# Branding in the Post-truth News era: A Social Media Hegemony in Zimbabwe Tourism Brand Equity Modelling

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## Abstract

The study was premised on understanding the basis of Zimbabwe tourism brand ascendancy particularly looking at the role of social media in improving positive publicity in a world dominated by post news falsification. This was achieved through comparing social media and other types of media namely traditional and digital on the effect to Brand Equity Variables. The brand equity variables comprised of brand awareness, brand image, perceived brand quality, brand loyalty and brand association. The study applied a sequential mixed methods by starting with a qualitative research design followed by a quantitative. In-depth interviews were used to obtain qualitative data and a survey questionnaire for quantitative data. The results from a qualitative research helped in coming up with the most used types of media in a tourism destination as: Magazine, Electronic, WhatsApp, Twitter, LinkedIn, Newspaper, Radio, Television, Facebook, Website, Blogs, Instagram, Google and Portal. A survey was further done in order to group them under three main categories which are Social Media, Traditional Media and Digital Media. The results showed that Social Media comprise of WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and LinkedIn: Traditional Media was discovered to have Magazine, Television, Radio and Newspaper. Digital Media was comprised of Electronic Boards, Website, Google, Blogs and Portal. A further survey was done in order to understand the relationship between each group of media and the brand equity variables. This then aided in producing a model for destination branding linking Social Media and Brand Equity Variables; Traditional Media and Brand Equity Variables; and Digital Media and Brand Equity Variables. The study therefore recommended that destination marketers should work in partnership with various media providers throughout the whole process of destination brand development since it might influence the crafting and framing news so as to attract potential tourists.

**Keywords**: Post-truth news, destination, branding, brand equity, social media, traditional media, digital media

## Introduction

There is an increasing competition in the tourism industry around the world (Blanke & Chiesa, 2013). This has called for improved branding of tourism destinations so as to increase on tourism destination success (Caldwell & Freire, 2004), that is in attracting more tourists. In this perspective, news from various media has played an important role in the development and of tourism destinations around the globe. It has both positive and negative effects in promoting vibrancy of a tourism destination and its brand. In this light, concern is mainly on the negative effect of media which is spearheaded by negative news publicity affecting perception of potential tourists.

In Zimbabwe there has been a rampant negative discussion with regards socio-economic and political environment in various media discussions which has resulted in a decline in tourists' inflows. As announced by Kurucz (2008) that social media has grown to be a powerful and cheaper source to spread news through word of mouth. In Zimbabwe it is argued that, media has been a catalyst in informing the world about the negative state of affairs which have downplayed supremacy of the destination's brand. As a key factor to Zimbabwe's case of having negative publicity mainly over its political instability, image is a key factor in branding a tourism destination. A brand then becomes a tool for enhancing a positive image in traditional and target markets. Lawson & Baud Bovy (1977:10) viewed image as a composite of emotions, thoughts, knowledge, imaginations, prejudice and impressions that individuals or a group develops towards a particular place. For this study media was factored out as driver for positive enhancement of these variables in order to improve the image of the destination and its brand. Therefore, destination marketers must develop more influence and control on the strategic tools that are used to sell a destination in an image making perspective. This is mainly for perception management. It should also be known that most of the tourists attach themselves to a brand based on the news they get about a tourism destination in various forms of media. The thrust for this study was to evaluate social media as a dominant form to uplift Zimbabwe destination brand. This is because, as postulated by Hays et al (2013) social media has transformed customers from being general receivers to active contributors in news making.

The post-truth effect of news is concerned with understanding the credibility of news presented in media especially when individuals and groups discuss presented issue in their own thinking. The role of media is to exchange news but also credibility of the news should be analysed especially with regards to destination brand matters. Societies usually report issues in their own view which is not as intended by the originator. Buhalis (2000:99) pointed out that past experience of a destination can be discussed by friends, marketers and other groups based on perceptions or imaginations. This study therefore was based on understanding the domination media to promote consistency in news reporting focusing on social media compared to others.

