

MARKETING, THE PAST AND CORPORATE HERITAGE

Professor John M.T. Balmer
Professor of Corporate Marketing
Brunel Business School,
Brunel University London,
The United Kingdom
Email: john.balmer@brunel.ac.uk

Mario Burghausen
Lecturer in Management and Marketing
Essex Business School,
University of Essex,
Colchester,
The United Kingdom
Email: mburgh@essex.ac.uk

John Balmer is Professor of Corporate Marketing at Brunel University Business School, London and quondam Professor of Corporate Brand/Identity Management at Bradford School of Management. A leading proponent of corporate identity and corporate heritage scholarship he co-conceived the corporate heritage brand notion (2006). Sometimes regarded as the "Father" of the corporate brand concept (1995), he also pioneered the corporate marketing, total corporate communications and monarchical marketing notions and, penned cornerstone articles in these areas. He has published in many leading journals including California Management Review, Journal of Business Research, British Journal of Management, European Journal of Marketing, Long Range Planning etc.

Mario Burghausen is a marketing lecturer with extensive industry experience prior to becoming an academic. His research is focused on corporate heritage and related concepts (history, memory, nostalgia etc.). More generally, his academic work is concerned with multiple temporalities in corporate and organisational contexts as well as the interplay between cultural manifestations, social interpretations, and instrumental representations of organisations and their brands per se. His work has been published in the Journal of Business Research, European Journal of Marketing, Journal of Brand Management and Corporate Communications: An International Journal.

Abstract

Argues for a more expansive conceptualisation of the past's relevance in, and for, marketing. Such a differentiated approach to the past is pregnant with possibilities in terms of advancing scholarship apropos temporal agency in marketing along with consumption practices. Symptomatic of this perspective is the increased mindfulness of the rich palate of past-related concepts.

Significantly, the corporate heritage notion - because of its omni-temporal nature - represents a distinct and meaningful vector on the past by coalescing the past, present and future into a new type of temporality. As such, the authors reason this expansive conceptualisation of 'the past-in-marketing' is both timely and efficacious. Whilst sensitive of the importance of the historical method in marketing and the history of marketing scholarship and practice per se, this broader marketing approach to and of the past highlights the ideational and material manifestations of the past-in-the-present and an envisaged past-in-the future.

Keywords:

Corporate heritage; past; temporality; temporal agency; marketing history

1 Introduction

“The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there,” (Harley, 2004. p.5). Taken from the celebrated opening lines of the novel, *“The Go Between”*, this quote exemplifies the traditional marketing approach to the past as “a foreign country” (Tadajewski and Saren, 2008).

In this article, we argue the past in marketing should be re-appraised; its central role in marketing theory and practice affirmed; and an appreciably broader, and more nuanced, phlegmatic perspective adopted. Our article continues by discussing marketing’s customary, and often uneasy, relationship with the past; details the diverse interpretations of the past in marketing; considers key past-related foundational concepts; and examines why growing attention is being accorded to corporate heritage as a new temporal concept within marketing.

The corporate heritage notion - because of its omni-temporal nature - represents a distinct and meaningful vector on the past by coalescing and transcending the past, present and prospective future (Balmer 2011). As such, it connotes, and arguably denotes, a new and highly meaningful type of temporality.

By means of context, the centrality of the past - and its significance for the present and future - has exercised philosophical thought since antiquity (St Augustine, 1961). It includes, for example, the deliberations of the Pre-Socratic scholars such as Heraclitus, Parmenides, and Zeno (Fraser, 1990; Kenny, 2000; Prigogine, 2003). It has also engaged the scholarship of academics in more recent times (Ankersmit, 2012; Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983; Koselleck, 1989, 2010; Lowenthal, 1985, 1998, 2015; Ricoeur, 1990, 2006; White, 2010, 2014; Zerubavel, 2004).

