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Please cite this publication as follows:

S raphin, H., Butcher, J. and Korstanje, M. (2016) Challenging the negative images of Haiti at a pre-visit stage using visual online learning materials. *Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events*. ISSN 1940-7963.

Link to official URL (if available):

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19407963.2016.1261146>

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# **Challenging the negative images of Haiti at a pre-visit stage using Visual Online Learning Materials**

## **1. Introduction**

The tourism sector is especially vulnerable to exogenous factors like political instability, economic crisis, natural disasters and the outbreak of diseases (Ritchie, Dorrell, Miller & Miller, 2004). Those factors can cause destinations to decline and sometimes even totally disappear from the tourism map (Seddighi, Nuttall & Theocharus, 2001). In this respect tourism is a problematic industry (Korstanje & Tarlow, 2012). Subsequently, some destinations have adopted strategies to mitigate their problematic status (Korstanje 2009; Alvarez & Campo, 2014; Tarlow 2014). Because explicit and aggressive marketing strategies have proven to be ineffective for destinations suffering from legacy of political instability (Seddighi et al, 2001; Alvarez & Campo, 2014), we have opted in this paper for a more subtle strategy, namely ‘education’. There has been a limited effort to educate tourists in order to change their perception about countries with a negative image (S raphin, 2013a; Ballengee-Morris, 2002; Orams, 1996), and that is the focus of this study. Existing research on tourists’ education focuses on the visit itself, but generally neglects the pre-visit stage. The objective of this paper is to explore the view that educating the general public at a pre-visit stage can improve the way a destination is perceived. The education of tourists at pre-visit stage is all the more important for post-colonial, post-conflict and post-disaster destinations (PCCD destinations). Haiti, as a PCCD destination is perceived by the general public as unsecure (Higate & Henry, 2009). This image has been widely spread by the media. As opinion drivers, journalists influence the general public representation of a place

(Daghmi, 2007). Because tourism is vulnerable to this type of exogenous factors (Ritchie, Dorrell, Miller & Miller, 2004), it is quite understandable why visitors are reluctant to visit Haiti. That said, Haiti is also a destination with a very rich history and culture (Thomson, 2014). This aspect of the country is unknown to the general public. The gap between the negative image of a destination perceived by tourists and the reality is referred to as a 'blind spot' (Séraphin, Gowreesunkar & Ambaye, 2016). Taking the example of global sustainability in tourism, Abu Baker (2016), highlighted the importance of Education for Sustainability (EfS) for an effective change in the world. In this paper we are claiming first, that well educated tourists about a specific destination can contribute to remove the 'blind spots'; second, that technology can play an important role in this education at pre-visit stage.

The role of technology in tourist education, their knowledge of the destination, is currently little understood (Neuhofer & Buhalis, 2012). However, it has been shown that: the internet provides opportunities to disseminate knowledge (Liburd & Hjalager, 2010); e-learning can enhance learning and motivation (Klein, Noe & Wang, 2006 cited in Behnke, 2013), and; Computer-Assisted Instruction in hospitality management education contributes to stimulate student participation and interest (Law, 2013). This paper makes a further contribution to the literature through the exploration of Gamification as a tool that can contribute positively to tourists' knowledge and perceptions of destinations. This leads us to the other major contribution of this research that is to say an analysis of tourism and tourists not only in post-conflict destinations, which is a newly emerging sub-field of tourism studies (Alvarez & Campo, 2014, 2011; Novelli, Morgan, Nibigira, 2012; Novelli et al, 2012), but also in post-disaster and post-colonial destinations. These three features of countries / destinations can coincide yet have not been analysed together in their impact upon a destination. The focus is on Haiti, but the findings may have a wider

applicability for destinations with a similar profile. Case studies has become increasingly associated with in-depth exploration of a particular context (...) they offer fresh insight and ideas about a topic (...) there is no reason why case studies should not be used to test a hypothesis (Hammond & Wellington, 2013: 17-18).

Based on the above, our research paper can be considered as a continuation of Alvarez and Campo's research (2014) on the impacts of political conflicts on a country's image and prospective tourists' intentions to visit. In the conclusion of their research, they suggested that further research should be carried out to fully understand the image change process for countries that 'suffer from chronically negative image and who are constantly exposed to political conflicts and other incidents' (Alvarez & Campo, 2014: 76). Theory on dark tourism has been included in this paper as Avraham's research (2015) suggested that restoring the positive image of a destination relies on applying practical measures like a marketing and sales strategy suitable to the context and situation of the destination. Last but not least, this paper could also be considered as a continuation of the work of Walters and Mair (2012) who not only argued that there is limited literature in the area of post-disaster destinations, but who also emphasised the importance of further research in the field of post-disaster messages communicated via broadcast media, internet, social networking sites. In this vein, our research questions are as follow:

- a) Why and how to educate tourists at pre-visit stage about PCCD destinations?
- b) How can Visual Online Learning Materials (VOLMs) contribute to educate tourists at pre-visit stage?