The overall drive was that Zimbabwe tourism destination brand has failed to connect its existence with a positive image so as to attract more tourists in the past years. Various researches on the Zimbabwe tourism brand has pointed negative media publicity as a catalyst for the poor performance of the tourism brand. In the post-truth stage of news communication, it is important to understand then media that controls perceptions of both existing and potential tourists that is by not diluting the original message. Rittichainuwat & Rattanaphinanchai (2015) postulated that there is a need to understand tourists from a wider media perspective. Keller (2003) then informed that there is little research with regards to building brands in the new interactive markets. This study then modelled a social media based branding framework in line with other media from post-truth ideology.

**Statement of problem**

The Zimbabwe tourism destination brand has failed to attract more tourists especially in the years after 2000. This contradicts with the view of Gursoy & McCleary (2004) that when tourists make their travel and experience decision, it is highly influenced by the brand of a destination. Even though some previous researches (Chigora 2016; Ndlovu 2009; Chibaya 2013) have informed that the socio-economic and political environment have been a catalyst to this state of affairs, there has not been a finalised standpoint for sustainable destination branding. According to Konecnik & Gartner (2007) tourism destination branding as a concept does not have a generally accepted framework since it is complex in nature. This study singled out media as a tool for restoring Zimbabwe tourism destination legacy. In specific the contemporary social media mixes.

As denoted by Meydan & Bayram (2013) consumers' active role in virtual environments have called for a better strategic approach not only in presentation but also for improved publicity. This is supported by Connell (2012) from a tourism marketing perspective who announced that destination marketing should also factor tourist involvement as a key factor. Ketter & Avraham (2012) evaluated traditional marketing of tourism destination with social media, but did not look at the post-truth effect of both mean of communication. This study was therefore premised on the fact that news social media has the power to build or exaggerate the truth about a tourism destination in its target markets. As announced by Nobre & Silva (2014) social media has helped in improving brand recognition and awareness for Small to Medium Enterprises, though little has been said from a destination branding perspective. Since it is not clear on the real cause of a poor performance of Zimbabwe tourism destination brand. A post truth news effect from social media compared to other forms might be the main cause for the current state affairs. It was then important to test supremacy of social media compared to other forms in order to improve tourism destination brand equity variables namely brand awareness, brand image, perceived brand quality, brand loyalty and brand association in a post-truth news era. This is supported by Rios & Riquelme (2010) who propounded that there is limited research in testing effect of internet marketing communication on brand equity.

## Research Objectives

- To understand the brand equity variables that are influenced by social media in the post-truth new era
- To compare social media and other media in influencing the brand equity variables in the post-truth news era
- To produce a framework for social media and other media in tourism destination branding mainly focusing on the influence made to brand equity variables

## Literature Review

### Social media in tourism

There is an increasing need for many to many mode of communication in the marketing of places since the linear models of communication have become redundant (Zouganeli et al., 2011). This study has focused on social media as a platform for many to many communication. There are several types of social media as announced by ISM (2014) that they comprise of Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, You Tube and LinkedIn. Roberts & Kraynak (2008) viewed social media as a collaborator whereby it is more to do with content that is created by users online. McCabe (2009) informed that destination marketing is no longer a focus on traditional methods of communication but social media which is even promoting word of mouth using the internet. This is supported by Thomas (2014) who postulated that the conventional methods that were used in advertising are no longer viable. This is because social media has played a transformational role, as the customers are no longer just passive receivers of message from companies, but are also contributing in the creation of the message (Hays et al., 2014).

In this light Karataş & Babür (2013) further propounded that new technologies have changed the way that tourism organisations communicate to customers and also the way the customers seek information in regards to touristic activities. Also this has become a source to spread positive news and even hearsays about a business which are then rapidly expanded through social networks (Magnold & Faulds, 2009). However, a consideration should be on the accuracy of information and its sources as it directs their customer behaviours in their social networks (Eröz

& Doğdubay, 2012:153), especially in the post-truth era where news can be distorted. On the positive message from the social media can give organisations an advantage to negotiate with the customers (Constantinides and Fountain, 2008). In this literature, little has been said with regards to post-truth effect of social media which then was the focus of this study to model in the post-truth era.

