EXPLORING THE DIALOGIC COMMUNICATION POTENTIAL OF SELECTED AFRICAN DESTINATIONS' PLACE WEBSITES

Abstract

As websites have become increasingly popular as a source of information for customers, place websites can play a critical role in the choices potential visitors/tourists make about destinations. This study aims at understanding how the dialogic communication potential of four African destinations' place websites relates to destination image from the perspective of potential visitors/tourists. The study employed a quantitative research approach for data collection and analyses. Specifically, data was analysed using the structural equation modelling approach. The dialogic communication principles of a website serve as an antecedent to forming customer perceptions about a destination. The destination image impression of a country positively relates to visiting intentions; an indication that perceived destination image is another antecedent of visiting intentions. Place websites have surprisingly not adequately featured in academic and practitioner interrogation with respect to brand marketing and communications and this paper is one of the attempts to address this research lacuna. Significant implications for researchers and managers promoting destinations have been highlighted.

Key Words: Dialogic communication, Place identity, Place website, Destination image, Visiting intention.

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1. Introduction

Tourists are often faced with uncertainty with regards to the benefits of visiting a particular destination (Fesenmaier & Jeng, 2000; Cho, Wang, & Fesenmaier, 2002). Since tourists are increasingly using the internet as a source information many countries are also beginning to rely on destinations' place websites to plan their communication activities to project a positive image about themselves to potential tourists through the development of visually pleasing websites characterised by richness of information and ease of navigation (Cyr, 2013) whilst emphasising the natural assets and attractions of the destination. Although, most websites fail to help achieve these objectives (Hausman and Siekpe, 2009), countries have not stopped using place websites as a way to enhance destination image and influence visiting intentions. Place websites, therefore, have a strategic marketing communication's role to promote a tourism destination.

The burgeoning literature on tourism provides theoretical and practical arguments supporting the effect of online presence on indirect tourism experiences (Bastida & Huan, 2014). That is to say, these online visits are imitations of actual visits that give the potential tourists the opportunity to access and evaluate the destination before the actual visit (Cho, Wang, & Fesenmaier, 2002). Successful destinations or places need to be positively positioned and differentiated from competitors (Calantone et al., 1989; Govers et al., 2007) and this can be achieved by developing destination websites that show key elements of identity and image (Foroudi et al., 2018). Offline information does not permit the flexibility of dialogic engagement and relationship building

which the web permits (Buhalis & Law, 2008). These expectations require effective website designs to address travellers' needs (Park & Gretzel, 2007; Dickinger & Stangl, 2013). Studies on websites suggest that the use of dialogic strategies could lead to greater interactive communication, resulting in greater engagement and relationship building between organisations and visitors (e.g. Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Saxton & Waters, 2014). A website with effect dialogic communication principles could help countries exploit their tourism potential.

Thus, in this paper we focus on two research questions: 1) Do place website dialogic communication principles influence destination image impression? 2) Does destination image impression influence visiting intentions of individuals? Currently, there are few studies that explore defensive website strategies and their impact on image impression and visiting intentions (Foroudi et al., 2018), but there is limited studies that investigate place website's dialogic communication principles' effect on destination image impression. Additionally, the dialogic principles have been employed in various fields to include the insurance industry (Hinson et al., 2014), the banking industry (Hinson et al., 2012), the security industry - police (Madichie & Hinson, 2014), as well as non-profit organisations (Kent et al., 2003; Taylor et al., 2001). They have also been used in examining organisation's social networking services (SNS) such as Facebook and Twitter (see Kim et al., 2014; Cha et al., 2014; Sundstrom & Levenshus, 2017). However, research that investigates the importance of the dialogic principles in place destination websites and whether they promote destination image are scarce. The results of this study provides support for using place website's dialogic communication principles as a platform for optimising the impact of website influence on destination image.

This paper provides implications useful for both practice and theory alike. From a practice perspective, managers of countries' brands can use it for insight into how the place website can

currently employ dialogic communication principles in building the image of a country. The paper also provides a validated model depicting the relationship between place website, place identity, and behavioural intentions thereby contributing to the theoretical perspectives of the growing body of knowledge.

To present the practical and research implications, the paper is organised as follows: the next section reviews relevant literature which evaluates the existing theoretical underpinning to develop hypothesis for this study. The paper then discusses the context of study before describing the methodology. The succeeding sections present the results followed by the discussions. Finally, the paper draws conclusions with theoretical and practical implications and sets an agenda for future research.

2. Literature review and hypothesis development

2.1 African destinations' place website

Tourism contributes significantly to the economic growth in Africa compared to other regions (Ivanov and Webster, 2013), however, conflicting brand image and brand identity (De Chernatony, 1999; Grönroos, 2007) could explain the under exploitation of tourism potential in Africa. Potential tourism opportunities in Africa and their related benefits have consequently not been realised (Osei and Gbadamosi, 2011; Osabutey, et al., 2014; Santos and Campo, 2014; Adegoju, 2017; Hinson et al., 2017), partly due to the poor destination branding. In a related study, Pitt et al. (2007) looked at the effectiveness of how some African countries have communicated their brand personalities and concluded that while some destinations have specific brand personalities they communicate, others fail to do so succinctly. On the issues of the

effectiveness of communication, Opoku and Hinson (2006) found that not all African countries have official websites. Arguably, the absence of good official country websites would make the communication of brand personalities less effective.