In their study on political conflicts on country image and intention to visit, Alvarez and Campo (2014) chose Israel because of the ongoing conflicts, the

bad press and poor public image. In our exploratory study, we picked Haiti for more or less the same reasons, but also because:

[1] As a tourist destination, Haiti is poorly researched from an academic point of view

[2] Haiti as a post-colonial, post-conflict and post-disaster destination combines three features that are problematic from the perspective of destination image.

## **2. Literature review**

### *2.1 Haiti and its tourism industry*

Doubtless, Haiti was the most popular tourist destination in the Caribbean between the 1940s and the 1960s and, as such, attracted the international jet set. In 1957, the dictatorship and the atmosphere of terror organised by Francois Duvalier crippled the country's tourism industry (Thomson, 2014). The key issue in Haiti's development relies on the fact that Haiti has not been lead so far by presidents with a genuine interest for the development of the country (S raphin, 2014a). Wagner (2015: 258) argues that Haiti became the first independent black republic in 1804, and since then endures 'long periods of political instability, increasing socioeconomic inequality, a nearly twenty-year occupation by US Marines, a nearly thirty-year dictatorship, several coups and military juntas, and an unremitting series of foreign military, political, economic, religious, and humanitarian interventions (...) Haiti and its people have struggled for stability, sovereignty and democracy'.

On January 12, 2010, an earthquake shook Haiti to its foundations and further damaged the tourism industry as most of the infrastructures and facilities of the sector were destroyed. Investments from the Haitian diaspora enabled the hospitality sector to begin to recover from the earthquake (S raphin & Paul,

2015). However, because of its image of an unsafe destination (Higate & Henry, 2009) it has been very difficult for Haiti to attract visitors (S raphin, 2014a). As a first step, the Haitian Destination Marketing Organisation (DMO) took an initiative towards rebranding the country with a new international logo and slogan.

## *2.2 Haiti and the formation of its image*

According to Gartner (2000), the destination image can be defined as *'the attitude, perception, beliefs and ideas one hold about a particular geographic area formed by the cognitive image of a particular destination'* (Gartner, 2000:295). On that basis, it is therefore very important to keep in mind the following key information about the image of a destination:

- The destination image is a simplified version of reality and it affects both an individual's perception of a destination and their choice of destination as the image of the destination is the only evidence that the visitor has of the destination before they visit (Cooper and Hall, 2008: 223).
- The image tourists have of a destination is based upon information acquired either by induced agents (generally controlled by sources external to the individual such as advertisements); organic agents (that are acquired through personal experience and are normally the most trusted source of information); and autonomous agents (are media sources or popular culture such as films or documentaries). They are considered as the most powerful because they can quickly alter a tourist's image of a destination (Gartner, 1993). No matter how the tourist acquired the image of the destination, but from his point of view the perceived image is reality (Cooper and Hall, 2008: 224).

The image of a destination has some key characteristics among these are the fact that the image changes continuously but slowly; the smaller the destination

is, the more likely its image is going to be based on its political situation. Last but not least, distance blurs the image of a place, in other words, distant destinations have a fuzzier image than closer destinations (Gartner, 1993). All the above information about the formation and characteristics of the image show how important this element is for the tourism industry of a destination as it has a profound effect on visitor behaviour and decision-making. As we have set up the theoretical background of the image of a destination, we are going to apply it to Haiti in order to understand how people perceive the destination and the impact on the tourism industry.

#### 1) Image formation of Haiti and roles of the media

According to Daghami research in '*Construction identitaires et recits mediatiques*' (Daghami, 2007), the journalists can be considered as opinion drivers. They are fully involved in the construction of the general public representation of a place. They create a representation of the identity. Journalists can also be considered as guides or opinion creators as the way they convey the information to the general public is going to influence their views on a particular subject. The autonomous agents (the media) are considered as the most powerful because they can quickly alter a tourist's image of a destination (Gartner, 1993). In this respect Haiti does not have a 'high profile'. The shantytowns, the coups, etc are generally the types of places and events broadcasted.