**Social media in destination branding**

According to Keller (2003) the use of interactive communications have helped in improving effectiveness and efficiency in conveying messages about a brand in the target. Branding is a process of communicating the organisation's culture and its point of difference to the customers (Mearns, 2007:56), and the focus of this study was to understand how social media can play this role. In a highly informative perspective Bulearca and Bulearca (2010) announced that strong brands have managed it because they pay high attention to social media in their advertisement and have recognised social media as a tool for improved interaction and communication with the customers. This is because in the current, social media has moved levels of participation in reshaping and improving transparency in the way that customers communicate (Qualman, 2012). This concurred with a view by Yoo et al. (2000) who informed that social media marketing is a driver for creating a favourable brand impression in the mind of the consumers, to an extent of narrowing a brand choice. In this view social media has turned to be the normal way for the new generation to share and exchange information so as to review their experience with others (Tussyadiah & Zach, 2013). Also Brodie et al. (2013) confirmed that social media enhances lasting communication with loyal customers, managing positive perceptions on the products or services being offered which can be further shared with others who may then become customers.

In line with the main objective of this study various authors (Ulusu, 2010; Muniz & Schau, 2011) have acknowledged that social media create an advantage to a brand since it secures reputation, increases brand awareness, increases sales, improves customer involvement in brand creation, enhances customer positive association and brand loyalty. This study therefore, further interrogated social media in its state to enhance brand equity variables for a positive post-truth publicity.

**Destination brand equity**

There should be a balance between buyers and sellers in building up a brand equity (Grönroos, 2011; Jing et al., 2015). It is vital to do a brand evaluation as this can be an effective way not only to measure the performance of the brand but also to assess satisfaction of the customers (Sung Ho et al., 2015). The thrust for this study being to intersect both the customers and sellers using social media communications especially in the post-news era. It is in this interest that the concept of tourist based brand equity has gained popularity in the current world such that now destinations are being treated as brands and becoming a powerful differentiation mechanism even for upcoming destinations (Pike & Bianchi, 2016; Mar, Carmen & Arturo, 2015).

One of the founder of brand equity concept Aaker (1991) announced that brand equity is a set of brand assets and liabilities which are linked to the brand and also connected to the name, symbol and other elements which can add or subtract value of a product or service on the market. This was also supported by Mudambi et al. (1997) who viewed brand equity as the overall value gained by a product from its brand. This has made strong brands the most valuable asset of a business (Tuominen, 1999). From a financial perspective Simon & Sullivan (1993) assessed brand equity as incremental in cash flows experienced by a product due to its brand which would not have been achieved by an unbranded product. Keller (1993) then conceptualised a Consumer-based

Brand which is mainly to do with customer satisfaction and the development of a unique and favourable association in the memory of the consumer.

However as a focus of this study Yoo et al. (2000) then developed a composite brand equity model which looked at the effects of market variables such as pricing and advertising on overall brand equity variables namely brand loyalty, brand awareness, brand association and perceived brand quality. Also other many studies have measured and analysed these brand equity variables from a tourist centric perspective (Smrekar and Ruzzier, 2014; Konecnik & Ruzzier, 2011), but little research has been done in relation to their connection with social media and post truth news effects.

**Destination brand awareness**

According to Aaker (1996) brand awareness is controlled by perceptions and attitudes which is also a reflection of salience of a brand that is within the mind of the customer. Zavattaro (2015) concurred by propounding that brand awareness is found in the way that consumers speaks about the brand. For this study it was the way that consumers speaks about the Zimbabwe tourism destination brand. This was after considering the negative awareness of the brand and the need to restore positivity through interactive media.

**Destination brand image**

Destination image has been regarded as a psychological connection that a tourist has with a destination which even influences the desire to visit and revisit a destination (King et al., 2015). Zimbabwe tourism destination brand has proved to have more negative memories in the mind of potential tourists resulting in a negative brand image over the years. Even with proven and known causes, more needs to be looked at in order to come up with an overall image building framework and for this study spearheaded by social media. This was supported by Pike et al (2010) who postulated that there is a question on the extent of relationship between brand image, identity and Destination Marketing Organisations' marketing campaigns on tourists based brand equity. This study looked at the effects of social media as a marketing communication tool for improved Zimbabwe tourism brand equity, with the aim to understand the brand equity variables that are influenced by social media in the post-truth new era.

