (2013) that place images can and actually change and can therefore be manipulated. The resolutions of people to purchase products, invest in, travel to or relocate to a particular country are highly influenced by the image of that country (Kotler and Gertner, 2002). In this regard, a country’s image is a critical feature worth considering when choosing a travel destination, regardless whether the image is a true reflection or not (Alvarez and Campo, 2014). Potential visitors have mostly inadequate knowledge about the characteristics of a place they have not visited before. As such, extant research argues that a country’s image plays a vital role in tourist knowledge gathering and behaviours by influencing the pre-visit decision-making process (Foroudi et al., 2018; Hinson et al., 2018). Hence, we hypothesise:

\( H2 \). A country image perception positively influences the intention to visit.

4. Case study: the Brand South Africa website

This paper targets the Brand South Africa website as the key focus of its discussion. South Africa is one of the most celebrated and economically developed countries in Africa. However, this image has been marred by some recent incidents and bad press. The xenophobic attacks of 2015 in the country have left a bitter taste in the mouths of visitors from other countries (Motsai, 2017). Although the xenophobic attacks and other reports of violence have potentially devastating effect on the country’s image, South Africa is still seen as one of the most advanced economies on the African continent. Given the seemingly ambivalent global media coverage of Brand South Africa, the role of the nation’s branding agency has become opportune.
Brand South Africa was established in 2002 to help build a positive and captivating brand image for South Africa and strive to build confidence in the country through its inspiring story. Particularly, the Nelson Mandela phenomenon, among others, continues to elicit attraction to the country. Brand South Africa announces on its website that it is positioned to “inspire and unify civil society, business, government and the media to build the reputation of South Africa, and contribute to its global competitiveness” (Brand South Africa, 2019). As Brand South Africa has a direct mandate to contribute to the global tourism competitiveness of South Africa, it seems appropriate to study the dialogical properties of its corporate website and how those properties influence visitor perceptions with respect to rendering positive recommendations on South Africa or the intention to visit.

5. Method

5.1 Measures
Measurement items for the study were adapted from previous studies. The five dialogical constructs were adopted from Taylor et al. (2001) and Kent et al. (2003). Country image and intention to visit items were mainly adopted from Davis et al. (2009) and Lam and Hsu (2004). However, all items were modified to the nation branding context. Before developing the questionnaire, a pre-test was undertaken with 21 working professionals enrolled in an executive master’s programme in a leading Business School in Africa that had a cumulative work experience of over 100 years, with an average travel experience of three countries visited. This helped reducing ambiguity for the scale items (Malhotra et al., 2017). One request of the working professionals was to keep the questionnaire as short as possible to not overburden respondents. The constructs were therefore measured with a minimum number of items (Grissemann and Stokburger-Sauer, 2012) related to website context as not to discourage respondents. The modifications to the original scale measures resulted in a total number of 22 measurement items for the seven constructs, selected from the original 31 items from previous studies. However, this method presented no validity and reliability concerns, as management research is now encouraging the use of single-item measures in addition to multiple-item measures (Nagy, 2002). Table I shows the modified measurement items. All items were measured on a Likert-type scale, ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”.