#### 2) Image formation and personal experience

In his travel writing: '*Bonjour Blanc: A journey through Haiti*' (Thomson, 2004) offers a contrasted image of Haiti. On the one hand we have the picture of a very charming island vested in the branding and marketing of paradise and on the other hand, an island which is totally 'repulsive'. The key information about this novel comes when Ian Thomson highlights the fact that all the people who have experienced Haiti like himself come to the island with prejudice: '*I had*

*come to Haiti with a baggage of prejudice and fear : AIDS, voodoo, black magic, Papa Doc's death squads'* (Thomson, 2004: 18).

### 3) Image formation and advertisement

The image people have of Haiti is mainly generated by organic agents and autonomous agents. The role of the induced agents is quasi absent in the image formation of Haiti. One of the main initiatives of the DMO was the change of logo for the DMO. However, based on research carried out by Séraphin, Ambaye, Gowreesunkar and Bonnardel (2016), this logo is not effective as it does not tell the narrative of the destination. It is therefore very important for Haiti to work on them first, with a priority to be given to autonomous agents as according to Cooper and Hall they are the most powerful one (Cooper and Hall, 2008: 225). In this vein, online education can be considered as a combination of autonomous and organic agents. This interim finding and conclusion gives ground to our theory based on VOLMs as being effective tools to educate tourists about PCCD destinations.

### *2.3 Potential alternative solutions*

The strong connection between Haiti and Voodoo (Séraphin & Nolan, 2014); the January 2010 earthquake, etc qualify Haiti as a dark tourism (or thanatourism, morbid tourism, black spot) destination, as this form of tourism attract people with an interest in death, macabre and paranormal (Blom, 2000; Lennon & Foley, 1996). More importantly, Niemela (2010 [online]) explained that dark tourism is an educational form of tourism that helps the visitor to have a better understanding of the destination. On that basis, this form of tourism seems to be suitable to the potential and needs of Haiti.

Whilst traditional solutions to improve the image of PCCD destinations focus on the destination (Avraham, 2015; Alvarez & Campo, 2014; Walters & Mair, 2012; Alvarez & Campo, 2011; Vitic & Ringer, 2007), this research is

interested in exploring solutions focused on the tourist. Taking the example of the Guarani, a post-colonial community located in Brazil, Ballengee-Morris (2002) suggested involvement with the locals or visits to local attractions to mitigate any negative perceptions (Orams, 1996). Séraphin (2013a) explained the role played by tour guides in Haiti as being extremely important for the visitors' understanding of the country. These simple examples are based on the education of tourists while they are at the destination, at the visit stage. Our approach in this paper is novel as it is going to analyse 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). 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 reinforced within the tourists' culture. Walker & Mair (2012: 87) put it succinctly: Communication with the tourism market and the tourist 'is essential for Destination Marketing Organisation seeking to manage the misperceptions and media-imposed attitudes held by potential visitors'.

The research starts from the dual premise that the 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), and that this impression is formed significantly through an individual's affective disposition rather than simply through a cognitive one (Alvarez & Campo, 2014). The approach is to make visitors more knowledgeable through appeals to their affective impulses (feelings and emotions), meaning that the strategy will have to be tailored towards this (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 more clear eyed and positive view. Whilst tourism education is generally seen

only from the students', academics', practitioners' and employers' angle (Dale & Robinson, 2001), this article considers it as a pre-visit marketing tool, explicitly countering false or exaggerated negative notions relating to colonialism, disasters and conflicts of the past (both distant and recent). When people have a better knowledge of the true nature of a destination (history, tradition, context, etc), they are more likely to have a better image of the destination because they will be less open to distortions, exaggerations and unbalanced accounts Gossling, Scott, Hall, Ceron & Dubois (2012).

#### *2.4 Lifelong learning and 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: 7). The concept of lifelong learning is of high significance to the tourism industry. In 1994, NACETT identified the role played by training and education in the performance of a nation. Hence generally lifelong learning is related to employee skills and economic efficiency for providers. However, ever since Krippendorf's (1987) call for tourists to be educated about the destinations they visited in order to create a more ethical tourism, advocates of ethical tourism have argued that this is a moral goal for the industry. Such an approach to lifelong learning entails a new, open and innovative attitude toward education in tourism at the pre-visit stage. Importantly for this study though, the Carlson's natural environment model (1979) and the arousal model developed by Carroll (1995), both cited in Kirillova et al (2014), suggest that knowledge and objectivity about the

environment can influence appreciation. Their analysis implies that objective knowledge and exposure to more balanced narratives influence the way potential tourists approach destination choice not just on a cognitive / rational basis but also on an affective one. Hence the education of tourists can be considered as a way to facilitate a more favourable affective disposition towards destinations such as Haiti. Also pertinent here is Connell's view (cited in Stepchenkova, 2013) that non-promotional communications can be more powerful than more explicitly promotional ones.