Most countries in Africa need a brand identity especially because most non-Africans often easily assume that Africa is a country rather than a continent (Osei & Gbadomosi, 2011). In addition, adverse events such as wars, famine and catastrophes have marred the image of Africa (Maeda, 2000; Osei & Gbadamosi, 2011; Mou, 2014). Such events in parts of Africa have resulted in negative perceptions that lead to erroneous views about the majority of destinations in Africa. Consequently, trade, investment, and tourism within this region have generally suffered (Lepp et al., 2011). Nonetheless, African nations that have destination websites are aggressively seeking to counteract such perceptions via their websites (Lepp et al., 2011). As Anholt (2007) posits, the image of a destination signifies how a government prioritises travel and tourism. It could, therefore, be argued that a destination with an eye-catching online presence would attract more visitors. Countries in Africa could exploit their tourism potential better if they adopted more modern and integrated communications strategies.

Pang et al. (2018) notes that the link between dialogic communication and relationship development and image building had not been empirically tested. In addition, despite the growing research on place website interactivity and its potential effects on destination image (Foroudi et al., 2018), there is paucity of research that examines website dialogic communication principles' influence on both destination branding and visiting intentions. Place websites have surprisingly not adequately featured in academic and practitioner interrogation of brand marketing and communications. Ivanov and Webster (2013) found that Africa had the highest contribution of tourism to economic growth compared to other regions. Nevertheless, there is

unfulfilled tourism potential (Osei and Gbadamosi, 2011) and studies that explore the communication elements are scarce. This study, therefore, employs dialogic communication elements proposed by Kent and Taylor (1998) to evaluate how dialogic principles could influence visiting intentions of African destinations through websites.

2.2 Brand image, brand identity, and nation-brand

Brand image, brand identity, nation-brand, are interrelated concepts. Arguably, whilst identity depicts the true essence of an entity, image symbolises how the entity is perceived. It is not surprising that the gaps between the identity and image could be misconstrued (often negatively). Therefore, congruence between brand image and brand identity, invariably, leads to building a strong brand that creates a bond between the brand and consumers (Roy and Banerjee, 2007). Consequently, when the communications of brand image and brand identity are not consistent, expected outcomes are not achieved (De Chernatony, 1999; Grönroos, 2007). A brand connects a product or service with a unique identity. What makes a brand valuable to marketers is the equity it engenders among consumers, therefore destination marketers commonly agree that the general principles of consumer branding can be applicable in the context of destination marketing (Dioko & So, 2012).

For tourism purposes, destination branding identifies and differentiates and communicates the image of a destination to tourists by highlighting distinctive and attractive features (Hall 1999; Blain et al., 2005). The identity of the location and the brand story reflects the destination's culture and image (Morgan et al., 2002). The culture, heritage and community history are also important components of destination branding because they provide historical accounts of

locations (Runyan & Huddleson, 2006). Therefore, whether the destination is national, sub-national or a local area, marketing and promotional activities are geared towards the production of a distinctive and competitive place identity (Dredge & Jenkins, 2003); for example, Hershey, Pennsylvania is known as the "Sweetest Place on Earth", Arlington, Texas, the "Bowling Capital of the World", San Diego, California, the "City with Sol", Canada, "Mounties, moose and snow-capped mountains" (Deloitte & TIAC, 2007), Egypt, "Pyramids", Emirates Airline, "Brand Ambassador for Dubai" (Balakrishnan, 2008), France, "number one destination for overseas tourists" (Uzama, 2009) and Western Canada "Okanagan Valley as the wine region" (Getz and Brown, 2006). Accordingly, Foroudi et al., (2018) argued that a place website can shape place identity. Place identity is also a core concept in the field of environmental psychology which identities how a place relates to the environment (Gieseking et al., 2014).

Since the introduction of the "place-identity" theory, it has been a dominant model used in explaining identity in the environmental psychology literature (Hauge, 2007). Place-identity theory does not give much insight into explaining identity with respect to structure and process (Twigger-Ross et al., 2003), yet alludes to the "schemata" that Neisser (1976) and Piaget (1954) describe as perceptions and ideas that relate to the physical environment. Place identity, therefore, refers to "an individual's strong emotional attachment to particular places or settings" (Proshansky et al., 1983, p. 61). Place can be a piece of a person's character; social cooperation and individual encounters can create a bond between an individual and a specific place (Rubinstein & Parmelee, 1992; Yuksel et al., 2010). Even though the connection to a specific place often begins after at least one visit, it is conceivable that people may have characteristic compelling passionate connections to a specific place they are yet to visit (Changuklee & Allen, 1999). This emotional connection could be founded on stories, recollections or suggestions from

companions and relatives, or from the media (Yuksel et al., 2010). Place identity is, consequently, an interactive process and although various studies use the concept of place and identity, a handful encapsulate the relationship between identity and place (Foroudi et al, 2018). Nonetheless, "a better understanding of the relationship between place identity and place brands might advance the theory of destination/place branding" (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013, p. 71). This current research, therefore, seeks to evaluate the conceptualisation of the relationship between place identity and place websites.

Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013) argue that place identity should be thought of as a complex process of identity construction rather than a specific outcome. As a result, place identity and place branding are understood as dialogue between stakeholders (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013). Markwick and Fill (1997) indicated that corporate identity is portrayed to stakeholders by using a number of cues. Yet, inconsistencies in the communication between brand image and brand identity could inhibit the extent to which such objectives could be achieved (De Chernatony, 1999; Grönroos, 2007). Current approaches fail to encapsulate the various constituencies that embody and communicate the plurality of a place through a website. This study is based on the premise that a dialogic communication strategy can make use of a place website to connect nations/destinations and potential customers/visitors/tourists via a number of cues as a result of deliberately planned messages that portray the identity of a destination.

2.3 Theoretical foundations and conceptual model development

Increasingly, small and large companies are using websites to facilitate dialogic communication with their stakeholders (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010). In much the same way, dialogic

communication relationships with stakeholders (visitors/tourists) through the use of strategically designed websites can improve the attractiveness of a given destination. Kent and Taylor's (1998) five dialogic communication principles can help facilitate positive image formation and relationship building. The framework uses the five features of these websites namely, 'dialogic loop', 'usefulness of information', 'return visits', 'ease of interface use', and 'conservation of visitors' to examine place/destination websites.

The *dialogic loop* allows visitors to raise queries and more importantly, gives an opportunity to respond to questions and concerns. A dialogic loop offers an opportunity of interactivity, engagement, communication and learning (Tanev et al., 2011). It facilitates dialogue which helps in the development of trust among participants (Ballantyne, 2004) and stimulates a negotiated exchange of ideas and opinions with publics (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Kent et al., 2003).

Usefulness of information, (another principle), provides website visitors with contact details of relevant departments and agencies. Useful information to website visitors helps facilitate dialogue. Website visitors are likely to leave a site if the information provided is not useful. Accordingly, Cox and Dale (2002) argue that where website information is insufficient, misleading or irrelevant, customers are more likely to visit a competitor's site.

Return visits involves the provision of exciting and attractive features on a website to encourage repeat visits for updated information, changing issues, special forums, new commentaries, on-line question and answer sessions, and on-line "experts" to answer questions. More visits to sites are likely to lead to the engagement in dialogue. Bortree and Seltzer (2009) found that on a Facebook advocacy group, return visits significantly influences the number of user responses to each other.

Ease of interface use principle postulates that website visitors should find the sites easy to access and understand. Previous literature shows that perceived ease of use is particularly vital in user satisfaction with information system (IS) (Davis, 1989; Venkatesh & Davis, 1996). Therefore, a user who perceives an IS easy to use, is more likely to be satisfied with it than one who does not, and would be more likely to use the IS for dialogic engagement (Calisir & Calisir, 2004).

Conservation of visitors states that websites should include only "essential links" with marked paths that guarantee visitors return to the site, and should avoid "links" that can put them off. When a website contains useful links potential tourists spend more time navigating and learning about a product or service which eventually leads to dialogic communications.

2.4 Place website and destination image

High-quality websites are critical because today's travellers regularly search for information online and purchase tourism related items and services (packaged tours, hotels, airline tickets and restaurant services) (Bieger & Laesser, 2004; Gursoy & McCleary, 2004; Dickinger & Stangl, 2013). In the online shopping context, greater dialogic interactions between consumers and online vendors have now provided the mechanisms for expanding business activities (Hausman & Siekpe, 2009). Dailey (2004) suggests that online vendors should consciously design web environments to facilitate dialogic communication in order to improve shopping experiences. The same argument should apply to destination marketing.

The image of a destination is important for building and maintaining positive relationships with its local and international audiences. Hunt (1975) defines destination image as perceptions held by individuals about an area. Baloglu et al. (2014, p. 1058) also define the concept as the

"perception of a person or a group of people regarding a place". According to Baloglu et al. (2014) and Sahin and Baloglu (2011), individuals form an image about a destination based on beliefs and knowledge about objective attributes. Hence, if a potential visitor/tourist, for instance, is exposed to positive information about a destination, he/she would form positive image evaluations of that destination and vice versa.

