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## Research Paper

## The Blakeley Model applied to improving a tourist destination: An exploratory study. The case of Haiti

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## ABSTRACT

The development of the tourism industry is one of the main priorities of the Haitian government. However, the destination still has the image of an insecure destination, where the worst is likely to happen. This exploratory study (based on the Blakeley Model), highlights the gap between the negative image of the destination perceived by tourists and the optimistic image promoted by the Haitian government: this is referred to as a 'blind spot'. The overall conclusion is that Haiti should engage in a pre-visit marketing strategy to change the negative image of the destination.

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## 1. Introduction

Haiti used to be called the Pearl of the Antilles (Séraphin, 2014). In 1957, the dictatorship and the atmosphere of terror promoted by Francois Duvalier and his 'Tontons Macoutes', crippled the tourism industry of the country (Séraphin, 2011). The political instability led to the country gaining a reputation as an unsafe tourist destination and, even before the January 2010 earthquake, Haiti was one of the poorest countries in the world. The negative image of the country acted as a deterrent to foreign investors and discouraged any form of economic development (Séraphin, 2012). Unlike the Dominican Republic, which is the most-visited island in the Caribbean (Caribbean Tourism Organisation (CTO), 2016), Haiti continues to be perceived as an unsafe destination (Séraphin, 2014). These observations give rise to important strategic questions regarding the kind of communication and marketing strategies that should be developed in order to improve Haiti's image as a tourist destination.

In attempting to change visitors' image of Haiti, a re-education effort needs to be implemented highlighting discrepancies between people's perception of the country and the current reality. These gaps between people's perceptions and reality are known as

'blind spots' and can be very difficult to change. Using different examples of organisations, Blakeley (2007) points out that 'blind spots are areas where we resist learning' (p. 21) and 'prevent us from adapting and learning' (p. 5). There are multiple sources of this resistance ranging from fear and defense, through to lack of motivation to engage in the learning processes that are needed to change. This paper therefore adapts Blakeley's 'four key processes of model of learning' (2007) to a tourism context, with a final objective of suggesting an effective marketing strategy to reduce or remove the 'blind spots' that prevent tourists being attracted towards the destination.

There are a limited number of contemporary models of crisis management that provide guidance to destination and business managers and planners prior to, during and after a crisis event (Speakman & Sharpley, 2012). It is argued here that by implementing a marketing strategy to educate the general public prior to visiting Haiti, it could increase visitor numbers. Existing research on informing and educating tourists focuses on the visit itself but generally neglects the pre-visit stage. There has been a very limited effort to educate tourists (Ballengee-Morris, 2002; Orams, 1996; Séraphin, 2013a) and the focus of this study is to attempt to suggest solutions for increasing this effort. For all these reasons, this paper can be considered as innovative.

The other major contribution of this paper is that it analyses tourism and tourists, not only in post-conflict destinations, a newly emerging sub-field of tourism studies, (Alvarez & Campo, 2014, 2011; Novelli, Morgan, & Nibigira, 2012), but also in post-

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disaster and post-colonial destinations. These three features of countries/destinations can coincide, but yet, have not been analysed together in their impact upon a destination.

The research questions are formulated as follows: (1) Why is it important to educate people about Haiti and more generally, why is it important to educate people about post-colonial, post-conflict and post-disaster destinations? (2) What method/media should be used to educate people? (3) And finally, what is the role of the Blakeley Model in this strategy?

This paper is based on a synthesis of the relevant literature organised around four main sections. Firstly, the Haitian context is set out. Then, the conceptual framework considers some key ideas and perspectives from the literature (Quinlan, 2011). In the methodology and results section, a framework to educate potential visitors is suggested. Finally, the conclusion provides provisional answers to the research questions and provides suggestions for future research.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Communication in tourism

Communication includes: word-of-mouth reporting; media reporting and image making; advertising and promotion; news accounts; conversation with friends and relatives; public relations (PR); sponsorship; social media; Internet (Seddighi, Nuttall, & Theocharus, 2001). Specific to tourism, travel agents and past experience are current methods that effectively educate tourists. In addition, a more subtle strategy directed at the affective realm (feelings and emotions) is key to tourists' education when it comes to choosing a holiday destination (Alvarez & Campo, 2014). An aggressive marketing and promotional strategy for destinations suffering from the legacy of political instability, as suggested by Seddighi et al. (2001), does not appear as a solution and therefore such destinations often fail in their objectives (Alvarez & Campo, 2014).

