**“Conversations On Turning 20”: Morris Sim on social bubbles, people firewalls and loss of talent**

When you get to the ripe young age of 20, you’re bound to collect lots of stories – not only about the past but lessons for the future.

As WiT marks its 20th year in 2025, we turn the spotlight on our community, our tribe pioneers and leaders, to tell their stories and share their views on the evolution of online travel and technology.

We ask them to look back on the past and their early days, reflect on the present and why this moment is pivotal for online travel and get them to imagine the future, the next 20.

This special WiT Studio series, “Conversations On Turning 20”, is the collective story of WiT.

As a Chinese saying goes, 以古为鉴，可以知兴替

“By using history as a mirror, one can understand the rise and fall of things.”

**Episode 14: Morris Sim, CEO & Co-founder, Circos Brand Karma**

What happens when the early dreams of social media collide with today’s digital bubbles?  
**Morris Sim**, a pioneer in social travel marketing and entrepreneur-turned-educator, reflects on lessons from the past and challenges for the future – in tech, in travel, and in society itself.

Here’s a sneak peek at what you’ll discover:

**• Early Days of Brand Karma: Betting on Reviews Before They Were Cool**

* Morris shares how **Brand Karma** was built on the belief that travellers would trust **peer reviews** over glossy ads.
* **Quote:** *"We thought hoteliers needed to know what travellers were really saying about them online — not just what magazines wrote."*

**• Christmas Eve Crisis: When a Lawsuit Threatened It All**

* The behind-the-scenes story of receiving a **legal cease-and-desist letter** from a giant review site… **on Christmas Eve**.
* **Quote:** *"You think your whole future is gone in that moment. But you learn: every obstacle can be creatively navigated."*

**• Social Media’s Dark Turn: From Democratization to Division**

* How today’s algorithms **create echo chambers** — and why the real danger is **self-imposed firewalls**.
* **Quote:** *"Nations don't need to build firewalls anymore. People are building their own through social media tunneling."*

**• Travel: The Last True Catalyst for Discovery**

* Even in a world of personalized feeds and AI, **physical travel** remains the best way to burst bubbles.
* **Quote:** *"You can watch a vlogger’s itinerary on YouTube — but when you're actually there, unexpected moments broaden your world."*

**• Will Travel Become Champagne Bubbles?**

* The future might not be about breaking big bubbles, but **navigating many tiny bubbles of experiences**.
* **Quote:** *"Think of life as champagne — lots of tiny bubbles, each one offering a different discovery."*

**• Where Did All the Hospitality Talent Go?**

* A heartfelt call to reimagine careers in travel and hospitality to make them **appealing again** post-COVID.
* **Quote:** *"The industry is under-staffed everywhere. Robots can't replace warmth — we need real people, and real careers."*

**• New Luxury, New Travellers**

* Rising trends of **quiet luxury** — quality over flash — and **younger entrepreneurs redefining success** in hospitality.
* **Quote:** *"People today want meaning — not just margins. It’s about craft, service, and experiences that matter."*

**Curious about how travel can rescue us from digital echo chambers? How entrepreneurship is evolving in the age of AI? And why hospitality needs to urgently rethink its future?** **Watch the full conversation with Morris Sim: a mix of sharp insight, personal storytelling, and thoughtful optimism for a better travel world.**

**THE BABY DAYS OF REVIEWS**

05:02.41

Morris

Okay. So I guess like we started Brand Karma on a premise that people would write about their travel experiences online and share it freely with other people. And and this kind of came in part because when I was working at Microsoft, um in back in the early 2000s, I used to check reviews on TripAdvisor before I booked hotels when I was going on trips and things like that for business.

05:31.94

Morris

And I just felt like this is something that people, more and more people would start to do. um Because, you know, up until that point, there were really not a lot of things that were from travelers about the hotels that they stayed in. Mostly you read like kind of editorials or reviewers or, you know, magazines like Travel and Leisure and Condé Nast Traveler.

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Morris

ah to inform you of where to go and where to stay. But there was also like a little bit of, hmm, is it really like that? Is it is it really as good as as they ah they they say? And when you kind of read these reviews online in the early days, so it kind of gave you like maybe maybe more of a sense of what reality looked like.