Destination image can be viewed as one of the primary aims of a tourism destination strategy which influences potential tourists' decision-making process. This would then lead to positive reactions which allow destination image to influence the impression of a tourist about a particular destination (Lawson & Baud-Bovy, 1977). Echtner and Ritchie (2003, p. 38) explain that destination images stem from a "flood of information" sourced from promotional literature (travel brochures, posters), the opinions of others (family/friends, travel agents) and the general media (newspapers, magazines, television, books, movies)". In this vein, Rodríguez-Molina et al., (2015) argue that a place website can be one of the essential tools that the tourism industry of a country can use to assist tourists by providing clear information about the positive destination image to the potential tourists. Thus, the perceptions of a place can be enriched by designing new websites or improving existing ones (Foroudi et al., 2018). Although Foroudi et al. (2018) conceptualised and provided empirical support for the relationship between place websites and image formation processes they did not use dialogic communication principles. Their work did not evaluate the changing dynamics of the dialogic nature of websites. We argue that place websites with strategic dialogic communications, with respect to interactivity and relationship building effects, can influence the image of a destination. We therefore hypothesise that:

> **H1:** *A place website's dialogic communication principle is significantly associated with a destination image impression.*

2.5 Place website, destination image and visiting intentions

The association between destination image and behaviours such as visit, purchase or investment intentions are well established in the literature (see Chen & Tsai, 2007; Chi, & Qu, 2008; Lee, 2009; Baloglu et al., 2014). For instance, in a study on the influence of the country-of-origin image, product knowledge and product involvement on consumer purchase decisions, Lin and Chen (2006), found that country-of-origin image has a significantly positive effect on consumer product evaluations and purchase decisions. The study of Baloglu et al. (2014) on Jamaica's destination image and brand personality also discovered that destination image was positively related to visiting intentions, and potential tourists are likely to visit if they possess a favourable image of the destination. This assertion is also supported by Court and Lupton (1997) who found that destination image can positively affect tourists' intentions to visit the same destination in the future. However, these studies were not based on image impression formed from an online context; given that online presence and websites have transformed considerably over the last two decades. To this end, the second and third hypotheses for this current study state that:

> **H2:** *A destination image impression is significantly associated with visiting intentions of individuals.*

> **H3:** *A destination image impression mediates the relationship between the place website dialogic communication principles*

*2.6 Southern and non-southern Africa place website, destination image and visiting intentions*

Generally, regional travellers continue to be Africa's biggest single market in the area of 'international tourism' (UNWTO, 2006). Despite Africa's progressive increase in regional travel

and tourism performance, sub-Saharan Africa remains, on aggregate, the region where travel and tourism competitiveness is, relatively, the least developed (World Economic Forum, 2017). Southern Africa remains the strongest sub-region, followed by Eastern Africa and then Western Africa (World Economic Forum, 2017). This is not surprising because within southern Africa, diverse ways to developing tourism joint ventures have emerged (Ashley & Jones, 2001).

In Southern Africa, the countries are fairly large in physical area, except three smaller landlocked states: Lesotho, Swaziland, and Malawi. The larger countries—South Africa, Botswana, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Namibia, and Angola—all have extensive mineral deposits, and these countries have vast mineral resources making them one of the wealthiest regions of Africa with the greatest potential for economic growth (University of Minnesota, 2016). In South Africa, "as well as in other Southern African countries, tourism has become an important sector of the economy" (Hottola, 2009, p. 217). It could be argued that the growth in Southern Africa's regional and international tourism could be linked to the favourable place identity and image of the destination. These arguments lead to hypothesis 4:

> *H4: H1, H2 and H3 will be significantly different across southern and non-southern destinations in Africa.*

Figure 1 Place website dialogic communications, destination image and visiting intentions
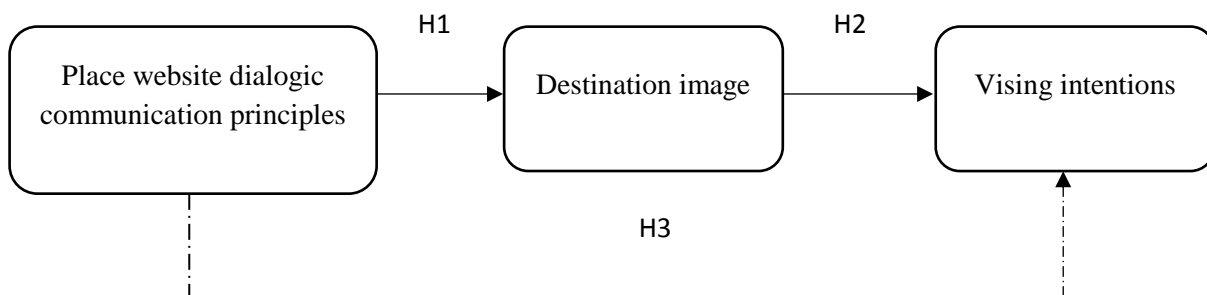
3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Measures and pilot testing

The measuring scales were extracted from Kent and Taylor's (1998) seminal publication on building dialogic relationships through the World Wide Web and modified to suit the place website context. The original Kent and Taylor data instrument had five sections, usefulness of site, dialogic loop, ease of interface, return visit and conservation of visitors. Usefulness of site in the original Kent and Taylor questionnaire had eight items; dialogic loop also had eight items, with the other three sections comprising four items. We adapted destination image and visiting intention measures from Hutter et al. (2013), Lu et al. (2014), and Davis et al. (2009) because of the related focus of this study.