5.2 Survey administration
This study adopted a convenience sampling technique, which allowed large numbers of respondents to be surveyed over a short period (Hair et al., 2003). An online questionnaire survey developed using LimeSurvey was used in collecting data outside South Africa, specifically in Ghana. The authors focussed on students enrolled in Ghanaian Universities, including business executives enrolled in Executive MBA programmes. Konadu-Agyemang (2008) advanced the argument that Ghanaians’ love for international travel could be seen as an expression of a quest for better opportunities. In 2018, the High Commissioner of South Africa in Ghana, Lulama Xingwana, remarked that South African businesses should continue to seize the opportunities that Ghana presents for trade and investment. Moreover, it has been stressed that the “importance of Ghana to South Africa as an anchor partner country within the West African region is affirmed by the continuous presence of South African delegations and companies that have expanded their businesses to Ghana and contributed more than R71 billion to date in capital investment” [South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), 2018]. Given the obvious appeal of Ghana to South African tourism and business development, we used a sample of Ghanaian students and business people as respondents to our survey.
The use of online surveys has become increasingly popular because it reduces the costs associated with locating appropriate respondents and ensures their immediate availability (De Gregorio and Sung, 2010). Despite the difficulties associated with online surveys, our study applied this method because the objective was to obtain a large sample, featuring a variety of demographic and socialisation characteristics across countries. To obtain a large sample of respondents to allow for generalisation, the link for completing the questionnaire was shared amongst different groups of University of Ghana student participants. The five minutes time frame was deemed adequate, as Lindgaard et al. (2006) found that website impressions are created within 50 s. Additionally, past research indicates that it takes online visitors less than two-tenths of a second to form a first opinion of a brand once they perused the organisation’s website and 2.6 s to reinforce that first impression (Dahal, 2011).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor items</th>
<th>Outer loadings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dialogic loop (CR = 0.817) (AVE = 0.599)</td>
<td>0.798 0.785 0.737</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The country’s website creates an engaging, and interactive consumer experience</td>
<td>0.798</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The country’s site provides an informative and helpful consumer experience</td>
<td>0.785</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The country’s site creates a sense of community and provides ample opportunities for community members to interact with each other over time</td>
<td>0.737</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Usefulness of the information (CR = 0.812) (AVE = 0.684)</td>
<td>Dropped 0.845</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The country communicates its key brand values on the website</td>
<td>Dropped</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The country’s brand identity is consistently presented throughout the website</td>
<td>0.845</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The country’s site weaves a story about its brand’s history, heritage, character or attitude</td>
<td>0.809</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Return visit (CR = 0.794) (AVE = 0.563)</td>
<td>0.784 0.708 0.756</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumers will have reasons to return to the country’s website on a regular basis</td>
<td>0.784</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The country’s site has directories with hypertext links to specific pages on other sites</td>
<td>0.708</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The website is personalized to suit visitors’ preferences (wallpaper, first page viewed, customized content, etc.)</td>
<td>0.756</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ease of interface (CR = 0.844) (AVE = 0.730)</td>
<td>Dropped 0.849 0.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The country’s website map is easy to find and use</td>
<td>Dropped</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The search engine on the website is effective</td>
<td>0.849</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The website’s navigation is intuitive and consistent</td>
<td>0.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservation of visitors (CR = 0.836) (AVE = 0.630)</td>
<td>Dropped 0.766 0.839 0.774</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The country’s website has quotes or rules of thumbs I might be interested in returning to</td>
<td>Dropped</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I believe the website makes it easier for me to transact business with the country</td>
<td>0.766</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I believe the website encourages me to bookmark the site</td>
<td>0.839</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I believe the website encourages me to sign up for a newsletter or consistent streams of information from the country</td>
<td>0.774</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country Image (CR = 0.831) (AVE = 0.621)</td>
<td>0.754 0.812 0.797</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In comparison to other countries, this country seems to have higher service quality standards</td>
<td>0.754</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This country has a rich history</td>
<td>0.812</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Visitor (I) can reliably predict what to expect if they visit this country</td>
<td>0.797</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intention to visit (CR = 0.909) (AVE = 0.769)</td>
<td>0.858 0.883 0.889</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I plan to take a vacation to this country</td>
<td>0.858</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I intended to visit this country in the future</td>
<td>0.883</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am willing to recommend others to visit this country</td>
<td>0.889</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table I. Modified scales, confirmatory factor analysis and measurement properties
6. Analysis

6.1 Data profile

Overall, 3,560 individuals participated in the survey, out of which 2,646 were partially completed and 914 were fully completed during the data collection period (the data were collected between 15 and 30 October 2016). All incomplete questionnaires were eliminated from the analysis. Of the 914 completed questionnaires, 672 were usable after data cleaning, which enabled us to remove unengaging respondents (i.e. responses with a standard deviation equal to zero and who could not provide correct answers to basic engagement questions such as the colours of the website and the social media handles on the website). The shared link inevitably ended up including some South African respondents studying in Ghana. We thus removed the respondents who selected South Africa as their country of origin or nativity. Out of the 672 respondents, 347 were male and 325 were female, and the majority (89.7 per cent) held either a bachelor or masters’ degree. Most of them were between 20 and 24 years old (51.8 per cent), 34.7 per cent between 15 and 19, 6.7 per cent between 25 and 29, 3.7 per cent were over 34 and 3.1 per cent were between 30 and 34. The majority of our respondents (82 per cent) had no prior experience of traveling to South Africa to ensure that our measure of “visit intention” was valid.