06:14.74

Morris

And so we thought that this would be like something that people would be really interested in um in the future, particularly the consumers. And we came up with the idea for Brand Karma to think that hoteliers needed to basically get a report of how people were thinking about them when they were evaluating their travel decisions. And that was really like kind of how we saw social media like kind of fitting in in a practical way um for people within hospitality.

06:42.69

Morris

Of course, later on, you know, with social networks and lots and lots of people on platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, um we eventually also figured out a way to use it as a distribution channel. But really, in the early days, it was really more of like an information source um that validated maybe what editorials or what, you know, advertisements were saying about specific establishments.

**THE DEMOCRATISATION AND/OR DEMONISATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA**

08:06.34

Morris

And so we kind of grew alongside with ah the the the growth in distribution. And then, of course, as more people were purchasing things online, there were more reviews being written. And so there were then more reports. And then we had to basically get back to the hoteliers so that they understood how their perceptions were being changed on a daily basis or on a monthly basis and so on so forth.

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Morris

So anyway, all of that like basically led us to where we are today, where I think this information um has become really ah democratized.

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Morris

in a good way that basically holds the um sellers honest um in terms of what they offer and gives consumers a certain amount of power in terms of being able to ah really understand what they're buying before they make the purchase decision. um There are some negative behaviors, obviously, when people utilize um the platform in an abusive way ah to get what they want, like, you know, influencers that would like write really negative reviews in hopes of free stays or, you know, getting some type of an exchange or whatnot.

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Morris

But by and large, I think nowadays, you know, the brands ah used to be very quiet about responding. But now I think the brands are actually, um you know, doing social media the way ah normal people would, which is they actually respond. And I think that's ah all a very, very positive trend because it facilitates more discussions between the consumer and the suppliers, which I think builds for greater customer intimacy overall and also for better products in the future.

**EARLY CHALLENGES: THAT CHRISTMAS EVE GIFT YOU DON’T WANT TO GET**

09:53.48

Morris

Yeah, brand karma existed out for nearly a a dozen years, nearly an entire astrological cycle before we basically were acquired.

09:58.02

siew hoon

Yeah.

10:04.27

Morris

I would say, look, the early challenges... honestly, were not um anything having to do with technology. Yes, the technology was burgeoning and, you know, there were a lot of things that were emerging with respect to using big data and so on and so forth. And a lot of that technology simply didn't exist, but that could be solved actually with money and investment and some smart planning.

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Morris

um So the technology was growing. I felt at a pretty rapid and comfortable pace, but I would say that for me personally, the, most difficult thing was working with some of the people that own the platforms and the content and the threat of basically being sued by some of the bigger players ah for us analyzing the content that we're like in the public domain, because it's a very gray area, right? At that moment, there did nothing like this had appeared before.

11:04.79

Morris

and um And that was like a really, I would say that was like probably the thing, the single thing that caused the most amount of stress was in the early days, because we were pioneers um in this field, um just receiving, I remember receiving a um ah letter from a very big ah ah review site.

11:31.57

Morris

that asked us to stop using their data on Christmas Eve, um just when we had sold and signed our first client. And you can't imagine like how deflating that was. And he was like, you know, it was a very large provider um based in the States. And, you know, they had a high power lawyer that basically sent us a pretty nasty letter, um you know, and on Christmas Eve. ah So you think about this letter coming in from the States on Christmas Eve, you know, you name it's like kind of like, yeah, i used to live in the States. Nobody works on Christmas Eve, except apparently this lawyer.

12:12.34

Morris

And, um you know, and it was like kind of like a really a crisis moment for us. um And, you I would say that was like probably the hardest thing really soon is that, you know, that at that moment, because there were so many gray areas um and some people are obviously very protective of their content.

12:34.56

Morris

um and And, you know, and and so it kind of sometimes doesn't leave a lot of room for startups, you know, to maneuver and things like that. Many, many, many, many years later, eventually worked it out to the point where we had to pay a licensing fee.

