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Hope for Haiti: How media narratives can transform a destination in despair

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Introduction

Haiti has been beset by a series of natural disasters over the past decade, notably the 2010 7.0 magnitude Haiti Earthquake and Hurricane Matthew in 2016, which caused catastrophic flooding. However, in addition to the natural disasters, Haiti is the poorest economy in the western hemisphere and has a history of politically turbulent events, each of which have contributed to despair and a negative destination image (Séraphin, 2018; Séraphin et al., 2017). This is a troubling combination for a tourist destination. Haiti, as a destination in the Caribbean, has a strategic advantage with its expansive coast and natural attractions, but the underdevelopment of tourism in Haiti is linked to shadows of natural disasters, economic dependence on foreign aid and political uncertainty (see Séraphin et al., 2017; Wise and Díaz-Garayúa, 2015). The power of nature has placed much media attention on Haiti, and it has gained much negative attention in recent years in the media, but the images of a 'beautiful destination' is now changing the narrative to a destination on the rise (Caribbean News Now, 2017a; The World Bank, 2018). However, tourism in a developing country comes with numerous obstacles, as extensive investments are needed to allow tourism to thrive in the increasingly competitive Caribbean market. This is where the media plays a crucial role in transforming how a destination is portrayed. This chapter will assess narratives sourced from newspaper travel articles published in 2017 to understand how

presentations of tourism in Haiti are constructing a new image of the country as an emerging tourism destination—an attempt to overcome the range of negative connotations. However, while the chapter focuses on image recovery in relation to the recent natural disasters in Haiti, it must also be noted that Haiti is also a destination with longstanding image issues given the extent of poverty, violence and political corruption (Séraphin, 2018).

This chapter begins with a review of the literature on tourism and destination image. Then the method of data collection and analysis is presented to discuss the content assessed from the academic search engine *Nexis Uni*. The subsequent analysis section addresses the importance of qualitative content analysis and presents the case of Haiti as a destination in despair looking to transform and see its tourism image recover. The analysis is organized into three sections from the newspaper content: positive stories, stories of concern and stories of future development. The conclusion offers some recommendations going forward concerning challenges and potential for tourism in Haiti that may be relevant to other developing destinations.

Tourism and destination image

In October 2016, Hurricane Matthew devastated Haiti as the country unfortunately sat right in the path of the storm. In 2017, Hurricane Maria devastated Puerto Rico and Dominica, and these destinations are seeking ways to reinvigorate their tourism economies (Peltier, 2018). Natural disasters and hazards can leave destinations in a state of despair and this has attracted much attention in academic research on tourism (see, for example, Gotham, 2017; Guo et al., 2017; Khazai et al., 2018; Mika, 2018; Ritchie, 2009). Earthquakes and hurricanes have had a major impact on destinations across the Caribbean (Morakabati, 2017), and while many of these small islands are dependent on the tourism industry, it can take months and sometimes years for tourism to recover and restore this sector of the economy (see Guo et al., 2017). The economic situation is further impacted by destinations failing to reach their economic potential, especially when they need to promote deals and discount packages to bring back tourists to show all has been recovered. Moreover, whilst destinations spend a lot to recover, there is always an imminent threat that another disaster could happen in the future.

Various perspectives and/or models have been devised by scholars, and such studies are often concerned with identifying measures to managing the recovery process (e.g. Khazai et al., 2018; Okuyama, 2018; Tsai & Chen, 2011). However, while building materials can be used to reduce damage, it is a challenge to completely hold back the full threat of nature, especially when succumbing to major earthquakes and Category 5 hurricanes. In the context of tourism, disasters and hazards, there is also the need to address destination image. Much of the research into tourism and natural disasters is concerned with seeking solutions to mitigate long-term declines in order to restore destinations, and one area that requires more attention is to show how the media has helped to re-create a destination's image. Jiang and Ritchie (2017: 70) note that "past experience and relationships can influence the development of collaboration after a disaster". This is further complicated in destinations that are not financially or politically stable. Therefore, consistent, adequate and informative communication is not only necessary to engage and motivate stakeholders in the rebuilding process, but also needs to appeal to potential visitors.

Leading into a focus on image, Khazai et al. (2018: 75) acknowledge that after a disaster, tourism declines because tourists cancel reservations or seek alternative destinations, and "a key part of managing recovery of tourism destinations is restoring the destination image and reputation which can be affected by negative or inaccurate media coverage". Therefore, what is needed is an emphasis on safety, physical recovery and business recovery so that tourists are assured and informed (Khazai et al., 2018). Hennessey et al. (2010: 218-219) note, "given the ever-expanding number of tourism destinations and the increased supply of products and services, the competition for visitors is intense and bound to become more so in the future". Because of the increased competition, national tourism organizations are faced with increased pressures to present what is most unique about their country and its attractions to catch the attention of those planning future travel—but headlines of a natural disaster can greatly burden efforts.

In marketing a destination's image, the strategy is to highlight significant developments, attractions and tourism resources in a destination (Govers et al., 2007), which links with how we come to recognize a place (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Nelson, 2013; Wise & Mulec, 2015). Baloglu and McCleary (1999) assess how destination images are formed when people have not experienced a destination. This is related to the focus of this chapter, which is to show how images are forged through