



Invented corporate heritage brands

Olof Brunninge¹

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Abstract

This article examines the phenomenon of invented corporate heritage brands, i.e. heritage that is made up, exaggerated or far-fetched, to an extent that stakeholders may challenge its accuracy. Along six empirical cases, three dimensions characterizing invented heritage are identified, namely *facticity*, *historical connectedness/disconnectedness*, and *temporal expansion/contraction*. Companies draw on three different strategies to build invented corporate heritage brands: The *appropriation* strategy builds a heritage brand by leveraging the past of organizations that are forerunners of the present firm. The *forgetting* strategy omits or tones down parts of the past that are deemed as not being useful for the brand. Eventually, the *fantasizing* strategy constructs a brand based on a purely invented past. Overall, the article provides evidence of the high degree of pragmatic flexibility (Burghausen and Balmer in *Corporate Communications: an International Journal* 19: 384–402, 2014a) inherent in corporate heritage. It also demonstrates how young brands can be infused with heritage, by appropriating the past of historical forerunners that are meaningfully connected to the brand.

Keywords Branding · Corporate heritage · Heritage brand · Social memory · Temporality · History

Introduction

Since its introduction by Balmer et al. (2006), the corporate heritage concept has become increasingly popular in research on corporate marketing and branding (Balmer and Burghausen 2015a). As Urde, Balmer and Greysen already pointed out in their foundational article from 2007, ‘heritage can add to the brand’s value proposition with depth, authenticity and credibility for the *customer/consumer*’ (p. 11, emphasis in the original). It makes a difference to customers whether a brand is new or whether it can draw upon a past that is meaningful and relevant to what they can expect from it in the present and future. Corporate heritage brands are underpinned by a perennial covenant (Balmer 2013) that guarantees the continuity of key characteristics.

But what if the accounts of the past, brand heritage is based on are just made up and have little or no correspondence in actual historical events? In a recent commentary in *Marketing Theory*, Brunninge and Hartmann (2019) discuss the phenomenon of invented corporate heritage. Drawing

on Balmer’s (2011, 2013) notion of omni temporality, they claim that invented heritage constructs an aura of authenticity. They see this as an opportunity to deliver an enchanting experience to consumers, while at the same time carrying considerable risk, if stakeholders feel deceived by a fabrication of the past.

Of course, it is no news that the accounts of the past that corporate heritage is constructed around, do not usually follow the quality criteria a professional historian would apply (Balmer and Burghausen 2015a; Rowlinson and Hassard 1993). The past is more than the contingency it has traditionally and rightly been depicted as (e.g. Brunninge and Melander 2016; Kimberly and Bouchikhi 1995; Pettigrew 1987; Sydow et al. 2009). It is also a constitutive element of corporate level phenomena (Balmer 2011; Balmer and Burghausen 2015a, b), meaning that the present may shape the past as much as the past shapes the present (Brunninge 2009). Invented heritage can be seen as an example of leveraging “the past in the present” (Balmer and Burghausen 2019). The usefulness of historical accounts in constructing a meaningful narrative about the past, being relevant for present and future (Balmer 2011; Brunninge 2009; Lowenthal 1998) is more important than factual accuracy in reconstructing historical events. As the past leaves room for multiple interpretations, this creates opportunities for companies

✉ Olof Brunninge
Olof.Brunninge@ju.se

¹ Business Administration, Jönköping International Business School, Jönköping University, Jönköping, Sweden



to make their past relevant in ways that change over time (Burghausen and Balmer 2014a). However, this does not automatically mean that any useful account of the past will do. Already Urde et al. (2007) identified credibility and trust as key attributes of heritage. Anything that challenges trust in a heritage brand is therefore a potential threat to its value.

The heritage literature acknowledges the constitutive nature of heritage to corporate level phenomena (Balmer and Burghausen 2015a) as well as multiple relationships between time frames (Burghausen and Balmer 2014a). This can be conceptualized as “omni temporality” (Balmer 2011; 2013) to emphasize the simultaneous relevance of all time frames or as a dialectical relationships of past and present (Brunninge and Hartmann 2019)—or other combinations of time frames—in order to put focus on the dynamics between two of them. Still, there is a lack of empirical studies focusing on *invented heritage* (Brunninge and Hartmann 2019), i.e. cases where accounts of the past are made up, exaggerated or far-fetched, to an extent that stakeholders may seriously challenge their accuracy. What if the heritage, a corporate heritage brand is supposed to leverage, turns out to be made-up or at least contestable? Burghausen and Balmer (2014a) point at the pragmatic flexibility firms have when adopting a relevant, but not necessarily factual past. At the same time, they affirm that this happens “within not yet specified limits” (p. 391). While the phenomenon of invented heritage is recognized and addressed in extant literature, it is typically addressed within broader discussions and seldom the focus of the discussion. This article adds to our understanding of the phenomenon, by studying six cases of invented corporate heritage brands. Its purpose is to show how and with what effects corporate heritage brands are invented. In doing so, it helps to better understand opportunities as well as risks associated with invented corporate heritage brands.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows: After an overview of theory relevant to the phenomenon and the empirical method applied, the cases are presented. In the discussion section a cross-case analysis develops three dimensions of invented corporate heritage brands and three strategies how invented corporate heritage brands can be deployed. The article concludes by outlining implications for the corporate heritage literature and for managerial practice.