12:49.61

Morris

um you know, on a yearly basis. um And, and so that's kind of how we eventually resolve that issue. But for many, many years, the company was effectively, like kind of under this like constant shadow of basically being sued, or having the access basically being cut off, which, you know, is not a really, ah really great feeling when you're providing reports to paying clients.

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Morris

oh, I can't can't you imagine like, you know, like you're sitting down about to have dinner, you know, and I think my son at that point was probably like three or four years old, you know, it's like daddy, daddy. And like, wait a minute here. Something came in from, you know, XXX.com or whatnot.

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Morris

And you're reading the letter and like, you know, you just entire future just kind of, flashes by and you think, oh my God, we're so effed. And, um you know, but that was really hard. And, but I would say he builds character. Like, you know, many, many years later now, we will look back at that moment and be like, okay, you know, yeah things don't always come, you know, with a nice bow on top. And when you kind of meet an obstacle, you kind of have to be creative and figure out your way.

14:17.03

Morris

around it. And you know, what's really cool, we' crazy you about this is that remember um approaching them um at ITB Berlin. um And of course, like ITB Berlin is like, not exactly the same friendly atmosphere that you kind of get, you know, like, a like web and travel and stuff like that.

14:35.85

Morris

And they wouldn't even talk to me. They're just like, yeah, we know who you are. So You know, so so it's interesting to me that that spirit of the community is was actually a lot more present in Asia Pacific than than elsewhere. um where You know, where you can kind of still meet industry people, but um but it's a little bit more tense sometimes.

**SOCIAL BUBBLES: PEOPLE CREATING THEIR OWN FIREWALLS**

15:42.44

Morris

Well, I think that it's both good and bad, um quite honestly. um Social media is now mainstream, right? And so as it is with any type of media that is now mainstream, it comes with it really ah great things, benefits, which is that you're able to get and consume the news that you want, um the information that you want. And you can basically do lots and lots of things, you know, without having to leave your office or your bedroom while you're looking at your computer.

16:17.64

Morris

you know to to learn about the world. But I think that's precisely actually the bad thing about social media is that creates bubbles. um you know There's so much content out there. ah It's actually possible for you to just um actually consume the content that appeals to your preferences and to your interests.

16:39.96

Morris

And that bubble, the the bubbling effect is very divisive. um I think that you see this already in different parts of the world from ah you know from a geopolitical point of view. It actually turns out nations do not need to create firewalls. People will create firewalls on their own um as a result of the social media tunneling.

17:00.78

Morris

And and As a result, sometimes it then becomes difficult to really understand what truth is. Truth has become like relative, really. It's become contextual and become relative to what a person's core beliefs are.

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Morris

And so i think for the next 20 years or so, particularly with the emergence of AI, which obviously relies on a lot of social media data um in order to be intelligent,

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Morris

ah It will be interesting to see how that um plays out to form what a person's core belief about the world is. um You know, does it broaden it or does it narrow it more?

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Morris

And I think broadening is a good thing. Diversifying is a good thing. um Being open is a good thing. Narrowing is a scary thing.

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Morris

um You know, and um limiting is a scary thing. Constricting is ah is a scary thing. So I would say that's probably where social media is today. It's much, much more neutral to negative than it was when it first began.

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Morris

But as it is with media, anything that's mainstream, that has become mainstream, actually just kind of becomes neutral at best and neutral to negative or negative at worst.

**TRAVEL, THE BEACON OF DISCOVERY?**

18:43.57

Morris

Well, I think travel actually is the beacon um of discovery because it is so analog and it is so physical in nature. So let's just say that you if if you get somebody who is like very tunneled into a specific set of core beliefs about a place, um but when they get to that place, inevitably, they will still encounter things that are counter to that experience. And that is the time where potentially you can open up somebody's world for them.

19:14.28

Morris

um So like, you know, like, I mean, sometimes like we we we um watch vloggers that document their trip experiences. We have a lot of people that basically say, here's the Michelin restaurant that you should go to. Here's a hawker stand that you should go to.