To ensure instrument validity of the measurement scales, pre-tests were carried out using the Executive Master of Business Administration (Marketing) class of 21 working professionals from varied sectors such as manufacturing, educational, telecommunications, banking, insurance, etc. at the University of Ghana Business School. Given that "small samples (5–15 participants) are prone to missing even fairly common problems" (Perneger, 2015, p. 150), a sample size of 21 for pre-test was deemed appropriate. They had a cumulative travel experience of over a hundred years, had travelled to fifteen (15) African countries and were not only technologically savvy, but also active on social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snap Chat, etc.). Based on their suggestions, modifications to question wording were made to fit the place website context. The final survey consisted of four parts covering the following issues: dialogic communication elements, destination image, visiting intention, and demographics. All items were measured on a

seven-point Likert Scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). Table 2 presents the final measurement items.

3.2 Sampling and data collection

An online questionnaire survey was employed in collecting the data using LimeSurvey. The use of online survey has become increasingly popular because it reduces the costs associated with locating appropriate respondents, increases response rates, and ensures immediate availability of the respondents. Simultaneously, its popularity does not mean that the method is inherently valid and reliable due to some problems that are associated with this sampling method (e.g., control and representativeness issues) (De Gregorio & Sung, 2010). Despite the difficulties associated with online survey, the current study employed this method because the objective was to obtain a large sample featuring a variety of demographic and socialisation characteristics from across the nation (De Gregorio & Sung, 2010).

Given that there is untapped tourism potential across Africa, the study sought to not focus exclusively on preforming or non-preforming destinations, but African destinations with place websites. We focused on official destination place websites of African countries because, despite the popularity of social media, most countries still redirect potential tourists to their websites. To reduce limitation related to single country studies, four African destinations were selected, and this was deemed adequate as similar studies have used samples from three, four or five country destinations (see in Hu et al., 2004; Bastida and Huan, 2014). English speaking countries (because respondents are English speakers) with place websites where grouped into southern and non-southern destinations, particularly, because we hypothesise a performance difference

15

between southern and non-southern destinations. Two destinations were selected from each group using simple random sampling without replacement to avoid sample bias. The four African countries selected had known and established tourist destinations and reliable and functional place websites. The selected countries with their websites are South Africa (https://www.brandsouthafrica.com); Botswana (http://www.bitc.co.bw); Cameroon (http://www.brandcameroon.com) and Kenya (http://www.brandkenya.go.ke). Tourism is one of the major industries in each of these four countries (BBC, 2016; One World Nations Online, 2016) and it directly contributes to the gross domestic product (GDP) of these countries (see Table 1). As a result of the importance of the sector in the selected countries, it would seem logical that country brand promotions agencies would have dialogic communication websites to encourage subsequent visits.

Table 1 here

The links to the questionnaire for each destination and corresponding place websites were sent to potential visitors/tourists to gather information on perceptions in relation to the influence of place websites on destination image and future visiting intention. Target respondents include 100 working and part-time postgraduate students in the Department of Marketing and Entrepreneurship at the University of Ghana Business School (UGBS) comprising of Master of Philosophy, Executive Master of Business Administration, Master of Business Administration and Master of Arts in Marketing Strategy. The University of Ghana, the premier university, is noted for attracting junior and senior managers for top-up undergraduate and postgraduate studies which allowed the study to capture a considerable number of technologically savvy individuals with the requisite travel and tourism exposure. The online questionnaire was also sent to 1,114 UGBS and 100 Political Science undergraduate students. The lead collaborator also put

16

the link on his Facebook page, potentially exposing the questionnaire to 5,000 Facebook contacts. To reduce drawbacks of online surveys, questionnaires were administered to different groups of individuals (i.e. undergraduates, postgraduates, Facebook contacts) to eliminate the issue of representativeness.

Respondents were required to spend a minimum of 120 seconds surfing a destination's website before filling the questionnaire. The minimum time provided was deemed adequate as Lindgaard et al (2006) found that web site impressions are created within 50 seconds of contact. Moreover, Missouri University of Science and Technology in a study indicated that it took 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 another 2.6 seconds to reinforce that first impression, using eye-tracking software and an infrared camera to monitor/study participant's eye movements (Dahal, 2011).