Theoretical framework

The corporate heritage literature has until recently been depicted as a nascent field (Burghausen and Balmer 2014a), yet within little more than a decade, it has produced a significant amount of scholarly publications. It takes an interest in the historically embedded traits of a brand or institution that enable it to survive and remain successful, by remaining salient to stakeholders (Balmer 2013). Hence, there is not just

a long history that may be interesting to know. Rather the past has been chosen to be a key feature of a brand’s identity and positioning (Urde et al. 2007). In being its constitutive element, it reaches beyond being a contingency explaining historically embedded constraints (Balmer and Burghausen 2015a). Rather, the way history is perceived is constructed in a way that suits today’s strategic agenda (Blombäck and Brunninge 2013, 2016). The past is interesting, as it is relevant for what the brand is today and what one can expect from it in the future (Balmer 2011). This means that activities seemingly preoccupied with the past in fact concern future-oriented strategic moves (Hudson 2011). Corporate heritage is therefore omni temporal by nature (Balmer 2013). It is simultaneously of the past, of the present and of the future (Balmer 2011).

The omni-temporality of corporate heritage is linked to the idea that certain things remain the same from past to present and potentially into the future. Balmer (2013, p. 307) talks of trait constancy referring to a variety of traits that can be stable, or relatively invariant (Balmer 2011). Trait constancy provides a sense of continuity and direction (Brunninge 2017). As the notion of relative invariance (Balmer 2011) suggests, traits need not be stable as long as changes are not too disruptive (Brunninge and Melin 2010). The constancy can also be reconstructed in hindsight by adapting conceptions of the past to present needs (Brunninge and Hartmann 2019). Even material aspects of heritage leave room for reinterpretation, as Bargenda (2015) shows in her study of corporate architecture.

The idea of producing true accounts of history can of course be problematized. Historian Leopold von Ranke’s classical ideal of reconstructing history *as it really happened* may appear problematic in an age where claims of objectivity are frequently questioned (Rüsen 1990). Historian Schulze (1987) likens history to a quarry, from where stones can be selected as they fit the purposes of their user. Heritage is therefore by definition selective and entails an opportunity for improving the past (Lowenthal 1998). This includes downplaying or forgetting things that are perceived as embarrassing or unuseful (Antéby and Molnar 2012; Balmer 2009; Balmer and Burghausen 2015b; Brunninge 2009), as well as adaptation to spatial and temporal contexts (Balmer 2013). Over time, some aspects of heritage may be discarded while others are preserved (Hudson 2017). Strictly speaking, there is not only one quarry as Schulze suggests, but multiple sources from which heritage can be constructed (Balmer 2013; Pecot and Barnier 2017). The corporate past is segmented (Balmer and Burghausen 2019) in the sense that it is multi-faceted and perceived differently by different stakeholders. Yet, this does not mean that accounts of history can be completely arbitrary. The corporate heritage literature does not focus on the past as it happened, but on the past as people perceive, think and communicate about it. Of course,



in this endeavour, as the present article shows, facticity can be of concern. Burghausen and Balmer (2014a) talk about repertoires of the corporate past. They distinguish between the corporate past as such, comprising all that ever happened and corporate memory, history, tradition, nostalgia, provenance and heritage, referring to as how this past is for instance remembered, told, and valorised. In the corporate world and even for non-commercial institutions, the past has become a communicative resource that can be deployed in order to obtain competitive advantage or to ensure sustained existence (Balmer 2007; Foster et al. 2011). For this endeavour, there is room to adopt even a fictional past, as long as it has symbolic relevance and allows achieving the desired goals (Burghausen and Balmer 2014a).

In their classical work about the invention of tradition, Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983), describe that supposedly ancient traditions often are relatively recent inventions. It is their supposed age and their origins in a mythical past, discussed as the ‘special mnemonic status of the beginnings’ by Zerubavel (2004, p. 101) that adds to their symbolic importance (Burghausen and Balmer, 2014a). The beginnings, referred to as provenance by Burghausen and Balmer (2014a) in the corporate context, have a central role in defining identity (Blombäck and Brunninge, 2009). Mythical past is often glorified and romanticised, making it an appealing ideal (Hudson and Balmer 2013). Especially founding myths, be it on the level of corporations or entire civilisations, have an implicit claim of eternal relevance, suggesting that they provide direction for the future (Assmann 1992). For this reason, the ability to define and redefine the ‘true’ origins of an organisation can become powerful managerial tools (Rowlinson and Hassard 1993).

Extant studies of corporate heritage and related phenomena suggest that there is no clear dividing line between exaggerations, far-fetched interpretations and fictional inventions of the past. Burghausen and Balmer (2014a) note that corporations have pragmatic flexibility in interpreting the past. While this flexibility is not unlimited and does not have to end up in factual inaccuracy, it may sometimes also result in a “corporate past that is more fiction than fact” (p. 391). At times, heritage can even be an outright invention, as Harquail’s (2007) of a food company with a fake founder shows. As discussed in the previous sections, corporate heritage aims at constructing useful rather than accurate accounts of the past (Brunninge and Fridriksson 2017; Burghausen and Balmer 2014a). Hence, statements about the past that a professional historian would consider being inaccurate are almost an inevitable ingredient of corporate heritage. For the present study, I will define invented heritage brands as *corporate heritage brands relying on accounts of the past that could be considered by key stakeholders, in whole or part, as fictitious, exaggerated, misleading, or otherwise untrustworthy* (cf. Brunninge and Hartmann 2019). Corporate heritage,

always has stakeholders in mind, meaning that heritage communication aims at evoking reactions among key stakeholder groups (Blombäck and Brunninge 2016). This could for instance be customers that are assured about a brand’s trustworthiness, based on longevity and track record (Pecot et al. 2019; Urde et al. 2007). As a result, they may display higher purchase intention, brand attachment and commitment (Rose et al. 2016) and be willing to pay a premium (Pecot et al. 2018).