6.2 The measurement model

After data collection, the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS version 22) and partial least squares (PLS) were used for the analysis because PLS structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) is well suited to handle highly complex predictive (rather than explanatory) models rather than confirmatory models (Hair et al., 2014; Ringle et al., 2015). This characteristic makes PLS-SEM suitable for exploratory research studies, as it operates similar to a multiple regression analysis (Hair et al., 2014). PLS-SEM is therefore preferable to covariance-based structural equation modelling when analysing predictive research models that are in the stages of theory development. Moreover, because the main objective of PLS-SEM is prediction (Rezaei and Ghodsi, 2014), the goodness of a theoretical model is recognised by the strength of each structural path and the combined productiveness of its exogenous constructs (Duarte and Raposo, 2010). The reporting of PLS-SEM results is a multi-stage process, whose analysis and interpretation are based on three key steps (Hair et al., 2014):

1. model specification;
2. outer-model evaluation; and
3. inner-model evaluation.

The first step was to create a path model that connects the variables and constructs based on the theoretical arguments in the literature review. Figure 1 shows the path relationships between the constructs, and country image perception (endogenous constructs) is explained by the elements of dialogic communication (exogenous constructs). In this study, country image perception also acts as an endogenous construct in explaining the intention to visit (exogenous constructs).

Once the model was specified, the next step was the evaluation of the outer model. To this end, a PLS-SEM algorithm was performed to examine the reliability and validity of the multi-item reflective scales. Specifically, we evaluated reliability by calculating the composite reliability of each construct. All constructs had composite reliability values greater than 0.70, a good indication of internal consistency among construct measures (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994). For assessing validity, we used both convergent and discriminant validity. Support is provided for convergent validity when each reflective item has outer loadings above 0.70 and each construct’s average
variance extracted (AVE) is 0.50 or higher. Two of our reflective items US1 (the country communicates its key brand values on the website) and EI1 (the country’s website map is easy to find and use) had outer loadings less than 0.70 and were thus deleted, following the suggestion of Wong (2013). The low loadings for the two deleted items could be because the key brand values of South Africa and the website map are not easily identified on the Brand South Africa website. All remaining constructs items had outer loadings above 0.70 to establish indicator reliability of at least 50 per cent (Table I). Additionally, all AVE values exceeded the satisfactory thresholds of 0.50 (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988).

To assess discriminant validity, we compare the square root of the AVE with their specific latent construct correlations. As per Table II, the square root of the AVE for each construct is larger than its correlation coefficients with other factors (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). All constructs fulfil this requirement and were, therefore, deemed reliable and valid. Once we established the reliability and validity of the outer models, we evaluates the hypothesised relationships within the inner model based on our confirmed construct. The five dialogical principles had different average scores: ease of interface was the highest, with an average score of 4.344 and a standard deviation of 0.799, and conservation of visitors was the lowest, with an average score of 4.066 and a standard deviation of 0.842. The findings reveal that, on average, the Brand South Africa website had an above average score (3.5) on all five assessments of the brand website dialogic communication. This indicates that, on average, respondents agreed that the Brand South Africa website has the potential to establish dialogical relationships with the public based on the five dialogical principles.

6.3 Structural equation modelling
To assess the association between the Brand South Africa website’s dialogic communication elements and the nation’s brand image perception, as well as the relationship between brand image perception and the intention to visit, we applied a bootstrapping procedure (5,000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constructs</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Country image</td>
<td>4.284</td>
<td>0.735</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Conservation of visitors</td>
<td>4.066</td>
<td>0.842</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Dialogic loop</td>
<td>4.195</td>
<td>0.776</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Ease of interface</td>
<td>4.344</td>
<td>0.799</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Generation of return visit</td>
<td>4.176</td>
<td>0.829</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Usefulness of information</td>
<td>4.339</td>
<td>0.896</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Intention to visit</td>
<td>4.505</td>
<td>0.950</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Diagonal numbers are average variance explained by each construct (AVE)

Figure 1. Conceptual framework
According to Sarstedt et al. (2014, p. 109), “PLS-SEM does not make any distributional assumptions regarding the indicators or error terms that would facilitate the immediate testing of the weights’ significance based on, for example, the normal distribution”. Unless a bootstrapping routine is applied, which is a resampling technique that draws a large number of subsamples (typically 5000) from the original data (with replacement) and re-estimates the model for each subsample, it will be difficult to generate $T$-statistics for significance testing for both the inner and outer models (Sarstedt et al., 2014; Wong, 2013).