### *2.5 New Technologies as educational tools*

ITs are considered as innovative in tourism and contribute to improve the external communication of tourism destination and enterprises (Buhalis, 1998). ITs in tourism are also changing the operation, process and structure of tourism organisation; the access to information and services on offer; increase the social engagement consumer / provider; and involve consumers to co-create experiences (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Wang, Parks & Fesenmaier, 2012;). With Internet, tourists are now able to virtually experience the destination before their physical travel (Neuhofer & Buhalis, 2012). As for mobile technologies they have been an instrumental tool in amplifying the tourist experience once at the destination (Wang, Xiang & Fesenmaier, 2014). When they come back from their visit, they can also feedback on their experience on different type of platforms and influence others in their decisions (De Ascaniis, Grecco-Morasso, 2011). ITs therefore play a role in all stages of the tourist experience (Neuhofer & Buhalis, 2012).

## **3. Methodology**

The purpose of a methodology being to study the design and procedures used in a research project (Hammond & Wellington, 2013), in this section we are going

to determine the conceptual protocol that will be used to determine whether or not VOLMs as a form of Gamification is an effective way to change players' perception about Haiti. So doing, our strategy is twofold:

1. First, an hypothetico-deductive approach that Hammond and Wellington (2013) define as an approach that is most associated with desk-based research relying on literature review. This approach also 'involves generating and formulating quite specific hypotheses about phenomena generally on the basis of existing practical and theoretical knowledge' (Hammond & Wellington, 2013: 41). Our hypothesis is as follow: Online interactive and educative quiz about a destination can contribute to educate the general public and change their perception about a destination.
2. Second, we are going to adopt a slightly more empirical approach based on observation. Hammond and Wellington (2013) explain that observation is a direct observation of a phenomenon or event. They also added that this method is widely used and 'figures highly in the study of new technology' (Hammond & Wellington, 2013: 112). This statement gives even more ground to our approach in this paper. So doing, this online platform named: Haitijeconnais (<http://haitijeconnais.org/projet/>) is going to be used as a sample.
3. The results from both approach will be collected and a model conceptualised

#### 4. Results and discussions

The literature review reveals that:

- PCCD destinations are victims of their negative image. Haiti for instance has a bi-polar image. The destination has some assets that are outshined by autonomous agents spreading exclusively negative images about the destination
- VOLMs can be considered as a combination of autonomous and organic agents and subsequently a powerful to improve the image of Haiti. Our finding also contributes to the literature in Marketing by adding a fourth agent to the list of agents already provided by Gartner (1993).
- When people have a better knowledge of the true nature of a destination they are less negatively influenced by information provided by the media
- Non promotional materials are more effective than promotional materials
- Online materials contribute to the experience of tourists

At this stage, we can already answer our first research question by saying that it is all the more important to educate visitors about PCDD destinations because they are unfairly judged by the general public and that VOLMs can fully play the role of 'educator' (figure 1). Gamification has many benefits: Improve loyalty; change of consumer behaviour; encourage customer engagement; enhance experience; improve engagement; provoke motivation; increase brand awareness (Xu, Weber & Buhalis, 2014). To this list, Capatina and Bleoju (2015) add that Gamification contributes to educate the players through their engagement and more importantly, contribute to enhance their Collective

Intelligence, in other words, their capacity ‘to engage in intellectual cooperation in order to create, innovate and invent’ (Levy, 1997 cited in Bleoju & Capatina, 2015: 294). In education, Gamification is gaining in popularity (Jimenez-Pelaez, Romero & Medina, 2014).