Within this broad canon, the importance of the past (and temporality) to human existence, and what it is to be human, is frequently emphasised. In an analogous fashion, marketing is also concerned with much of the same apropos

human nature; albeit in a more instrumental and less foundational way. Given the above, therefore, the rationale for the past - and temporality - to be accorded greater importance within marketing would appear to be irrefutable.

Traditionally, marketing theory and practice exhibits a great deal of temporal myopia - and occasionally - ambivalence towards the past (Tadajewski and Saren, 2008). Habitually, most marketers abstain from making explicit references to the past in serious, sophisticated, or substantiated ways. As such, marketing's customary stance can often seem ahistorical and habitually displays considerable insouciance concerning the 'historic turn' which has informed recent debates in organisation studies and other business disciplines (Clark and Rowlinson, 2004; Wadhvani and Bucheli, 2013). However, this is far from saying that marketing is atemporal; this is because a good deal of conventional marketing thought and practice privilege the time-frames of the present and future whilst often exhibiting insolence towards the past.

From the outset, we note there can be multiple interpretations, representations, and manifestations of the past by organisations, customers, stakeholders, and scholars. Scrutinised via a marketing lens, the past can be the consequence of erstwhile marketing practices and can be socially constructed in the present. For us, the past is a heterogeneous notion and possesses varied genres and forms of manifestation. Organisations, customers and other stakeholders may actively appropriate the past in the present for some current or future-orientated concern or purpose.

However, we observe that whilst the past can be valuable it can also be malleable and exploitable by organisations. Whilst a corporate past can be authenticated, it can, to a lesser or greater degree, also be fabricated, insinuated, simulated or augmented (or, indeed a combination of these).

For some institutions their past can be a valuable corporate and consumer resource which has veracity, vibrancy, and vigour. Consequently, corporations frequently strive to uncover, or rediscover, a positive organisational provenance.

This explains why many firms routinely commemorate, and celebrate, their past: corporate anniversaries, published company histories, organisational time-lines and dates of incorporation etc. are instances in point. However, an undue institutional focus on the past, the phenomenon of “the dead hand of the past”, can, occasionally, be oppressive: potentially it can confer corporate toxicity, lethargy, and impotency.

At a strategic level, a firm with a perceived negative past can bequeath an entity with a burden: an institutional impediment which managers might seek to forget, or circumvent, or supplement by fabricating an invented past, yet which might still be visited on them in the long-term (e.g. corporate complicity in past human rights violations). For consumers and other stakeholders, a perceived negative organisational past may seriously undermine trust and may, in extremis, cause the corporation to be despised by them.

However, there can be a degree of complexity here since organisations, inescapably, have segmented pasts. Corporate pasts are rarely conceived as uniformly good or bad, injurious or beneficial, relevant, irrelevant or inconsequential. Moreover, perceptions of the past may vary among different stakeholders; consumers and shareholders, for instance. Furthermore, conceptualisations of an organisation’s past can metamorphose over time; sometimes because of changing mores and precepts. What becomes apparent is there can be multiple interpretations, representations, and manifestations of the past by organisations, customers, stakeholders and scholars. Given the above, and for all its value, a corporate past is sometimes contested. For instance, there can be disputes regarding the perceived past in terms of whether it is good or bad, or indeed, beneficial, injurious, or inconsequential.

Within the corporate heritage canon scholars have spoken about the augmentation, valorisation, reinterpretation, and appropriation of the past. As such, the augmentation of the past can relate to the multitude of identity roles in the present predicted on a substantive and/or symbolic link between past, present and future (Balmer, 2013). The valorisation of the past explains how the

selective investment of the past with value in the present and assumed worth for the future (Burghausen and Balmer, 2014a). The reinterpretation of the past details the symbolic relevance of the past vis-à-vis an organisation, product or service that is temporally extended and given a new/expanded meaning in the present and future which is different from the past or history *per se* (Urde et al., 2007; Balmer, 2011; Burghausen and Balmer, 2014a). Finally, the appropriation of the past equates to the active acceptance by managers, consumers and/or other stakeholders of the past being concurrently an inheritance in the present and a bequest to the future which affords opportunities and responsibilities (Balmer 2011, 2013; Burghausen and Balmer, 2014b, 2015).