The model’s goodness was assessed based on its ability to predict the endogenous constructs using the coefficient of determination ($R^2$), cross-validated redundancy ($Q^2$) and path coefficients. From the PLS-SEM algorithm procedure, the $R^2$ values of the endogenous latent variables can be interpreted. The $R^2$ values of country image (0.309) and intention to visit (0.243) can be considered as moderate and low, respectively. We also examined predictive relevance ($Q^2$) using the blindfolding procedure. According to Rezaei and Ghodsi (2014), “for SEM models, $Q^2$ values larger than zero for a specific reflective endogenous latent variable indicate the path model’s predictive relevance for a construct” (p. 260). After the blindfolding procedure was applied for all endogenous latent constructs in the model, they all had $Q^2$ values above zero (country image: $Q^2 = 0.184$ and intention to visit: $Q^2 = 0.185$), which indicates that the model has a predictive relevance for all constructs (Table III).

As shown in Table IV, all hypotheses were supported. Our results show that, amongst the dialogical principles, the usefulness of the information provided on a nation’s brand website has the highest association with country image perception ($\beta = 0.17; p < 0.00$), while the dialogic loop of a nation’s brand website, although significant, is the least associated with country image perception ($\beta = 0.07; p < 0.05$). This result indicates that the interactive nature of a nation’s brand website can either create a positive or negative image perception of a country. Also, the findings from the study show that country image perception that significantly influences individuals’ intentions to visit ($\beta = 0.07; p < 0.49$).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Endogenous construct</th>
<th>$R^2$</th>
<th>$Q^2$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Country image</td>
<td>0.309</td>
<td>0.184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intention to visit</td>
<td>0.243</td>
<td>0.185</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table III. Results of $R^2$ and $Q^2$

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypothesis</th>
<th>Path</th>
<th>Path coefficient</th>
<th>$T$-statistics</th>
<th>$P$-values</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$H1a$</td>
<td>Dialogic loop $\rightarrow$ country image</td>
<td>0.078</td>
<td>1.961**</td>
<td>0.050</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$H1b$</td>
<td>Usefulness of information $\rightarrow$ country image</td>
<td>0.178</td>
<td>5.535***</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$H1c$</td>
<td>Generation of return visit $\rightarrow$ country image</td>
<td>0.203</td>
<td>4.306***</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$H1d$</td>
<td>Ease of interface $\rightarrow$ country image</td>
<td>0.126</td>
<td>3.390***</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$H1e$</td>
<td>Conservation of visitors $\rightarrow$ country image</td>
<td>0.198</td>
<td>4.239***</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$H2$</td>
<td>Country image $\rightarrow$ intention to visit</td>
<td>0.493</td>
<td>12.921***</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table IV. Result of hypotheses testing and structural relationships

Notes: $t$-values for two-tailed test: *1.65 (sig. level $-10\%)$; **1.96 (sig. level $-5\%$); ***$t$-values 2.58 (sig. level $-1\%$)

Source: Hair et al. (2011)
7. Conclusions and discussion

This study aimed at investigating the use of interactive websites in creating and maintaining relationships. To this end, we made use of the dialogic communication and IM literature to create a theoretical foundation for this study. The findings of this study imply that human interactions with interactive digital technologies do not only help with relationship building but also influence individuals’ perceptions about a place. These perceptions then influence people’s decisions to visit or not to visit the place. The findings of this study also imply that interactive technologies and their contents can create a symbolic meaning for the countries or organisations that deploy them. The symbolic meaning created by interactive technologies in this context is represented by the positive belief and image individuals have about a place.

Numerous claims have been made on how the internet could be used to influence an individual’s perception (Dahal, 2011). Therefore, this paper evaluated how the interactivity of the Brand South Africa website affects the image perception of the country and the effect of the country image perception on the intention to visit. A theoretical discussion based on IM theory and a framework that maps the five dialogic communication principles of nation image perception and the intention to visit were presented. The findings suggest that, based on the extent and quality of the interaction between a tourist and the nation’s website, the perception of the country’s image is formed. In this sense, the study validates the conclusions of Dahal (2011), who argues that perceptions of organisations are formed when individuals visit their brand websites.

The findings further suggest that the image perception of a country influences a tourist’s intention to visit. Therefore, we have provided an empirical corroboration of previous studies’ results on the role of a country’s image on visitors’ intention to visit (Alvarez and Campo, 2014). However, the findings show that the mean scores for dialogue were above average for Brand South Africa. The ease of use and usefulness of information principles had mean scores slightly above average, which explains the reasons for visitors to remain on the website and the relationship-building capacity of encouraging visitors to return to the site and allowing visitor interaction. The findings are similar to those of Taylor et al.’s (2001) examination of the mediated communication of activist organisations, which aimed to understand how these groups use their websites to build relationships with the public. The insights from our study demonstrate the importance of all five dialogical principles on nation image and the intention to visit and has implications for both practice and theoretical development.