In their commentary on invented heritage, Brunninge and Hartmann (2019) see authenticity as a major reason why invented heritage may be appealing. They argue that a fictitious and at the same time idealised past may have an aura of authenticity making it appear as genuine although it might not be against objective standards. This view resonates with that of Hudson and Balmer (2013) who talk of mythical heritage that can be faux but is appealing to consumers as it allows them to escape to an idealised and romanticised past represented by a brand. In his work on brand auras, Alexander (2009) finds that distinguishing auras of authenticity can be created by constructing a brand story based on historical associations. Beverland (2005) discusses how authenticity is indicated by telling stories about a brand’s provenance that might be real but does not have to be. He exemplifies this with the invented provenance of Gucci (Forden, 2001) that is continuously being communicated although the firm has admitted it is invented. Rindell’s (2013; 2015) notion of image heritage highlights the risk of corporate heritage brands not being considered as authentic by brand communities (Rindell et al. 2015). In such cases lack of authenticity may result in a backlash against the brand.

Such construction of authenticity is possible thanks to the omni-temporal nature of corporate heritage (Balmer 2013). Where past present and the prospective future merge, the past is also relevant to the authenticity that is ascribed to a brand in the present. In this context, it is not only the past of the focal brand that is relevant. Heritage identities have multiple augmented role identities, for instance by being connected to a group, a nation or a place (Balmer 2013). Pecot and de Barnier (2017) discuss that brand heritage is constructed based on the origins of the brand itself, but at the same time draws on elements of the collective past. Balmer and Chen (2015) discuss how a Chinese medicine brand draws on both Chinese national and imperial identity.

Burghausen and Balmer (2015) show how the English brewery Shepherd’s Neame sees itself as a guardian of the country’s brewing heritage. Leveraging the collective past, even young brands compensate for their own lack of heritage and construct authenticity (Foster et al. 2011; Oertel and Thommes 2015; Schroeder et al. 2015). Sometimes, connections to something or someone else’s past can be far-fetched. Balmer (2013) talks of appropriated heritage, where an institution leverages on a person’s or a brand’s heritage it



has no connection to of its own, by choosing a name or by acquiring a brand. In such situations, there is an opportunity of creating an aura of authenticity, but also a risk of being perceived as fake. The logic behind such appropriation lies in the value and relevance the appropriated past may have for both present and future (Burghausen and Balmer 2014a) and that the brand's own past cannot provide.

To sum up, the phenomenon of invented corporate heritage brands is recognized and quite often addressed in broader discussions on corporate heritage. Still, there are few studies, in particular few empirical investigations, putting an emphasis on it. By showing in more depth how and with what effects invented heritage brands are created, this study will hopefully be a step towards a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

Method

The present article strives to add to our empirical understanding of invented corporate heritage brands. To remedy the lack of empirically-based investigations of the phenomenon, the study draws on six cases of invented corporate heritage brands. Qualitative case study research is particularly suited to capture context, particularly the historical context of the cases (Pettigrew 1987). To study cases that provide valuable information about the phenomenon, a purposeful, theory-based sampling strategy (Suri 2011) was chosen. Balmer (2011, p. 1385) defines corporate heritage brands

as “a distinct category of institutional brand[s] where there is a degree of continuity in terms of the brand promise as expressed via the institution's identity, behaviour, and symbolism”. The cases should display a brand promise drawing on such continuity, where the depicted past is invented, at least to some extent. There should be some variation within the sample, to address different aspects of the phenomenon (Flyvbjerg 2006). The focus of such a sampling strategy is not to achieve any statistical generalisability, but to ensure that the data is of high relevance to the research topic. By drawing upon personal experience and by asking colleagues, I identified six cases, where enough data could be collected to portray how corporate heritage brands were invented. At the same time the cases displayed significant variation.

Case study research relies on multiple data sources that complement each other and allow for covering different perspectives on the case (Yin 2017). The theory-driven aim of the study at the same time provided a clear focus for data collection. The main point of interest was how heritage related to the brands was communicated. Depending on the nature of each case, typically media reporting was combined with a study of corporate websites. In three cases, I could conduct participant observation. Two organizations whose brands were studied, the University of Borås and Jönköping University have been my workplaces. In none of those cases was my participation of a kind that it had any significant impact on the construction of heritage. Archival documents complemented the data, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Data used for the cases

	Degussa Goldhandel	Gold-Zack	University of Borås	Jönköping university	UCS	Twin city
Media reporting	14 newspaper clippings/press releases	17 newspaper clippings/press releases	3 newspaper clippings	10 newspaper clippings	12 newspaper clippings	1 newspaper clipping
Corporate website	Website screenshots from 2015 and 2019	Website screenshots from 2003	Website screenshots from 2019	Website screenshots from 2019	Website screenshots from 2015	Website screenshots from 2015
Participant observation			Authors was employed and worked at the university 2011–2014	Author has been employed at the university since 1998, was a student 1994–98		Mystery shopping 2014
Other	Court ruling from 2013 Official history book from the old Degussa 1993		Brochures and promotion material 2007–2019, including 1866 magazine Official history book Swedish School of Textiles 2013	Various brochures and promotion material 1994–2019	Annual reports 2012–2014	Annual reports 2004–2018



In qualitative research, data collection and analysis are intertwined (Merriam 1998). The researcher reflects upon the cases and compares them to theory while collecting the data. As a first formal interpretive step, a case story for each case was constructed. Short versions of the case stories are presented in this article. Each of them is concluded in a within-case analysis, departing from Balmer's (2013) notion of trait constancy. The results are also mapped in Table 2. Trait constancy was a useful starting point, as it shows how continuity and discontinuity are created in constructing invented heritage brands. In a cross-case analysis, reported in the discussion section, I went through the cases looking for reoccurring themes (Merriam 1998). The themes of facticity, historical connectedness/disconnectedness as well as temporal expansion/contraction came back in all the cases and helped making sense of their similarities and differences. Eventually, the cases were grouped along similar approaches to invented corporate heritage resulting in the identification of three strategies.