**Perceived destination brand quality**

Perceived brand quality has been viewed by Keller (2003) as an overall perception superiority of a product or service in quality with regards to the intended purpose and in comparison to existing alternatives. Zimbabwe tourism destination has been viewed as being of poor quality. This is mainly due to the negative socio-economic and political dynamics that have even destroyed development of tourism infrastructure and facilities especially in comparison with other existing touristic destinations. Since this is a mere perception, social media would play a correctional role as a focus of this study.

**Destination brand loyalty**

This is a sense of attachment that tourists have on the brand Pedeliento et al (2015) which can be created by the destination marketers using various forms. Use of social media in marketing the tourism destination may also strengthen this kind of relationship in Zimbabwe. This is because Hosany et al (2007) announced that there is a direct relationship between brand image and

destination brand loyalty. Zimbabwe's negative brand image has reduced tourists' brand loyalty which was assessed by this study from a media perspective.

**Destination brand association**

Brand association is the process by which a consumer makes a decision to purchase a branded product or service which is triggered by the experience from previous consumption residing in the memory (Im et al., 2012:390). For this study, it therefore interrogated social media as a means to enhance a positive memory of the brand in the mind of the tourists, so as to encourage their positive association with Zimbabwe tourism destination brand. Pike (2010:129) then reinforced by postulating that a positive association with the brand is when relaxation and excitement determines the choice of holiday making or any form of a touristic visit. This study also was driven by the need to use social media as a platform to share good experience in relation to relaxation and excitement in the post-truth news publicity.

**Research methodology**

This study was based on a pragmatism philosophy. This means that the research design for the study was a mixed methods which combined both quantitative and qualitative designs in order to gather the data. The study was initiated using a qualitative research in order to understand the types of media that are used in a tourism destination in order to receive any news, especially in the post-truth era. This was then followed by a survey research that helped in categorising the various media in three categories, which are Social Media, Traditional Media and Digital Media. Also a further survey was done for each category to determine the relationship between the types of media and the brand equity variables.

**In-depth interviews**

The interviews helped in coming up with the types media that are dominants used in a tourism destination. A purposive judgmental sampling was then used to select the participants for the interviews. The basis for the selection was by sectorial representation mainly looking at the operators in the accommodation, travel and resorts sectors in Zimbabwe's tourism industry. There for the study chose n= 6 participants across the sectors in the marketing communications departments as presented in Table 1.1 below.

**Table 1.1 Profiles for interviews**

| SECTOR | n | POSTION | DURATION | DATE |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Accommodation | 1 | Marketing Manager | 1 hour 6 minutes | 21/7/18 |
| | 1 | Front Office Manager | 47 minutes | 18/8/18 |
| Travel | 1 | Operations Manager | 56 minutes | 14/8/18 |
| | 1 | Public Relations Officer | 1 hour 18 minutes | 19/7/18 |
| Resorts | 1 | General Manager | 49 minutes | 2/9/18 |
| | 1 | Marketing Officer | 1 hour 15 minutes | 7/7/18 |

**Survey**

A survey was done in order to complement the quantitative research. The respondents for the survey were selected using a stratified random sampling method. This helped in grouping the respondents into two sectors namely accommodation and travel. The total sample for the survey was n=130 that is 85 from the accommodation and 45 from the travel sector. These specific samples were determined using a convenience sampling method that is by focusing on those who were just available on the time of the study.

## Data collection

The data for a qualitative research was collected from the participants using in-depth interviews. For a quantitative research, the study distributed survey questionnaires to the respondents.

## Data analysis

The study did a content analysis for qualitative data in order to come up with themes for the research. For the quantitative research the data was developed from frequencies to percentages which were then tabulated for analysis and discussions.

## Findings and Discussions

The responses from the participants helped in establishing the main types of media that are most commonly used in the marketing of tourism destinations. Some of the participants informed that they have used the media and others have witnessed the media being applied in various tourism marketing set-ups. The main informed types of media are as shown in Figure 1.1 below.