What is manifest from the above is the past is too important to ignore. Hence, this article adds voice to the significance of the past in and for marketing (as a discipline and as a practice). It also adds weight to the growing chorus of execration in marketing vis-à-vis marketing's habitual amnesia and ambivalence toward the past (e.g., Brown, Hirschman and Maclaran, 2001; Patterson, Bradshaw and Brown, 2008; Tadajewski and Jones, 2016; Tadajewski and Saren, 2008; Wooliscroft, 2008, 2011). As noted by Mark Tadajewski (2006, 2008, 2014), marketing theory and practice is not only highly politicised and contextual but, significantly, can be temporally situated too.

2 Locating the past in the present: Beyond history and method

Considering the above one significant, albeit tangential, constituent of contemporary marketing scholarship asserts the efficacy, and moreover indispensability, of the past. Significantly, the efficacy of 'the historical method' *per se* (Brown, Hirschman and Maclaran, 2001; Fullerton, 2011; Witkowski and Jones, 2006) is highlighted and the value of comprehending the history of marketing thought and practice is stressed (Tadajewski and Jones, 2014, 2016). Within this perspective, temporal and historical lenses are *de rigour* in the exposition and comprehension of marketing - and marketing phenomena - in theoretical, empirical, and instrumental terms. Importantly, a distinction can be

made between the hegemonic perspective derived from *history as a discipline and method* (i.e. the ‘past-of-marketing’ perspective) and the wider standpoint advocated here focussed on *the past in the present per se* (i.e. the ‘past-in-marketing’ perspective).

Thus, what we contend is the past’s relevance for marketing stretches *beyond* the lens of history and *beyond* the history of marketing thought and practice. For us, the past has substantive and symbolic relevance for the present and prospective future. Consequently, this broader, more panoptic, perspective of the past is pregnant with possibilities in terms of advancing scholarship apropos the temporal agency of marketing per se and, more especially, in further illuminating consumption practices as temporal phenomena too.

Elaborating the above point, key marketing concepts - and consumption practices - compel scholars to (implicitly) consider the past in the present: the corporate brand, corporate reputation and vintage consumption concepts are cases in point. Moreover, the past can invest marketing (at the product, services and corporate levels) with strategic benefits and capabilities (but may also constitute strategic obstacles and liabilities). For consumers, the past can be seen to burnish the patina of an organisation’s offerings and can provide consumers, and other key stakeholders, with both identification and meaning (as well as emotional well-being).

More specifically, the exponential rise of past-related marketing constructs and interest in such phenomena indicates the past’s instrumental, symbolic, and psychological significance as evidenced by scholarship elucidating the nomenclature of the past (Balmer, 2013; Burghausen and Balmer, 2014^a). Conspicuous exemplars of the exponential growth in this areas is represents by scholarly interest in consumer nostalgia (Hamilton and Wagner, 2014; Holbrook and Schindler, 2003; Merchant and Rose, 2013; Muehling and Sprott, 2004); corporate heritage brands/identities (Urde et al 2007; Balmer 2011); cultural heritage marketing and consumption (Goulding, 2000; McDonald, 2011); history marketing (Herbrand and Röhrig, 2006; Kühlberger and Pudlat, 2012; Schug,