Cases

Degussa Goldhandel: reusing an abandoned brand

In 1843, a gold and silver separation factory opened in Frankfurt. Thirty years later, it adopted the Degussa name. It was particularly the company's gold ingots with the Degussa 'sun and moon' logotype that the German public connected with the brand.

In the late 1980s, the precious metal business was sold and lost the Degussa brand name. In 2010, a German investor bought the right to use the Degussa brand in connection with trading precious metals. He launched a firm called Degussa Sonne/Mond Goldhandel (Degussa Sun/Moon Gold Trading). The company initially targeted German consumers that saw gold as a haven for their savings. The firm drew on the heritage of the old Degussa and revived the logotype. It also used the slogan 'Degussa – Gold and Silver since 1843'.

However, in 2013, a court prohibited using the slogan. The court found that the reference to age misleadingly signalled quality, although there was no continuity in the processes, business and know-how of the previous Degussa company. After the court ruling, the illegal reference 'Degussa – Gold and Silver since 1843' was removed from the firm's website. Brand name, logotype and the reference to old Degussa in the history section still claimed commitment to the traditions connected with the brand name.

Degussa Goldhandel draws on the ethos and quality standards of the original Degussa company. As a consequence, a start-up company founded in 2010 establishes continuity back until 1843, i.e. 167 years prior to its own founding date. It tries to overcome the liability of newness

(Blombäck and Brunninge 2009), by appropriating the heritage of a brand with the same product and service focus. That brand has longevity and track record, two key elements of heritage (Urde et al. 2007), to offer. By maintaining continuity in terms of design and style, concerning the name as well as the logotype of the acquired brand, stakeholders may even incorrectly assume organisational continuity.

Gold-Zack: from underwear to investment banking

Gold-Zack is an old German corporate brand, connected to the company Gold-Zack-Werke, known for producing elastic bands and other sewing supplies. While the firm's roots can be traced back to the 1860s, the Gold-Zack name was introduced in 1934. It referred to a golden zigzag thread that was woven into the elastic bands. The colour alluded to high quality. As long as people tailored or repaired their garments themselves, Gold-Zack was a well-known brand in Germany. However, with a shrinking consumer market the elastic band production was sold in 1995. This did not rescue Gold-Zack-Werke. In 1996, the owners sold the company to an investment banker. Keeping the Gold-Zack brand name, he transformed the company into a financial services firm specializing in IPOs. It was somewhat odd that an investment bank bringing high tech companies to the stock exchange chose the brand name of an old-fashioned manufacturer of sewing supplies. The owner-manager explained:

'Gold-Zack stands for conservatism, long life and high value.'

However, the firm got in trouble like many of its peers when the IT bubble burst. Gold-Zack went bankrupt in 2003.

Gold-Zack is similar to Degussa in emphasizing the quality standards as well as the values connected to rationale, culture and ethos the brand embodies. The trait constancy communicated is in conservatism, long life and high value, regardless of the current product. This is reflected by continuity in style and design, sticking to the same name and the zig-zag symbol in the logotype. In contrast to Degussa there is however sharp trait inconstancy in product focus. This makes the choice of trait constancy in name and symbolism surprising. There is little reason to assume that quality standards the brand represents can be transferred from the production of elastic bands to financial advice processes.

University of Borås: making oneself older than the big brother

For long, Swedish higher education had been concentrated to the country's six universities (Swedish: *universitet*). In 1977, twelve regionally-based so-called *högskolor* in medium-sized cities were opened. In most of these places, there



Table 2 Claimed trait constancy in the cases. Only traits emphasized in the communication of corporate heritage are mentioned

Trait	Degussa Goldhandel	Gold-Zack	University of Borås		Jönköping university		UCS	Twin city
			Same as original company	Same, but only since 1977	Pre 1994	Post 1994		
Ownership					Private foundation		Founder-owned	
Legal unit		Same as original company	Same, but only since 1977	Higher education institution	Same as in 1994		Supposed to be the same	
Organisational Type			Higher education institution	1866 represents quality and tradition	Foundation, higher education institution	Secondary school	Restaurant chain	
Rationale, Culture and Ethos	Philosophy relating to value of precious metals	Conservatism, long life, high value			Entrepreneurial, strong regional anchoring, international	Visionary, elite education	Good food, not expensive (founders' philosophy)	
Product and Service Focus	Gold, precious metals		Higher education		Higher education, inter-national market	Secondary education	Italian/American restaurant	
Manufacturing and Delivery								
Quality Levels	High quality, leading brand since nineteenth century	High quality (long life)	High quality + academic values proven by tradition		High quality, not just regional college	Elite program	Good food, value for money	
Location			Borås		Jönköping	Karlskrona	St.Paul/Minneapolis + other places	
Group and Class Associations								
Design and Style	Sun and moon logo-type	Zigzag design						Interior and menu allude to heritage
Sensory Utilisation Corporate Communications								



were limited higher education activities, often seminaries for teachers that were integrated in the new organizations.

The University of Borås was one of these *högskolor*. Like in the other cases, there were existing education programs in the city that were merged into the university. In 2012, the University of Borås decided to launch a magazine entitled ‘1866’, presenting research to a non-academic audience. 1866 was the year when the oldest predecessor organisation that could be traced, *Tekniska Väfskolan* (The Technical Weaving School), had been established.