Data collection occurred between 15th and 30th October 2016. Of the 7641 responses received, 2687 completed the survey. Incomplete questionnaires, which may have resulted from respondents' lack of the knowledge to answer correctly, created missing data. We could not attribute specific trends or reasons for the missing data and the examination of sampled incomplete questionnaires did not reveal any preconceptions. The remaining responses were adequate for statistical significance of our study. Consequently, after data cleaning, we removed unengaging responses and incomplete questionnaires to address the issue of control (i.e. responses with a standard deviation equal to zero). The study therefore used 1827 engaging and fully completed responses. The majority of the respondents were studying for a Bachelor/Master (70.7%), the average income level was below 250 USD (83.3%), and the average of the respondents' ages was between 20 and 24 years (51.6%). The female respondents (52.3%) were

more than the male respondents. The demographics used in this study relate to work by Foroudi et al. (2018) where a high percentage of respondents were students and majority were female. In addition, Ye et al. (2017) also, similarly, used data with majority (51.7%) female respondents. Also 40% of their study's respondents had ages between 26 and 35 years with 43.3% being 25 years or younger. In addition, most of the respondents were bachelor's degree holders.

3.3 Common method bias

Common method variance may exist due to the use of a single survey method. Concerns of common method variance were examined using Harman's one-test factor for this study (Podsakoff et al., 2003). This is to assess whether majority of the variance could be accounted for by one general factor. The results of the analysis revealed three factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 which explained 55.878% of the total variance. The first factor accounted for 39.287% (less than 50 percent) of the variance which did not account for the majority of the variance. In conclusion, the data for the study did not suffer from common method bias (see in Podsakoff et al. 2003).

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

For each destination, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was first fit for the model using the Analysis of Moments of Structures (AMOS) software package (Version 22) as well as maximum likelihood estimation procedure. The dialogic communication principle was conceptualised as a higher order construct in the research model. All four samples obtained acceptable model fits: Botswana: $\chi 2/df = 1.353$, CFI = 0.979, SRMR = 0.040, RMSER = 0.030 and PClose 1.000;

Cameroon: χ^2/df = 1.807, CFI = 0.955, SRMR = 0.048, RMSER = 0.048 and PClose 0.663; Kenya: χ^2/df = 1.801, CFI = 0.963, SRMR = 0.045, RMSER = 0.045 and PClose 0.822; and South Africa : χ^2/df = 1.705, CFI = 0.968, SRMR = 0.038, RMSER = 0.032 and PClose 1.000. Subsequently, the data was grouped in order to assess reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity test with factor loadings as presented in the Table 2 and Table 3.

Table 2 here

4.1 Validity and reliability of final measurement model

The intercorrelations among the latent constructs are included in Table 3. Fornell and Larcker's (1981) tests for discriminant validity were all found to be acceptable with results reported for composite reliability and average variance extracted for all latent variables (see Table 3). The reliability measures in this study were above the acceptable satisfactory levels (Cronbach's alphas (CA) > .70, composite reliability (CR) > .70 and Average Variance Extracted > .50) as recommended by Fornell and Larcker (1981), and Bagozzi and Yi (1988).

Table 3 here

With the acceptable measurement model established, this study proceeded to estimate the structural model method, however, the dataset was separated into two groups to create a sample that assesses and differentiates Southern Africa's place websites (Botswana and South Africa) from non-southern Africa's place websites (Cameroon and Kenya). All two samples obtained acceptable model fits: Southern part of Africa: χ^2/df = 1.931, CFI = 0.978, SRMR = 0.032,

RMSER = 0.029 and PClose 1.000; Non-southern part of Africa: χ2/df = 2.121, CFI = 0.976, SRMR = 0.036, RMSER = 0.039 and PClose 0.999.

4.2 Structural model estimation and findings

With the acceptable measurement model established, the study proceeded to estimate the multi-group structural model for the southern and non-southern place websites. The same set of fit indices used in assessing the CFA was employed to examine the fit of the structural model - χ2/df = 1.937, CFI = 0.999, SRMR = 0.014, RMSER = 0.023 and PClose 0.998. A step by step process was used to test the proposed hypotheses. The first stage of the analysis was to examine the control variables namely, gender, age and travel experience which is contained in model 1. The second stage is the introduction of the direct effect and the third stage is the inclusion of the mediating variable representing model 2 and model 3 respectively.

Amongst the three models examined, model 3 has the highest R^2 value, therefore, it was used in interpreting the hypotheses. Although not hypothesised for, we examined the relationship between place website and visiting intention. The result did not support the fact that place website significantly influences visiting intentions of southern (β = -0.06, p < 0.09) and non-southern (β = -0.03, p < 0.49) destinations. The analysis however shows that destination websites' dialogic communication principles relate significantly to destination image impressions for both the southern destinations (H1: β = 0.87, p < 0.00) and non-southern destinations (H1: β = 0.91, p < 0.00), indicating that online dialogic communication is an important antecedent of destination image impression, providing support for H1. The proportions of variance of the endogenous variables accounted for by the hypothesised influences were as

follows: R^2 southern countries destination image $= .763$ and R^2 non-southern countries destination image $= .840$. The findings also provide support for H2 as the study revealed that destination image impression also had a strong positive effect on visiting intentions for both the southern destinations (H2: $\beta = 0.79$, $p < 0.00$) and non-southern destinations (H2: $\beta = 0.85$, $p < 0.00$). In support of H3, results show that the significant positive relationship between the dialogic communication principles and visiting intention is fully mediated by destination image impression ($\beta = 0.78$, $p < 0.00$).