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Morris

and here's whatever. So they would form an itinerary that is very good from the context from the context of the vlogger. And as a result of you liking the vlogger's personality,

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Morris

um you may subscribe to that same itinerary. But the thing is that when you're consuming that itinerary in your living room, watching YouTube or or whatnot, um it is a very constrained experience because the sights and sounds of the actual location is not in your house.

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Morris

However, if you actually adopt that itinerary and let's say follow it exactly, you are bound to encounter a lot of other things. And those are then the opportunities to open up your world in that Things that are outside of your itinerary are things that you experience.

20:16.62

Morris

And as a result, um that might create greater understanding of the local scene or of the local culture, local people and so on and so forth. So to me, i think more travel, good.

20:27.53

Morris

As social media and as media increases more, as advanced technology such as artificial intelligence um keep us in our space,

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Morris

houses more and our offices more. ah Travel, I think, ah basically ends up becoming like the anti, you know, stay put um reason why people should get up and leave and go somewhere.

**OR TRAVEL, THE TUNNEL OF SAME-NESS?**

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Morris

ah Yes, I think you see this actually, right? i mean, you see ah people that always go to Kyoto, that always go to Tokyo, but they don't go to any of the countrysides and stuff like that, right?

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Morris

But then what you're counting on is that maybe 1% of those people will be curious enough about, you know, some other location that is outside the Kansai region, that's outside the greater Tokyo region.

21:46.28

Morris

um And those people... maybe 1% of those people will create content that would then highlight the villages outside. And 1% of those people's content will actually become viral either on TikTok or on Instagram or whatnot and become an advertising you know kind of format or advertising content for then a new so a new host of people that would then repeat the pattern of then now going to not just Tokyo and Kyoto, but then using it, taking a day out or a few hours out to go to a village to kind of see what that's like.

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Morris

So that's at least the hope. Um, I think the one thing that we got going for us is that for people that are growing up with this technology, I think they understand the idea of differentiation and wanting to be unique.

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Morris

So to some extent content, all forms of content now are advertisement that spells out the promise for you to be unique if you subscribe to it and experience whatever that content is recommending.

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Morris

And um so from that point of view, um you know all this media that is about everything and all things, if you can find it,

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Morris

there is the way to facilitate um some type of news discovery by the right people who happen to really like what they see.

23:19.04

siew hoon

So the bubble effect can become a ripple effect.

23:23.41

Morris

Or it could basically become tinier bubbles.

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Morris

Yeah. Yeah, so that the bubble is not so big, but it's tinier. And, you know, you have access to multiple tiny bubbles. It's more like champagne. So your life becomes more like champagne.

**ADVICE TO NEW FOUNDERS**

24:34.92

Morris

Yeah, that's interesting because I teach some entrepreneurial classes, you know, and I'm i'm also like teaching at a university right now, um helping younger people like basically find their way and, you know, and and try to do something useful for the world.

24:52.21

Morris

I guess like the advice the same that I've always given, which is find a problem that needs to be solved and focus on solving just that problem.

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Morris

Don't get distracted, you know, because as's a as an entrepreneur, you have to be 100% focused on something, right? And when you become really good at that one thing, then you can figure out what is the next thing you want to focus on and then you add to it.

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Morris

um If you start with too broad of of a problem, um you know, it it kind of doesn't take. um And the reason doesn't take you is because you wouldn't have the resources to be able to solve a broad set of problems um you know, as ah is as as as a startup person.

25:37.04

Morris

And I remember when I first started my startup journey, um a VC told me, what you want is you want problems that need a painkiller.

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Morris

Like problems that require vitamins are not really that useful because not everybody wants a vitamin, but everybody needs a painkiller. So you got to basically find the problem that ah requires a painkiller that is extremely painful for someone or for a group of people.

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Morris

And that pain may not be a pain for everybody. And that's okay. Right? As long as you create a painkiller for one person, you could create painkillers for a million people.

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Morris

the the The point is to find that pain and to have a solution for it. So that's ah effectively like what I think still holds true. for entrepreneurs who want to start their own company um or their own business is that you got to basically solve a pain point.

**WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT THIS: THE NEW LUXURY AND WHY ARE PEOPLE LEAVING HOSPITALITY?**

27:15.29

Morris

Well, I think in the last four or five years or so, since, um you know, since we emerged out of COVID, I definitely think the hotel business has changed a lot. um And I think there are maybe two ah stories that, that I kind of feel like, um you know, is, is very on trend right now. And maybe people are not necessarily talking about it so much.

27:40.64

Morris

um But one is this, um this, this, drive towards what I would consider a more quiet luxury. um It's more subtle. um It is not ostentatious. It's not like bling, bling, bling, bling everywhere.

27:56.19

Morris

um But it's more about quality, quality of craftsmanship, quality of service. um It's a ah more toned down. um and I see that quite a bit, particularly in some of the new hotels that are that are opening up. And then another thing I would say is that it used to be a lot of people wanted to join the travel industry because it's really glamorous.

28:22.90

Morris

But I think through COVID, um you know there were a lot of people that were laid off. And now i think, or I feel that it very hard actually get people to join the hospitality business, whether it's um in hotels or on an airplane,

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Morris

or even in the restaurant. I think the F&B business ah worldwide is such that um I can't think of any business owner that I know of ah who so who are fully staffed if they're in the services industry.

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Morris

um And so i think this kind of maybe wake-up call for us, um which is,

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Morris

you know, what are we doing to basically make this industry as attractive as let's say the tech industry or, you know, some other industry where there are more people wanting jobs than there jobs available.

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Morris

It feels to me like in the hospitality business, it's kind of the opposite. There are now more jobs than are people wanting those jobs. um And not all of it can actually be replaced by robots.

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Morris

I was at Ding Tai Fong last night and um you know after I basically got my number called, they said, oh, a robot will show you to your table. But the robot couldn't actually show me to my table. The robot actually just took me to where all the tables were and then another hostess then showed me to my table.

30:01.22

Morris

And so i was like, well, the robot like basically traveled about like at most, I don't know, three meters? yeah It's kind of like a waste of fit. But, you know, my point is that for whatever reason, um there is a shortage of staff ah in the restaurant business, in the hotel business, in the airline business, um even in online travel businesses, you know, that are technical and digital in nature. And I think maybe as an industry, we need to like kind of think about why.

30:37.52

Morris

Why are we so why are our jobs so unattractive? And what could we do about it to make sure that we are fostering next generation talent and make it easy for them to get into the industry and then to believe that there is a career for them. And then also ah to ensure that even if they were to leave, migrate big company or whatnot, that they go ah open up businesses on their own in the services industry that will then further

31:09.38

Morris

um provide more choices for consumers in a relevant way.

**WE SHOULDN’T END UP LIKE THIS**

31:30.94

Morris

And of course, this is an area where social media really helps a lot. Right? I mean, it really kind of levels a playing field to some extent, because, you know, small mom and pop shops, and you know, if I open up like a cafe myself, I'm not going to have the advertising budget.

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Morris

And I'm not going to have a Michelin, you know, guy recognition or whatnot. But I can provide really good services and, you know, get people to write about it, get people to Instagram about it, TikTok, whatnot, partic participate in those like kind of activities.

31:58.92

Morris

um that brings more exposure. And really, like if I have a small cafe, I don't need 100 customers every day, I wouldn't be able to service them anyway, I just need enough to basically fill up so that I can have enough of a cash flow um to, you know, pay salaries to pay myself, you know, to buy the ingredients and to keep the lights running. And, and I think that's not necessarily a bad model.

32:22.79

Morris

But that's, I don't think where the industry should end. We should not be happy with that. We should really kind of have opportunities for people like that to be able to expand their business, to be able to, you know, commercialize it more because running like a hotel, running a restaurant, it's tiring. And if all you do for 10 years is that ah you're going to break your back and, you know, and, and kind of not have a very healthy and,

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Morris

and fulfilling retirement life, if you will. right And so I think like to some extent, we just kind of need to maybe relook at the entire career model, you know like kind of business and so on and so forth, and see what it is that we can do to make this a much, much more attractive and rewarding um career path ah for for people.