In the editorial of the first issue, the Vice Chancellor wrote:

‘Lineage is important in the academic world. With age come experience and tradition. [...] To highlight our quality, we have chosen 1866 as the name of our new magazine. The year refers to the year when the Technical Weaving School started operations in Borås. The Weaving School is part of the University of Borås today, so for sure, we have a lineage as well.’ During a meeting with staff, the Vice Chancellor added with a twinkle in his eyes:

‘1866 is a bit of a lie, but finally we can say that we are older than the University of Gothenburg.’

This comparison was no coincidence. The University of Gothenburg is one of the old universities in Sweden. As Borås is less than 70 km from Gothenburg, the University of Borås at times appears like Gothenburg’s little sister.

The University of Borås emphasizes trait constancy concerning the organisational type in combination with its location in Borås. To cope with its liability of newness, particularly compared to the nearby competitor Gothenburg, the University of Borås appropriates the heritage of higher education institutions located in the city a long time ago. In doing so, the brand comes to represent academic tradition and the quality such tradition suggests. Brand heritage is stretched by 111 years from 1977 back to 1866. While the service delivered, i.e. higher education, has stayed the same, there is of course little similarity between nineteenth century weaving education and a twenty-first century university.

Jönköping University: hiding a part of the past

Like its counterpart in Borås, Jönköping University was established in 1977 as a *högskola* and incorporating some existing education programs. However, Jönköping University no longer considers 1977 its founding date. In the Autumn of 2019, the institution celebrated its 25th anniversary. The reason for moving the founding date from 1977 to 1994 is the change of the University’s legal status that year. To promote innovation in academia, the government transformed Jönköping University into a private foundation. As such it had more freedom than its state-run peers. Still, name, staff as well as educational programs remained largely the same.

A substantial investment by the government allowed building up a new business school with international ambitions.

For the 2019 anniversary celebrations, a special section of the university’s website was created, presenting an animated timeline covering the years 1994–2019. No reference to the period of state ownership before 1994 was made. Only somewhat hidden in the “about us” section of the university website a second timeline can be found. That timeline covers the period 1897–1994, with 1897 referring to the opening of a school for nurses.

In an editorial for the university magazine’s anniversary issue, the Vice Chancellor stated:

‘Jönköping University has now contributed to changing the region of Jönköping for 25 years. Hopefully, we will be an equally strong force for change in the future.’

The question whether Jönköping University contributed to the development of the region during the years 1977–1994 is not at all brought up. The anniversary celebrations, like most of the regular communication around the past, indicate that the transformation into a private foundation is considered as so fundamental for the university’s identity that the history before is largely negligible. Continuities, reaching longer back in time such as the organisational form of a university, the place and the services offered are toned down. The brand promises novelty, innovativeness and quality, contrasting to the pre-1994 brand of a regional, second-class institution. Hence, trait constancy from 1994 onwards is constructed along multiple dimensions. Special emphasis is put on the foundation form that is supposed to represent trait constancy in ethos, culture and quality standards.

United Continents International School: start-up with 250 years of heritage

In 2014, a private upper secondary school called United Continents International School (UCS) opened in a historical military building in Karlskrona/Sweden. The school offered an international baccalaureate (IB) elite diploma program to fee-paying students recruited worldwide. One of the founders had previously managed a similar program at Ehrensvärdska Gymnasiet, a school owned by Karlskrona municipality. UCS used many historical references in its marketing communications. Most of those referred to the city of Karlskrona that was founded in 1680 as a naval base. In its branding, UCS drew on this heritage, showing pictures of old military buildings on its website and stating:

‘Study at UC IB World School in Karlskrona Sweden. In the Naval City of Karlskrona, high quality high school education has been around since 1882. Vision-



aries have been inspiring students in lecture halls ever since. [...] The Navy Cadet School in Karlskrona was founded in 1756, as a replacement of the dissolved Royal Cadet Corps in Stockholm.'

UCS also claimed roots in the recent past. The IB program at UCS was presented as the continuation Ehrensvärdska's IB program. Regardless of not yet having graduated any students of its own, UCS presented testimonials from Ehrensvärdska alumni on its website. Despite all marketing efforts, UCS went bankrupt in 2015.

Like Degussa Goldhandel, UCS was a start-up having no heritage of its own to relate to. Key elements of corporate heritage such as longevity and track-record (Urde et al. 2007) were missing. To overcome this liability of newness (Blombäck and Brunninge 2009), UCS appropriated the heritage of the founder's previous workplace. It also drew on the augmented role identity (Balmer 2013) connected to Karlskrona as a place. By appropriating the heritage of the Navy Cadet School, 0 years of heritage became 258. Far-fetched associations with organisations that represented trait constancy in terms of place, organizational type and services offered were used to construct a brand, suggesting trait constancy in terms of education culture and supposedly high quality.

Twin City: when heritage is a pure invention

Twin City is a restaurant in Jönköping in Sweden. The name might be attributed to Jönköpings closeness to the neighbouring city of Huskvarna. However, in Twin City's menu as well as on its website, a different background of the name and history of the restaurant was presented:

All started with Molly Dewalt, who gave birth to identical twins in Minneapolis in 1972. When delivering her babies, Molly almost died and needed intensive care. This allowed a childless nurse to kidnap one of the boys and have him declared dead. After her recovery, Molly took care of her remaining boy named Lester. The nurse, who was of Italian descent, called the stolen twin Luciano and the two boys grew up in the twin cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul without knowing of each other. Many years later, Lester and Luciano incidentally bumped into each other in the street. They understood from their looks that they were twins and soon discovered a shared interest in cooking. They opened a restaurant, combining Lester's interest in American food with Luciano's knowledge of Italian cuisine. The restaurant's name "Twin City" reflected the location and the owners' amazing fate. The business grew into a restaurant chain always opening new outlets in twin cities, including Dallas/Fort Worth (USA), Athens/Piraeus (Greece), and Johannesburg/Pretoria (South Africa).