Table 4 here

We examined a series of nested models against our baseline model through sequential chi-square tests with the parameter constraints of interest in this study, following the method suggested by Anderson and Gerbing (1988). As shown in Table 5, the chi-square difference between Southern African destinations and non-Southern African destination was significant ($\Delta\chi2=17.592$, Δd.f. $=6$, $p< 0.007$). Since the southern and non-southern models were statistically significantly different, we check the path difference using a z-score. The findings of the z-score show that there are differences between the 2 groups in terms of the relationship between the dialogic communication principles and destination image (2.094**) and also in terms of relationship between destination image and visiting intentions (-3.249***). This is an indication that the dialogic communication principles differ across place websites and this in turn, affects destination image impression and visiting intentions in different ways.

Table 5 here

5. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The study investigated how the nature and quality of African place websites could facilitate destination image formation and consequently the intention to visit. The research results confirm

that dialogic communication principles are essential for communicating destination image which leads to an increasing propensity to visit a destination. Findings from this study suggest that dialogic communication principles are critical for communicating place identity. Since congruence between brand image and brand identity leads to developing strong brands (Roy and Banerjee, 2007), dialogic communication through place websites ensures the consistency between identity and image and therefore destination branding. As ascertained in the literature, a better understanding of the relationship between place identity and place brands might advance the theory of destination/place branding (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013). Our findings emphasise the importance of the quality and nature of websites in connecting identity, image and brand. Dialogic communications principles, therefore, ensures sustainable image formation. Dialogic elements such as dialogic loop, usefulness of information, return visits, ease of interface and conservation of visitors would go a long way to help build and manage a nation's image. Given the rather poor image of Africa created in the mainstream media and other related literature (Osei & Gbadamosi, 2011; Browning & de Oliveira, 2016; Adegoju, 2017), applying the dialogic communication principles to a place website would help build the image of African destinations. Since the internet broadens the geographical scope of communications, it gives developing countries such as those in Africa, the opportunity to manage impressions. The findings of this study make theoretical contributions with significant implications for research, practice and society.

From a theoretical perspective, this was one of the first studies to use the dialogic communication principles to confirm the relationship between place website and destination image. As noted in the literature, although the components of online dialogic communications have received considerable attention, they have seldom been examined as strategic tools for

building a destination image. Our study advances Kavaratzis and Hatch's (2013) identity-based approach to place branding theory which states that place branding is best understood as a dialogue. Thus, through dialogic communication features of a place website, a destination's identity can be understood. This study validates the role of website dialogic components as an antecedent of destination image. The study, therefore, contributes to the growing body of knowledge on place website, place identity, and behavioural intentions in several ways by testing the mediating effect of perceptions (image destination) proposed in the model - the relationship between dialogue and behaviours. The mediating role of perceptions on a theoretical model incorporating dialogic communication of place website and behaviours have been under researched, and this study paves the way for related future studies.

Our findings have practical implications for governments and their institutions responsible for the promotion of image, tourism and foreign investments. Practically, to portray a good national image, government agencies and other relevant stakeholders must ensure place websites have inbuilt systems that encourage interactivity, timely communication and contain relevant information that is easily accessible. Organisations need to ensure that dialogic communication principles are incorporated in the development of websites with specialised and dedicated employees to provide timely customer and technical services. Therefore, there is the need for a shift from websites as mere information portals to use as a strategic means of communication with stakeholders aimed at image formation. This follows the suggestion by Kinsey and Chung (2013) that to build and manage national image, governments need to invest resources in understanding perceptions of international audiences through effective communication strategies. More resources are required to build websites that have the ability to interact with stakeholders. This would, serendipitously, create more believable impressions about nations if previous

foreign visitors can communicate their impressions on well-developed websites. Indeed, to be able to manage impressions, there should be an avenue of discovering the impressions held by international audiences. Developing countries such as those in Africa need to ensure that they follow the advice of Adegoju (2017) to 'tell their own story', given that there are numerous potential tourist attractions in Africa which remain unknown. In addition, such activities could go a long way to change negative stereotypes about the African continent.

Our study has research implications. More research needs to be done on perceptions of international audiences on Africa in general with particular emphasis on how websites could support impression management. The use of online survey and sampling, as discussed in the methodology section, present limitations which suggests that future studies could use social media sites to target a wider and more varied sample. The study was also limited in the sense that responses were from only one country, a larger study with participants from multiple countries or a multi-country comparative study could enhance our understanding of dialogic communication principles and impression management of nations. Future research could also investigate how demographics (e.g. income level, gender and travel experience) play a role in determining how the dialogic elements impact on destination image and visiting intentions. In particular, the observed differences from this study between the 2 groups (southern and non-southern) in terms of the relationship between the dialogic communication principles and destination image as well as the relationship between destination image and visiting intentions is an interesting one which requires further studies to discover why such nuances exist.