**Figure 1.1 Media for tourism destination marketing   Source: Research Findings (2018)**

The presentation in Figure 1.1 above shows that there are several types of media that are used in tourism destination. This is supported by Hollensen (2011) who informed that there are various media present around the world. It was the n important for this study to look at the above media and categories them for a further analysis so as to understand the type(s) of brand equity variables they influence. Table 1.2 therefore shows the results from a survey which grouped the all the types of media under three main categories as Social Media, Traditional Media or Digital Marketing.

**Table 1.2 Responses on the categories of media present in a tourism destination**

| TYPE OF MEDIA | SOCIAL MEDIA | TRADITIONAL MEDIA | DIGITAL MARKETING |
|---|---|---|---|
| Magazine | - | √ | - |
| Electronic Boards | - | - | √ |
| WhatsApp | √ | - | - |
| Twitter | √ | - | - |
| Newspaper | - | √ | - |
| Radio | - | √ | - |
| Television | - | √ | - |
| Website | - | - | √ |
| Google | - | - | √ |
| Blogs | - | - | √ |
| Instagram | √ | - | - |
| YouTube | √ | - | - |
| Portal | - | - | √ |
| LinkedIn | √ | - | - |

The presentation in Table 1.2 helped in classifying all the types of media as follows:

- **Social Media**: The survey revealed these to be WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and LinkedIn.
- **Traditional Media**: The survey grouped them as Magazine, Newspaper, Radio and Television.
- **Digital Media:** They survey confirmed that these can be classified as Electronic Boards, Website, Google, Blogs and Portal.

The above categories were further examines on their influence on the brand equity variables namely brand awareness, brand image, perceived brand quality, brand loyalty and brand association. These are presented for discussions in Tables 1.3, 1.4 and 1.5 below.

**Table 1.3 Social Media influence on Brand Equity Variables**

| TYPE OF SOCIAL MEDIA | Brand Awareness | Brand Image | Perceived Brand Quality | Brand Loyalty | Brand Association |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| WhatsApp | 1.11 | 1.96 | 2.15 | 2.03 | 1.02 |
| Twitter | 1.31 | 1.04 | 2.91 | 1.30 | 1.17 |
| Instagram | 2.10 | 2.83 | 1.19 | 2.94 | 1.96 |
| YouTube | 1.02 | 1.22 | 1.89 | 1.67 | 1.47 |
| LinkedIn | 1.79 | 2.81 | 3.12 | 2.76 | 3.50 |

*** mean values ranging from 1 to 5 Likert scale with 1=Strongly Agree and 5=Strongly Disagree

The presentation in Table 1.3 above shows that on the available types of social media WhatsApp (1.11), YouTube (1.02) and LinkedIn have more influence on Brand Awareness than any other type of social media. This might be due to the fact that these media are the almost used by everyone around the globe such that most people refer to them for their discussions and evaluation, whether positive or negative. Lim (2010) informed that consumption in tourism is controlled by the use of networking cites by friends, family members and acquaintances. It can therefore be used by destination marketers in Zimbabwe to spread and measure the post-truth news effect on the tourism destination brand.

Twitter has the lowest mean value (1.04) on Brand Image. This might be due to the fact that it is followed by many professionals who have the ability to judge and conclude various issues of a socio-economic and political nature. Especially issues to do with politics have gained popularity and wide discussions on Twitter affecting the post truth about a tourism destination and its brand. Instagram proved to have a lowest mean values (1.19) on Perceived Brand Quality. This might be due to the fact that it has supremacy to provide pictorial presentations and videos that makes it easier for a potential tourist to evaluate quality that is by making tangible the intangible. However, it is important to note that the survey informed Social Media does not have an influence on the Brand Loyalty and Brand Association in the post-truth news era.

**Table 1.4 Traditional Media influence on Brand Equity Variables**

| TYPE OF TRADITIONAL MEDIA | Brand Awareness | Brand Image | Perceived Brand Quality | Brand Loyalty | Brand Association |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Magazine | 2.45 | 2.91 | 1.31 | 3.17 | 3.79 |
| Newspaper | 1.97 | 2.03 | 3.98 | 3.45 | 2.53 |
| Radio | 1.86 | 2.39 | 3.74 | 2.04 | 3.33 |
| Television | 1.45 | 1.35 | 1.11 | 2.12 | 3.31 |

*** mean values ranging from 1 to 5 Likert scale with 1=Strongly Agree and 5=Strongly Disagree

The results in Table 1.4 shows that Traditional Media influences Brand Awareness and Perceived Brand Quality only. The specific types of media that influences Brand Awareness are Newspaper (1.97) and the Radio (1.86). This might be due to the fact that historically people have used newspapers and radios to spread news and even to search for information with regards to a particular event or situation.