A thorough research on the internet, however, does not reveal any traces of Twin City restaurants in the cities mentioned. The story of the twins and their restaurant chain is obviously a pure invention. Nevertheless, when the author of the present article asked a waitress of the restaurant about the name, she referred to the story in the menu. The way she did, suggested she genuinely believed in it.

By drawing upon a heritage that is purely invented, Twin City's brand enchants potential customers. The restaurant is far from an ordinary pizza and pasta place. Trait constancy is shown along numerous dimensions. If one believes the made-up story of the past, ownership, organisational form, legal unit, product focus, rationale, culture and ethos, product focus, quality levels as well as design and style have remained the same. No disruptions or trait inconstancies can be found in the restaurant's story. This is little surprising, considering that a purely invented past can be perfectly adapted to present needs.

Discussion

Looking at the six cases of invented heritage brands, they will be discussed along three different dimensions that appear in different ways in all of them, namely *facticity*, *historical connectedness/disconnectedness*, and *temporal expansion/contraction*.

Facticity

The question of facticity is central to the idea of invented heritage, as inventedness suggests that stakeholders can question whether accounts about the past and the brand's relation to it are accurate. Here, facticity does not refer to any philosophical discussion whether there is such a thing as a true past, but rather the question if claims about the past would likely be considered accurate after investigation.

Only one of the cases, Twin City, is based on a pure invention. It is not even a reinterpretation/exaggeration of actual events. In all the other cases, the accounts about the past seem plausible and it would be possible to check their accuracy against external sources. Most people would agree that the events depicted in the accounts in fact occurred. The narratives about the past are of course selective in pointing out historical events and characteristics of past organisations that appear relevant to the focal brand in the present and future. However, this does not come as a surprise given the pragmatic flexibility of corporate heritage (Burghausen and Balmer 2014b). What differentiates invented heritage brands is rather whether the suggested relevance of the past for the present and future can be legitimately claimed. Hardly anyone would doubt that Karlskrona has a long



history of education, but it is rather questionable that this would have any impact on the ability of a school like UCS to deliver high quality education today or in the future. While in extreme cases, invented heritage brands build on totally made-up stories, the invention mostly does not lie in the facticity of the communicated past, but in the trustworthiness of its relevance for the brand promise.

Historical connectedness/disconnectedness

Historical connectedness/disconnectedness refers to the brand's connection—claimed, concealed, or denied—with a historical referent that could potentially be relevant for its heritage. Such referents can be brands, organisations or a place, as we see in the case of UCS, which resonates with Balmer's (2013) idea of augmented role identities.

Most brands in this study connect to historical corporations and their brands. The degree of connectedness varies. Sometimes, the historical referent comes across as being the same organisation, at least at first sight, like for Degussa Goldhandel. To avoid further lawsuits, the firm is careful not to claim being identical with the historical Degussa company. Yet, customers need to make some effort to find out that brand is now connected to a different organisation. For Gold-Zack on the other hand, where the legal unit was identical with the historical referent, the radical change in industry made it easy for external stakeholders to realize the difference between the contemporary and the historical organisation. The owner-manager even had to explain in what sense there was a meaningful connection between the two. Still the brand expressed the same values as the historical referent. Despite all differences, Gold-Zack and Degussa have in common that historical connectedness was constructed through continuity in design, namely that of their logotypes. Such continuity in design is powerful in establishing heritage brands (Balmer 2013; Miller et al. 2017). The Gold-Zack and Degussa examples show that where corporate heritage design connects the brand to its historical referent, few stakeholders would ever overlook the connection.

In five of the cases, the brand connects to a historical referent representing a heritage the brand now claims for itself. It appropriates (Balmer 2013) the referent's heritage. One case differs, namely Jönköping University that largely disconnects itself from any referents existing prior to 1994. This stands in sharp contrast to its industry peer, the University of Borås. The two institutions have similar histories, and both have potential precursors dating back to the nineteenth century. Still, it is only Borås that emphasizes a connection to those. Jönköping largely refrains from doing so.

Historical connectedness or disconnectedness is constructed by referring to trait constancy or by refraining from doing so. Table 2 shows the different traits that are

communicated as being continuous. The wide range of combinations reflects the choice organisations have in tailoring the heritage brand they want to communicate. However, in all the cases, rationale, culture and ethos are claimed to be continuous over time. This connection to historical examples of good business practice, serves as evidence of a perennial covenant (Balmer 2013), suggesting that stakeholders can expect from the brand that values, quality, and resources of the past will prevail in the future (Blombäck and Brunninge 2016). Where disconnectedness is constructed, parts of the past are discarded (Brunninge and Melin 2010). As the Jönköping University case shows, historical connectedness and disconnectedness can exist in parallel. While a recent period in the past is celebrated as a logical forerunner of what the brand represents and will represent, the earlier history is forgotten and deemed irrelevant to present and future.