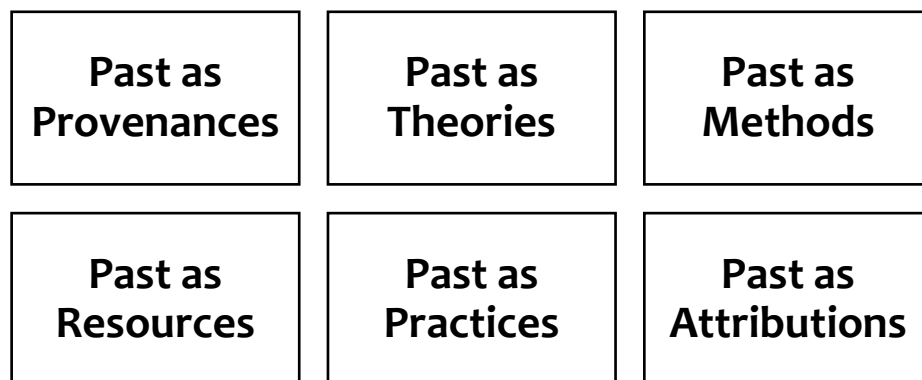
2003); retro-branding/marketing (Brown, 1999; Brown, Kozinets and Sherry, 2003).

However, there is a paradox in the above. While marketing practice seems to embrace ‘yestermania’ as Stephen Brown puts it (Brown, 2013), mainstream marketing academia by and large seems to ignore the conceptual and instrumental implications of the past’s significance, and omnipresence, in marketing and consumption (and in popular culture per se; see de Groot, 2009).

3 Constituting the past in the present: Toward temporal agency

Whilst acknowledging there can be a multiplicity of marketing standpoints concerning the past six perspectives can be discerned (see Figure 1):

FIGURE 1: SIX MARKETING PERSPECTIVES ON THE PAST



- i) **Provenances:** the history of marketing thought and practice (e.g. a conceptual and empirical history of marketing and consumption)
- ii) **Theories:** the revisiting and synthesising of past theoretical approaches and debates in marketing; the development of temporally contingent, and contextualised marketing theories (as opposed to ahistorical/atemporal generalisations that seem to dominate mainstream marketing)
- iii) **Methods:** the use of historical methods and principles in marketing theory and research practice (e.g. archival research, case histories, source criticism etc.)

- iv) **Resources:** the appropriation of past sources and traces as a marketing and consumption resource (e.g. utilising the date of company foundation, timelines, reuse of product formulae, packaging designs, vintage clothing etc.)
- v) **Practices:** the embrace and cultivation of past-related activities in marketing and consumption (e.g. distinctive past-related modes of production, service provision, and consumption etc.)
- vi) **Attributions:** the marketing manifestations of the past in perceptual and discursive terms at the level of the individual, collective or institution (e.g. as reputation, brand loyalty, traditional symbolism and iconography, consumer nostalgia etc.)

Significantly, many of the above perspectives coalesce. This is because the relevance of some aspect of the above for marketing is dependent on the specific socio-historic conditions/socio-cultural milieu at a specific point in time.

Also, the past is actively utilised and interpreted for specific contemporary purpose/s which meet both consumer and organisational requisites. Similarly, the history of marketing thought, and the relevance of past theories for instance, at a point in time can be temporally contingent, and may be predicated on scholarly, ideological and practical priorities in marketing at a given point in time.

In other words, marketers (as academics and practitioners), consumers, and other stakeholders, deliberately or inadvertently, exercise *temporal agency* actively constituting the past in the present through marketing and consumption.

4 Multiplying the purpose of the past in the present: Toward temporal multiplicity

Clearly, the past in marketing not only has breadth and depth but also complexity. This is especially the case in epistemological and teleological terms. As such, the past can variously be characterised as serving different purposes in the present such as

- Authentication: probing the veracity of the past
- Documentation: archiving/systematising the remnants of the past
- Interpretation: understanding (the relevance of) the past
- Narration: disseminating (a version of) the past
- Manifestation: performing/(re)enacting the past (e.g. commemoration)
- Valorisation: ratifying/ennobling the past
- Identification: defining the individual, collective or institutional 'self' vis-à-vis the past
- Contestation: addressing the inequities and injuries of the past

This multitude of purposes implies *temporal multiplicity* and puts into question a unified version and singular utility of the past in marketing. It also provides opportunities for a more nuanced and differentiated perspective vis-à-vis marketing and consumption as temporal phenomena per se.