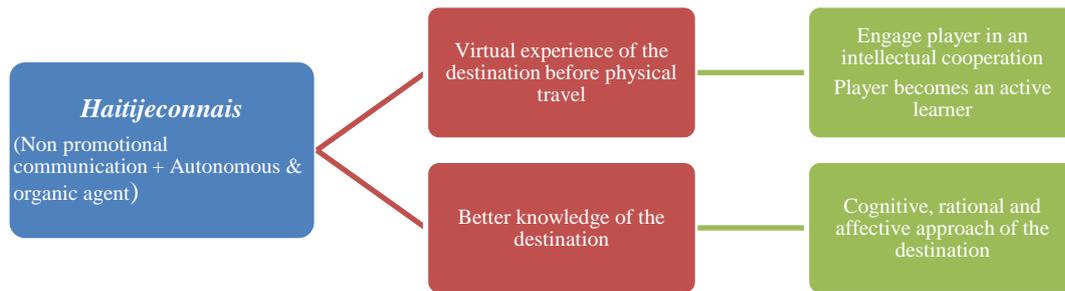


Figure 1: Potential impacts of VOLM

As for the observation of the VOLM Haitijeconnais (<http://haitijeconnais.org/projet/>), 8 tabs can be noticed:

- Project – This tab explains the purpose of the website (ie educate the public about Haiti)
- Fan club – Provides an online form that anyone who wants to support the project can complete
- Donation – This tab is self-explanatory
- The team – provide a picture, the name and the role of all the people who are involved in the day to day management of the website (they are mainly from the Haitian diaspora)
- Endorsements – This tab is also self explanatory
- Blog – Information about activities and events organised by the Haitian diaspora
- Media – Provide pictures of the live quiz competitions organised by Haitijeconnais

- Contact – A form where users can send message to the community manager of the website

More importantly on this website can be found a link to an online quiz about Haiti (<http://haitijeconnais.com/#/login>). The questions covered in the quiz include a variety of areas: Literature, cinema, sport, geography, current affairs, culture, tourism, local saying). This online application proposed is effectively an interactive, fun and affecting repository of knowledge about Haiti. It encourages access to factual knowledge and informed, affective reflection about the country. It is not directly ‘selling’ Haiti *per se*, but following our analysis, may be all the more effective for that in promoting it as a prospective destination. This is an example of what Rowley (2000) sees as knowledge management that is not neutral, but in pursuit of a specific objective (Davenport 1998, cited in Rowley, 2000), the objective being improving the image of Haiti and encouraging people to visit the destination. This online platform also fits into Dale and Robinson’s (2001) three domains model of tourism education that argues that in order for a tourism education programme to meet the need of the industry and stakeholders involved, it needs to: (a) develop interdisciplinary skills for a broad understanding of the industry; (b) provide expertise in a specific area in terms of skills; (c) explore some niche markets. The online platform also fits into Anderson model, 2001 (cited in Walters & Mair, 2012), which explains that the art of convincing a target audience relies on three elements: (a) an ‘ethos’ element based on the credibility and trustworthiness of the source of the message; (b) a ‘pathos’ element is linked with the emotional appeal of the message and finally, (c) a ‘logos’ element referring to the capacity of the message to inform.

We can now answer to the second research question of this research paper, by saying that VOLMs contribute to educate tourists (figure 2) at pre-visit stage if it conveys knowledge to the users and also includes convincing elements.

Pays	Sessions	% Sessions
1.  United States	1 603	29,09 %
2.  France	1 436	26,06 %
3. (not set)	567	10,29 %
4.  Canada	449	8,15 %
5.  Haiti	406	7,37 %
6.  China	151	2,74 %
7.  Brazil	88	1,60 %
8.  Japan	88	1,60 %
9.  Germany	70	1,27 %
10.  United Kingdom	65	1,18 %

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Figure 2: Origins of the players of *Haitijeconnais*

## 5. Conclusion

As ‘the main aims of a post-disaster recovery campaign marketing are to restore a positive destination image, correct negative images and in some cases, create a new image (...) restore confidence in the minds of potential visitors’ (Walker & Mair, 2012: 90), a future study should adopt an empirical approach to test the effectiveness of the application *Haiti Je Connais* app as a tool that can improve the general perception that individuals hold about Haiti. This is all the more important as new tourism initiatives can lead post-conflict recovery (Ritchter1999, cited in Novelli et al 2012).

From a destination management point of view this paper offers an alternative to existing promotional material aiming to improve the general perceptions of Haiti (and other PCCD destinations), as there is little evidence at the moment that existing strategies are effective (Walter & Mai, 2012).

From a conceptual point of view this paper contributes to the meta-literature in the field of international marketing and tourism. Existing literature about the image formation process of destinations typically refer to media (TV, news paper, etc) word of mouth, movies, tour operators, promotional video (Alvarez

and Campo, 2011; Hall, 2002; Gartner, 1993; Gunn, 1972). We are adding to this list, Gamification. This paper also contributes to the very limited academic research in Gamification in general and in tourism by adding the fact that Gamification can be a very efficient advertising tool if using subtle and implicit marketing elements.

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