Constancy in soft aspects of heritage brands, such as rationale, culture and ethos, are central in constructing an aura of authenticity (Alexander 2009; Brunninge and Hartmann 2019). Generally, such soft aspects of heritage brands are not bound to a specific product or service focus. For that reason, even if a corporation changes industry (Gold-Zack), or if the heritage of a different organisation is appropriated (UCS), reference to supposedly everlasting values represented by the brand can be made. Where the heritage of old brands like Degussa or GoldZack is appropriated, a sense of ceaseless multigenerational stakeholder utility (Balmer 2013) is conjured up. From the perspective of invented heritage, it is of course more difficult to challenge the constancy of an intangible trait than that of, e.g. location or product focus. At least to some extent, the facticity of the latter is easier to verify for stakeholders. Still, of course one may challenge the plausibility of claimed constancy in intangible traits. Why would the values of old Degussa survive in a company that has just bought the Degussa brand name? Why would quality standards of elastic bands apply in a different industry with new staff? From a purely rational perspective such trait constancy seems implausible. However, if the main aim with constructing such continuities is to create a brand with an aura of authenticity, success might be possible. The mythical past (Hudson and Balmer 2013) may help enchanting the consumers (Hartmann and Ostberg 2013), making them feel that there is more to brands like Gold-Zack, Degussa and UCS than a start-up without a track-record.

Temporal extension/contraction

A fundamental characteristic of corporate heritage is the forward-looking extension of the past's relevance to present and future (Balmer and Burghausen 2019; Burghausen and Balmer 2014a). Likewise, by activating selected aspects of the past as heritage (Santos et al. 2016), historical connection



and disconnection extends or shortens the relevant past of the brand. Through this temporal extension or contraction, historical referents are highlighted or concealed, meaning that even the perceived age of an organisation may change. While at first sight, the founding date of an organisation appears as objective, there are sometimes several meaningful dates available (Rowlinson and Hassard 1993). Table 3 compares the differences in age between the focal organisations' current operations and the claimed origins. UCS, a start-up that hardly has begun operating, leverages a heritage of more than 250 years. In doing so, the brand connects.

It is noteworthy that the companies in the study are young by the standards of their industries, in several cases even start-ups. Constructing invented heritage brands, helps these firms to overcome their liability of newness (Blombäck and Brunninge 2009). This happens through appropriating heritage, by buying a brand-name (Degussa), a firm (Gold-Zack), drawing on the augmented role identity of a place (UCS) or by leveraging the heritage of claimed precursor organisations (UCS and University of Borås). This is done despite there is no or little operational connection to the institutions whose heritage one appropriates.

Invention of heritage brands through appropriation, forgetting and fantasizing

Summarizing the six cases and the discussion in the preceding section, three different strategies related to invented heritage brands emerge. Most of the cases, Degussa Goldhandel, Gold-Zack, University of Borås and UCS, choose a strategy that, drawing on Balmer's (2013) notion, can be

labelled *appropriation*. For this strategy, facticity plays a role in the sense that there is no conscious attempt to make up historical events. The invention rather lies in constructing a farfetched historical connectedness between the brand and a carefully selected past. Constancy in selected traits is emphasized and the appropriation of traits such as brand name or design make the brand difficult to distinguish from its referent (Degussa) or establish a connection where it otherwise appears counterintuitive (Gold-Zack). Stakeholders may question whether the corporate brand has any relevant relationship to the historical referent it appropriates to construct its heritage. The appropriation strategy often goes hand in hand with temporal expansion. The past of the referent becomes a substitute for the past the brand otherwise lacks. Hence, the appropriation strategy even allows start-ups to have heritage brands. This provides an interesting perspective to the juxtaposition of heritage brands and contemporary brands, where age is sometimes used as one distinguishing dimension (Cooper et al. 2015a). If a start-up has heritage, maybe age is less important than we thought in defining heritage brands. This is not to say that age does not matter. Where multiple generations follow a brand, the brand becomes part of a group's collective memory (Balmer 2013). But even this can be appropriated by new ventures, as the revival of the Degussa and Gold-Zack brands shows.

Also, the *forgetting* strategy has no interest in manipulating the facticity of historical events as such. Instead, parts of the past that appear useless to the brand or would disturb the envisioned heritage are forgotten. They are deliberately left out or, as in the case of Jönköping University, seldom mentioned and mostly hidden. In contrast to the appropriation

Table 3 Temporal expansion/contraction in the cases

Case	Start of current/most recent operations	Origins referred to	Difference	Additional remarks
Degussa Goldhandel	2010 Start of firm trading with precious metals	1843 Original gold and silver separation factory	+ 167 years	The Degussa name was introduced 1873, but the current company refers to 1843 as its origin
Gold-Zack	1996 Company transformed to financial services firm	1934 Introduction of Gold-Zack company name	+ 66 years	The company that changed its name to Gold-Zack was founded in 1921, after a merger of two firms, started in 1868 and 1894
University of Borås	1977 Start of the University of Borås	1866 Start of Technical Weaving School	+ 111 years	The Technical Weaving School was the oldest of several precursors
Jönköping University	1977 Start of Jönköping University	1994 Transformation of legal form to a private foundation	- 17 years	The university has several precursors, the oldest from 1897
United Continents International School	2014 Opening of secondary school	1756 Start of Naval Cadet School in Karlskrona	+ 258 years	The school also claimed continuity to a similar program at a high school established in 1999
Twin city	2005 Start of Jönköping restaurant	1997 Start of restaurant in Minneapolis/St.Paul	+ 8 years	The claimed origins are a pure invention



strategy, forgetting draws on historical disconnectedness and implies temporal contraction. In extant literature, forgetting has often been connected to “dark” aspects of the corporate past (Burghausen and Balmer 2014a, b), such as war crimes (Booth et al. 2007) or human rights abuses (Balmer 2009; Van Lent and Smith 2019). In such cases, being caught conveniently forgetting past events entails a serious threat of damage to the brand (Brunninge 2017). Forgetting things that are simply not in line with present identity is less risky. From a stakeholder perspective (Blombäck and Brunninge 2016), such forgetting can target internal audiences to communicate the organisation’s strategic orientation, as much as it communicates corporate brand heritage to external stakeholders. In principle, forgotten aspects of heritage can be rediscovered/revived (Brunninge 2009; Cooper et al. 2015b) if this fits a changed branding strategy. At times, forgetting comes along with appropriation, for instance when a past that has become inconvenient needs to be replaced, if necessary, with a fabricated past (Balmer and Burghausen 2019). Hudson and Balmer (2013) illustrate this with the case of the British Crown, which for political reasons adopted the English name Windsor to replace the original German name Saxe-Coburg and Gotha.