7.1 Implications for researchers and managers

From a management perspective, the study shows that all five dialogic communication principles have the potential to aid website managers and designers in creating a more dialogical website. Although further studies will have to be conducted to confirm and consolidate the model, the results provide initial empirical support for the need to go beyond providing useful information and making sure that the website is easily navigable and thus include the relationship-building capacity of the nation brand website. The results also show compelling reasons for visitors to remain on the site. Websites should have essential links to other sites that promote their nations’ website, such as well-known tourist sites, hotels and airlines, to make the site a hub for a range of consumer activities. This helps customers returning, as well as increases the conservation of visitors.

In this paper, we drew on IM theory to propose a nation brand website as a significant IM platform that presents a country’s image as a function of the country’s communicated perceptions. The implications of this study are significant for organisations that plan to use
nation brand websites as part of their IM efforts. Specifically, website usage under the direct-assertive IM strategies of dialogic loop, usefulness of information, ability to elicit repeat visits, ease of interface usage, and ability to conserve visitors will result in positive improvement of a country's image perception. As previously indicated, nations can try to influence individuals' perceptions of the country by using self-presentational dialogic communication devices, such as a website. Therefore, a website with dialogic communication potentials can play an important role in the IM of a nation's image. Consequently, this study proposed a new way of explaining how a nation's image perception can be managed and how it affects the intention to visit.

Government agencies and the organisations responsible for nation branding should understand that the factors that lead to the formation of perceptions about a nation should become top priority because a good image perception (reputation) benefits exporters, importers, governments, the cultural sector, tourism, immigration, and almost every aspect of international relations (Gaya, 2015). Therefore, nation branding agencies seeking to create a web presence should consider the opportunities for IM and not just focus on the Internet as a new channel for international business (Sultan and Rohm, 2004; Melewar and Smith, 2003). As previously explained, a website can be used as an innovative tool, with relatively little expense, by mirroring and matching relevant symbols to their audience. However, a mismatch between the symbols and audience could make the site appear inadequate. Additionally, matching features that are technically advanced or patented may be more expensive (Winter et al., 2003).

The findings from this study support the claim made by some scholars that, within the online environment, individuals may easily shift from the "real" to the "ought" identity (Petkova, 2006; Siibak, 2009). Consequently, when communicating within the online environment, IM is formulated as an "ever-present worry of needing to perform oneself appropriately, and the twin need to be constantly evaluated as acceptable, or simply okay, in the context of one's peers" (Clark, 2005, p. 217). Indeed, whilst promoting a nation to the rest of the world, government agencies and the organisations responsible for nation branding should realise that nation brand website design needs to be undertaken with care as it, inadvertently or otherwise, communicates an image of the nation.

7.2 Limitations and avenues for future research
Based on the apparent limitations in our study, we put forth some avenues for future research. Future studies can address the application of this concept to different nation brand websites, using different sample respondents across different geographical locations. Additionally, further studies might consider exploring other nationalities and nation brands to improve the generalisability of the findings. In this study, respondents were required to spend a minimum of five minutes surfing the website to give them ample time to ensure they formed an impression. However, it is possible that some respondents used more or less time to form their impressions despite the earlier views of Lindgaard et al. (2006, 2011) noted in the methodology section. We could thus not strictly ascertain uniformity in the time spent on the website across respondents during data collection.

For those who presumably did not visit the site, we addressed this issue by removing uncompleted questionnaires and unengaging respondents (as depicted by their unit standard deviations during the preliminary data checks) from the analysis. Future studies could improve our method with the use of a software or experiments that will compel respondents to surf the internet for less than five minutes to see the variation. Further, as this study is one of the first to use image perceptions in relation to a nation brand website using the dialogic communication principles and although the new measures are shown to be valid and reliable in predicting
country image perception formation and intention to visit, additional examination is warranted to increase the instrument’s robustness. Researchers may also consider potential moderating effects such as travel experience or other context-related variables.

References


Corresponding author
John Paul Basewe Kosiba can be contacted at: john.kosiba@upsamail.edu.gh

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website: www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm
Or contact us for further details: permissions@emeraldinsight.com