Although the new generation has moved their attention to other forms of contemporary media, Traditional Media still has a great influence in the post truth publicity and must be considered as destination marketing communication tool in present. For Perceived Brand Quality, the specific media has been identified by the research as a Magazine and Newspaper. The reason might be magazines also can display pictures and televisions showing videos for improved evaluation and making tangible the intangibles.

**Table 1.5 Digital Media influence on Brand Equity Variables**

| TYPE OF DIGITAL MEDIA | Brand Awareness | Brand Image | Perceived Brand Quality | Brand Loyalty | Brand Association |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Electronic Boards | 1.02 | 1.12 | 1.01 | 2.31 | 2.57 |
| Website | 1.04 | 1.89 | 1.23 | 1.96 | 1.39 |
| Google | 1.16 | 1.31 | 1.52 | 1.70 | 1.95 |
| Blogs | 2.31 | 2.79 | 1.81 | 2.69 | 2.94 |
| Portal | 1.32 | 3.01 | 2.97 | 3.51 | 3.32 |

*** mean values ranging from 1 to 5 Likert scale with 1=Strongly Agree and 5=Strongly Disagree

Table 1.5 shows that Digital Media has more influence on the Brand Awareness and Perceived Brand Quality in the post truth news publicity.

For Brand Awareness Google (1.16) and Portal (1.32) have shown to have more influence. This might be due to the fact that these media are based on the World Wide Web (www) which is a powerful disseminator for news and information around the world such that it can easily raise global awareness.

Perceived Brand Quality is therefore influenced by Electronic Boards (1.01), Website (1.23) and Blogs (1.81). Also the reason for this result might be due to the ability to tangiblise a brand and its offerings in the post truth news era.

**Framing social media in the post-truth news publicity towards destination branding**
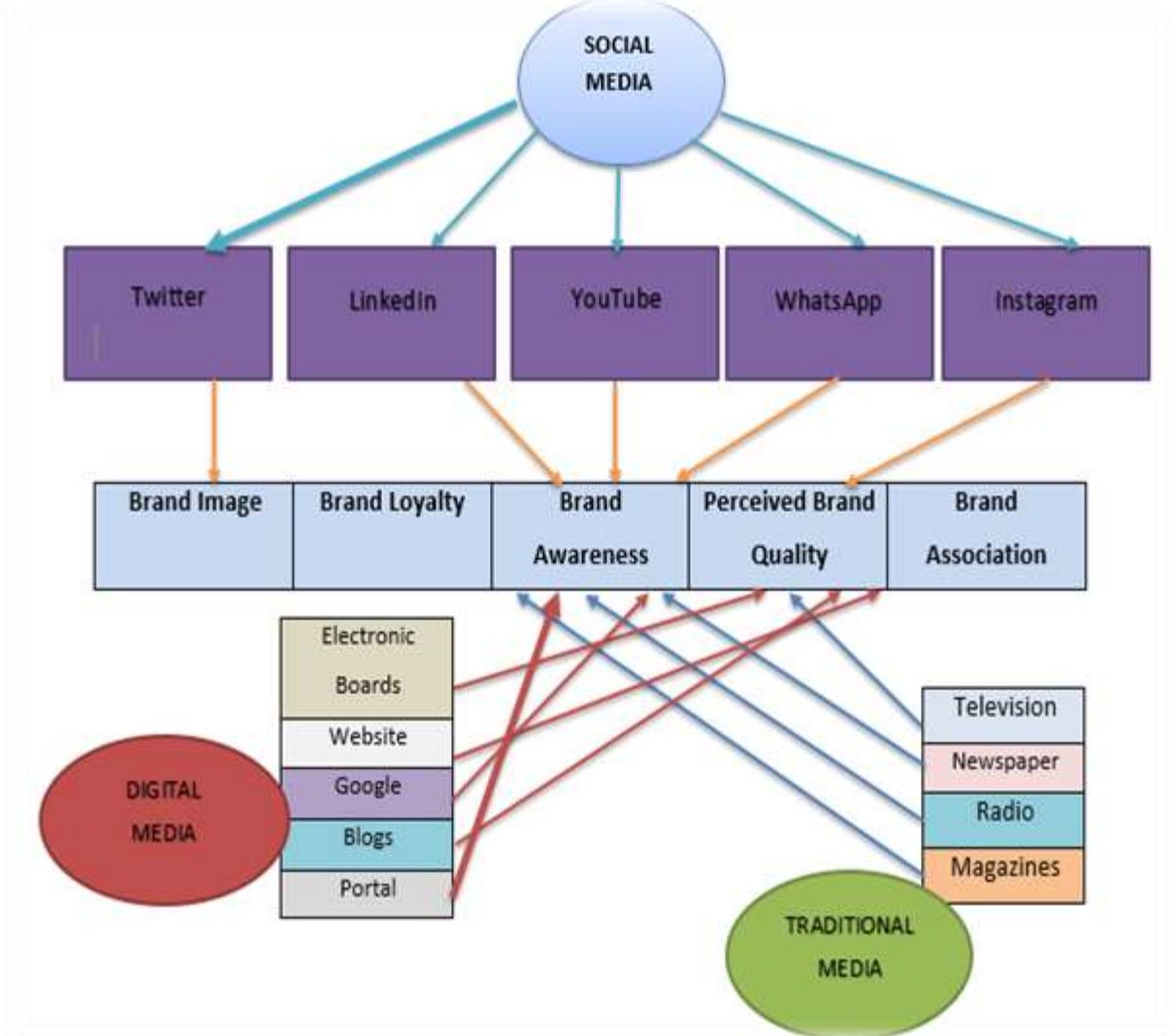