Eventually, there are also cases, such as Twin City, where the past is just made up. On the facticity dimension this means that central elements of the brand’s claimed past lack correspondence to actual events. A corporate heritage brand is created almost out of nothing. In such a *fantasizing* strategy, historical connectedness or disconnectedness to actual referents are irrelevant, as the claimed past is tailor-made to the desired heritage. Whether the made-up story constitutes temporal expansion or contraction is an empirical question. Where the past is fantasized, also the claimed age of the organisation can be adjusted. Fantasizing strategies bear witness that pragmatic flexibility (Burghausen and Balmer 2014a) in adapting the past can vary very big. Hudson and Balmer (2013) see highly fictitious versions of the past in what they call mythical heritage. Here, one purpose can be helping consumers to escape to imaginary worlds. This implies that it is not necessarily a problem if customers understand that the past is made up.

When a fantasizing strategy offers an enchanting experience (Brunninge and Hartmann 2019), its symbolic relevance (Burghausen and Balmer 2014a) may be sufficient to make the brand’s invented past meaningful to stakeholders.

Conclusions

This article has provided six empirical illustrations of how invented heritage brands can be constructed. The cases show that invented heritage can be helpful in constructing an aura of authenticity that assumes an eternally valid covenant

(Balmer 2013), rooted in a mythical past, to apply in the present and the future of the brand. The study also demonstrates how young organisations can create an invented heritage brand to tackle their liability of newness (Blombäck and Brunninge 2009). They do so by appropriating heritage that would not normally be considered as theirs. Hence, even the corporate brand of a start-up can allude to track record and longevity.

For the corporate heritage field, this article adds to the understanding of invented corporate and notably invented corporate heritage brands. A challenge to the study of invented heritage, as well as a methodological limitation to this study is the difficulty in exactly defining the invented heritage concept. Of course, one might critically remark that in a sense all corporate heritage is invented, as it is built on the meanings people ascribe to the past. Nevertheless, I would claim based on the cases studied that some cases of corporate heritage brands are more invented than others. Correspondence to what we might see as actual history differs. Sometimes it is very weak or far-fetched and this phenomenon is worth studying. This study does not provide a definite answer to Burghausen and Balmer’s (2014a) question within what limits the pragmatic flexibility of corporate heritage allows for adopting a useful past. However, it suggests that pure inventions (Twin City) may be accepted if they convey a meaningful message, while factually correct connections to the past (Gold-Zack) are met by a lack of understanding if the message is not perceived as meaningful.

For future research, it would be interesting to investigate invented corporate heritage brands that have been around for a longer period. All heritage brands in this study were relatively recent inventions, at least by industry standards. Regarding, Balmer’s (2013) six corporate heritage criteria, the present article has mainly focused on institution trait constancy, while also addressing augmented role identity (UCS) and ceaseless multigenerational stakeholder utility (Degussa and Gold-Zack). Omni-temporality is fundamental to the idea of heritage brands and can of course be invented, e.g. by extending the brand’s relevant past, as shown in the cases. The study does not highlight the other two criteria, i.e. tri-generational heredity, and unremitting management tenacity. In principle, also those might be subject to invention, but this is left for future research to show.

For managers, this study is an illustration of the power invented heritage brands have in constructing authenticity and in overcoming the liability of newness. Likewise, managers need to be on the alert that made-up accounts of the past are not perceived as deceitful. The example of Degussa Goldhandel, resulting in a lost trial, may be an extreme case. Still, managers should carefully monitor how their stakeholders perceive invented heritage. We know from severe cases of damage to corporate brands in firms concealing historical complicity in human rights violations (Balmer and



Burghausen 2019; Booth et al. 2007; Van Lent and Smith 2019). Of course, it may be difficult to foresee whether customers believe in inventions of the past or not.

In the case of Twin City, even parts of the firm's staff seemed to believe the fake story. Managers who want to reduce risk could ask themselves what would be the worst-case scenario if invented heritage is challenged? A lawsuit? Media accusing the firm of misleading customers? Activists calling for a boycott? Damage to the brand as customers perceive a story as ridiculous? Some of these risks are potentially severe and managers need to decide whether they are worth taking. A good risk-avoiding solution is probably the strategy the Vice Chancellor of the University of Borås chose—openly, and with a twinkling eye, admitting that the accounts of the past are ‘a bit of a lie’. After all, stakeholders are aware that not all stories related to corporate brands are true and they might forgive a good, yet invented, story if it conveys a meaningful message about the brand promise.

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Olof Brunninge has research interests in the areas of strategic management, corporate heritage, organisational identity and self-understanding, corporate governance, family businesses, and social memory in organisations. He manages development collaboration projects with universities in Sub-Saharan Africa, where he is involved in several research projects on entrepreneurship and strategic management. He has published in leading academic journals including Long Range Planning, Marketing Theory, Small Business Economics, European Business Review, The Journal of Family Business Strategy, and International Studies of Management and Organization.