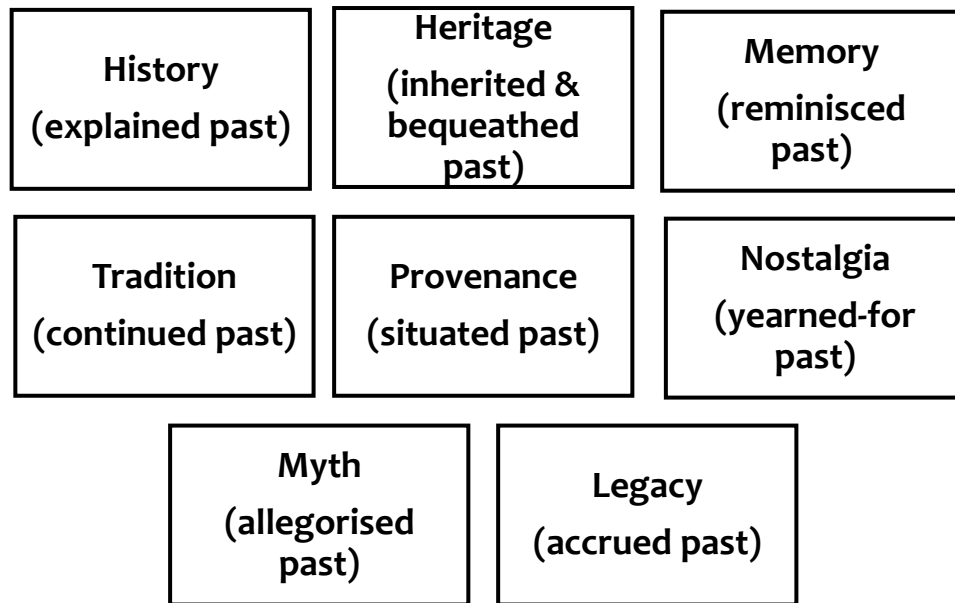
5 Differentiating the past in the present: Toward temporal differentiation

One characteristic of the potential richness of the 'past-in-marketing' perspective is the emerging repertoire of different past-related marketing concepts (see Balmer 2013; Burghausen and Balmer, 2014a for a more detailed exposition). In scrutinising the taxonomy of past-related marketing concepts they can be categorised in terms of their respective foci/functions as: (a) foundational, (b) instrumental, and (c) performative concepts.

Foundational past-related marketing concepts (heritage, memory, history, tradition, nostalgia etc.) provide the theoretical bedrock for instrumental and performative marketing categories and phenomena (see Figure 2). These concepts illustrate the manifold ways in which the past in marketing can be meaningfully comprehended. Whilst informed by scholarship in the social sciences and humanities, these underpinning concepts invariably require adaptation, so they have a scholarly and or practical utility within marketing. In other words, there is a requisite for them to be marketing specific. To date, marketing theory

has drawn on and adapted theoretical and scholarly insights from diverse disciplines, so they have a utility for theoretical and practical applications within marketing and in accordance with underlying marketing philosophical precepts.

FIGURE 2: FOUNDATIONAL MARKETING CONCEPTS OF THE PAST



Instrumental past-related marketing concepts (corporate heritage brands, heritage brands, retro branding, cultural heritage/museum marketing, corporate history marketing, nostalgic advertising etc.) are primarily focused on marketing management actions and strategies which are past-related and can focus on, *inter alia*, the identities and brands of an organisation itself as well as its services and products. In other words, these instrumental concepts are marketing-specific conceptualisations of past-related managerial marketing activities that serve organisational purposes (commercial, communal, social, public etc.).