**Figure 1.2 Social Media dominance in post news publicity destination brand formation    Source: Research Findings (2018)**

The model in Figure 1.2 is a construct form the outcome from this study which simply shows the extent to which Social Media can influence Destination Brand Equity variables when compared to Traditional and Digital Media. It shows that Social Media mainly influences Brand Image, Brand Awareness and Perceived Brand Quality in the post truth news publicity.  This informs that it does not influence Brand Loyalty and Brand Association. Other forms of media that is Traditional and Digital have proved to have more influence on Brand Awareness and Perceived Brand Quality only.  It can therefore be concluded that Social Media has more influence on Brand Image than other media in the post truth new era.

**Conclusion**

The study concluded that Social Media is more powerful in controlling and enhancing the Brand Image in comparison to other forms of media which are Traditional Media and Digital Media. The study first outlined the types of Social Media that can be used to communicate and sell a

destination brand as these comprised of WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and LinkedIn. For Traditional Media the initial research also discovered to these to be Magazines, Television, Radio and Newspaper. Lastly Digital Media was classified as Electronic Boards, Website, Google, Blogs and Portal. All the three categories were further investigated on their effect on the destination brand equity variables. The study informed that even with high dominance of Social Media as a marketing and communication tool in the new world, it shares some influence with other types media mainly on Brand Awareness and Perceived Brand Quality in the post truth news era. This then resulted in the study producing a model for destination branding linking Social Media and Brand Equity Variables; Traditional Media and Brand Equity Variables; and Digital Media and Brand Equity Variables. It then helped to clearly outline where each type of media has dominance and where all of the media can be combined so as to improve the overall performance of Zimbabwe destination brand.

## Recommendations

The study recommends that destination marketers should work in partnership with various media providers throughout the whole process of destination brand development since it influences the crafting and framing news in ways that convince potential tourists. This means that there is no single media for improved destination brand equity especially in the post truth publicity. It will then be easier to produce news, which cannot be manipulated by the societies in order to change meaning of an event associated with a destination and its branding.

Destination marketers should engage in various perception management campaigns as they help to be proactive when crafting, framing and presenting news in relation to a tourism destination brand. Also, there is clearly a need for a further research with regards to the media that can help in uplifting Brand Loyalty and Brand Association of a tourism destination.

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