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Table 1: World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) country reports, for March 2017

Country	GDP Direct contribution
South Africa	The direct impact of Travel and Tourism to GDP "was ZAR127.9bn (USD8.7bn), 3.0% of the total GDP in 2016 and is forecast to rise by 2.7%, and then by 4.5% pa, from 2017-2027, to ZAR204.4bn (USD13.9bn), 3.8% of total GDP in 2027" (WTTC, 2017a).
Botswana	The direct impact of Travel & Tourism to GDP "was BWP6, 278.9mn (USD573.5mn), 3.9% of total GDP in 2016 and is forecast to rise by 8.5% in 2017, and then by 5.1% pa, from 2017-2027, to BWP11, 208.0mn (USD1,023.7mn), 4.3% of total GDP in 2027" (WTTC, 2017b).
Cameroon	The direct impact of Travel & Tourism to GDP "was XAF682.1bn (USD1.2bn), 3.7% of total GDP in 2016 and is forecast to rise by 5.2% in 2017, and then by 5.3% pa, from 2017-2027, to XAF1,204.5bn (USD2.0bn), 3.8% of total GDP in 2027" (WTTC, 2017c).
Kenya	The direct impact of Travel & Tourism to GDP was "KES257.4bn (USD2.5bn), 3.7% of total GDP in 2016 and is forecast to rise by 6.0% in 2017, and then by 6.0% pa, from 2017-2027, to KES487.1bn (USD4.8bn), 3.7% of total GDP in 2027" (WTTC, 2017d).

Table 2: Scale items and loadings

Construct	Loadings	T-values
Dialogic elements (2nd order)		
Usefulness of information	0.803	
Dialogic loop	0.857	20.435
Ease of interface use	0.785	17.415
Return visits	0.816	17.888
Conservation of visitors	0.828	18.971
Usefulness of the Site		
The country's brand identity is consistently presented throughout the website	0.695	
The country's site weaves a story about its brand's history, heritage, character or attitude	0.688	23.394
The country communicates its key brand values on the website	0.65	22.477
Dialogic loop		
The country's website creates an engaging, and interactive consumer experience	0.718	
The country's site creates a sense of community and provides ample opportunities for community members to interact with each other over time	0.732	26.536

The country's site has chat rooms	0.653	24.179
Ease of interface		
The country's website map is easy to find and use	0.603	
The search engine on the website is effective	0.687	20.631
The website's navigation is intuitive and consistent	0.69	20.678
Return visit		
The country's site has directories with hypertext links to specific pages on other sites	0.639	
The website is personalized to suit visitors' preferences (wallpaper, first page viewed, customized content, etc.)	0.715	20.584
Conservation of visitors		
I believe the website makes it easier for me to transact business with the country	0.646	
I believe the website encourages me to bookmark the site.	0.806	25.914
I believe the website encourages me to sign up for a newsletter or consistent streams of information from the country.	0.706	24.065
Destination Image		
In comparison to other countries, this country seems to have higher service quality standards	0.715	
This country has a rich history	0.704	26.323
A Visitor (I) can reliably predict what to expect if they visit this country.	0.727	27.015
Visiting Intention		
I plan to take a vacation to this country	0.829	
I intended to visit this country in the future	0.865	41.584
I am willing to recommend others to visit this country	0.826	39.634

Table 3: Construct Intercorrelations and Reliabilities

	Destination image	Dialogic	Visiting intention
Destination image	**0.821**		
Dialogic	0.635	**0.606**	
Visiting intention	0.604	0.552	**0.896**
CA	0.888	0.758	0.876
CR	0.759	0.910	0.878
AVE	0.512	0.669	0.706

Table 4: Findings on hypotheses testing

Independent variables	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Southern	Non-southern	Southern	Non-southern	Southern	Non-southern
Control paths						
Gender	.019	.062	.033	-.007	.034	-.006
	(.536)	(.096)	(.139)	(.757)	(.068)	(.769)
Age	.101	.165	.023	-.017	.005	0.002
	(.002)	(.055)	(.285)	(.508)	(.815)	(.931)
Travel experience	-.025	-.023	-.013	-.060	.003	-.026
	(.440)	(.570)	(.570)	(.017)	(.877)	(.206)
Dialogic Communication			.679***	.777***		
Mediator						
Destination image					0.696	0.782
					(0.001)	(0.001)
R^2	0.013	0.008	0.464	0.606	0.636	0.840
ΔR^2			0.451	0.598	0.172	0.234

Table 5 Nested Model Comparisons

Model	DF	CMIN	P	NFI Delta-1	IFI Delta-2	RFI rho-1	TLI rho2
Structural weights	6	17.592	.007	.003	.003	.003	.003