Performative past-related marketing concepts (cultural heritage/museum visiting, organisational heritage identification, vintage consumption, memorabilia and antiques collecting etc.) relate to consumer/stakeholder engagements and practices which have, are predicated on, a material and/or symbolic link to the past. In other words, these concepts are marketing-specific conceptualisations of past-related consumer and stakeholder behaviours/activities which have marketing relevance.

The above categorisations imply/suggest the need for a more variegated *temporal differentiation* of marketing-relevant conceptualisations which question the dominant monadic and undifferentiated perspective on past-related concepts such as ‘the past’ or ‘the history’ within marketing.

6 Transcending the past in the present: Corporate heritage

Following on from the above, corporate heritage as a recent conceptual innovation in marketing scholarship (Balmer et al 2006; Urde et al 2007; Balmer and Burghausen, 2015b; Balmer, 2017) is seen to be broader than history or the past per se owing to its omni-temporal character (Balmer, 2013).

Corporate heritage is distinctive because of its defining characteristics (see Balmer et al, 2006; Urde et al, 2007; Balmer, 2011, 2013; Burghausen and Balmer, 2014a). Arguably, the most significant of these include omni-temporality, inter-generational continuity and augmented role identities (Balmer, 2013).

Omni-temporality, relates to the concurrence of the three timeframes of past, present and future that are all constituted simultaneously. Representing a distinctive vector on the past, corporate heritage coalesces the past with the present and future in a unique way: arguably, this represents a *sui generis* type of temporality (one which is different from history or the past per se).

Intergenerational continuity represents the substantive and/or symbolic exchange/inheritance of corporate heritage across/between generations of stakeholders which again coalesces the past, present and future.

Finally, relative invariance/trait constancy, stresses the importance of authenticity apropos corporate heritage: a *bona fide* corporate heritage relates to an entity where there has been temporal constancy of key organisational traits, whilst also acknowledging the meaning attached to the above can alter over time (Balmer, 2011, 2013).

Within the corporate heritage canon scholars have noted, *inter alia*, how this new type of temporality (which assimilates the time frames of the past, present and prospective future) is meaningful. This can be seen in the work on corporate image heritage (Rindell, 2017); family businesses (Blombäck and Brunninge, 2013; Brunninge, 2017); strategic brand revival (Cooper et al., 2015; Hudson, 2011; Miller et al., 2017; Santos et al., 2016); consumer behaviour (Balmer and Chen, 2017; Hudson and Balmer, 2013; Wiedmann et al., 2011); spatial, material and multi-modal manifestations (Bargenda, 2015; Burghausen and Balmer, 2014b; Maier and Andersen, 2017; Santos et al., 2016); relevance beyond the commercial realm (Balmer, 2009; Urde and Greyser, 2015).

7 Final Reflection

We have argued for a more expansive conceptualisation of the past's relevance in, and for, marketing. This perspective fully-recognises the critical importance of the past-in-marketing (including the rich pallet of past-related constructs), and compliments extant approaches which focus on marketing history and the historical method within marketing. Our broader marketing approach to and of the past highlights the ideational and material manifestations of the past-in-the-present and an envisaged past-in-the future.

Significantly, the nascent corporate heritage notion heralds a new, distinct, and meaningful vector on the past in marketing and beyond. This is because the concept coalesces the past, present and future into a new type of meaning and, arguably, a new kind of temporality. The omni-temporality aspect of corporate heritage is consequential since it can have multi-generational meaning and impact. As such, it transcends the established notion of time, history, and the past. Consequently, corporate heritage is pregnant with possibilities in advancing marketing theory especially in relation to marketing/consumption practices.

Finally, we argue for the myopic perspective of the past in marketing as something anomalous and inconsequential (“a foreign county”) to be countered with the broadened standpoint averred in this article which views the past as a meaningful and indispensable part of marketing’s hinterland.

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