The objective here is to show that when people have a better knowledge of the true nature of a destination (history, tradition, context, etc), they are more likely to visit it because they will be less open to distortions, exaggerations and unbalanced accounts (Séraphin, 2014). For example, Gössling (2003, p. 54) showed that in Martinique, 'repeat visitors [were] more resilient to weather extremes, as 'weather' loses importance with continued visitation'. These repeat visitors do not dismiss the threat of storms but are knowledgeable enough to put it in context as a small, but not defining, factor in their choices. This suggests that the lack of experience and/or ignorance of a destination can lead to the acceptance of misleading narratives of risk. Education can play an important role in countering such narratives.

Taking the example of the Arab Spring, Avraham (2015) explains that different methods have been used by Middle Eastern countries to improve their image: censoring media, threatening news people and organising events to shift the international media attention from a negative position to something more positive. For Alvarez and Campo (2014), these types of destinations should adopt crisis management strategies more fully and develop a better understanding of the factors that influence the image of their country, thus attempt to improve feelings and emotions of the potential target market towards the destination.

In the case of Turkey, Alvarez and Campo (2011) highlighted the great impact of promotional video/information (which are controllable sources) as a way to improve a destination image, particularly when the media and journalists (which are uncontrollable sources) often emphasise the negative aspects.

Destination branding is therefore extremely important in helping to improve a negative image. For example, post-conflict

Montenegro has rebranded itself as an ecological state by focusing on its environmental quality to embellish its image (Vitic & Ringer, 2008). Other methods include: communication with the tourism market using an effective disaster recovery message; using festivals and other types of events; celebrity endorsement; testimonials from guests and a good pricing strategy (Walters & Mair, 2012).

### 2.2. Educating tourists

Whilst the above solutions focus on the destination, this research is interested in exploring solutions focused on the tourist. Taking the example of Guarani, a post-colonial community located in Brazil, Ballengee-Morris (2002) suggested that involvement with the locals or visits to local attractions could help mitigate any negative perceptions (Orams, 1996). Séraphin (2013a) explained the role played by tour guides in Haiti as being extremely important to enable a better understanding for visitors of the country. These simple examples are based on the education of tourists while they are at the destination, at the visit stage.

The approach in this paper is novel as it analyses the matter from the pre-visitation angle. The pre-visitation stage is an important phase of information processing and is shaped by personal knowledge and other third party information (Hubner & Gossling, 2012). Indeed, 'international incidents, terrorist attacks or natural disasters also play a role in shaping a place's image, since they change the existing knowledge that a person might have about the area' (Alvarez & Campo, 2014, p. 70). Based on pre-visit information, it is very important to make people knowledgeable about the place through exposure to truthful information that can counter the exaggeration of risk and other negative preconceptions developed within the tourists' own culture. Walters and Mair (2012, p. 87) put it succinctly: communication with the tourism market and the tourist 'is essential for a Destination Marketing Organisation seeking to manage the misperceptions and media-imposed attitudes held by potential visitors'.

A country's image is defined by 'the impression that a person or persons hold about a country in which they do not reside' (O'Sullivan, 1996, cited in Seddighi et al., 2001). This impression is mostly formed through an individual's affective disposition rather than simply through a cognitive one (Alvarez & Campo, 2014). The approach suggested in this paper is to make visitors more knowledgeable by appealing to their affective impulses (feelings and emotions), thus developing a clear strategy which takes this into account (Seddighi et al., 2001).

Logically, the education of potential tourists of post-colonial, post-conflict and post-disaster destinations could challenge media reinforced clichés and false preconceptions, and promote a clearer, more positive view. Education can contribute to turn potential tourists into actual tourists, as well as enhancing the experience of the tourists too.

While tourism education is generally seen only from students', academics', practitioners' and employers' angle (Dale & Robinson, 2001), this paper considers it as a pre-visitation marketing tool, explicitly countering false or exaggerated negative notions relating to colonialism, disasters and conflicts of the past (both distant and recent).

### 2.3. Lifelong learning in tourism

Lifelong learning is defined as any kind of continuing education in shorter or longer courses, and includes formal, non-formal and informal education and learning (Coombs & Ahmed, 1974). It focuses on key features such as human skills and aptitude development, and contextualised learning that can enhance the 'competency and confidence to cope with the urgent tasks and changes arising throughout a lifetime' (Longworth, 2003, p. 7).

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