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Effects of Negative Media Events on Tourist's Decisions

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Abstract

During the recent years, the role of mass media and its crucial position in the tourism information and decision-making process has increased. The decision to choose one holiday destination over a myriad of available choices is just one of many steps in the tourist's decision-making process. The question rising from this is whether there is a relationship between what is being communicated by the mass media and the tourist's stimulus. Tourism operators on Fiji and other holiday destinations have experienced that the messages the mass media are communicating to the public can have a significant impact on the numbers of visitors to the destination. An event published in the mass media is seen as objective and factual because a third party writes it. However, editorial staff of the media controls what is being published, and it is hard, if not impossible, for the tourism operators to control. This paper uses an analytical approach to discuss the relationship between tourism and the effects of news reports on customers decisions-making and motivations resulting in the tourist's travel behaviour. The findings in this paper indicate that the mass media plays an important role in tourist's decision-making process.

Keywords: Tourism, Negative media events, Perception, Image

Introduction

'Death toll climbs in Fiji cyclone' (BBC News, 2003a), 'Visiting Great Britain? Beware of Foot And Mouth Disease!' (Johnson, 2001), 'Sars Warning over Taiwan' (BBC News, 2003b), 'Colombia closes popular parks in yellow fever scare' (CNN.com, 2004), and the headlines about negative events keep coming. What kind of influence do the mass media have on people, and is the tourist's decision-making process influenced by what the mass media are communicating?

According to (Lombardi, 1990) there are two major ways of [re]-creating a destination image in the minds of visitors after an event has occurred. The first one is through communication in the mass media, while the second one is through a real experience. Even though Lombardi's theory seems logical, it can be criticised because there is no final definition of what he calls a 'true' image. What this paper queries is, if the mass media actually paints a true / factual picture of destinations after a crisis, or if they are more interested in boosting sales and thus creates a fictional image that is claimed to be true. However, the net result of a perceived and real image has more or less the same outcomes which, according to Baloglu & McLeary (1999), are reduction in

tourist arrivals and tourist receipts, and a change in visitor's perception of the destination.

It has been suggested that the mass media also play an important role in the restoring phase after a crisis that have led to negative media publicity and damage a destination's image (Beirman, 2003). However, this paper is limited to focus on the role the mass media plays in influencing tourists in their decision making process and the perception they generate about a destination. In conclusion, based on the models related to tourists' decision-making and the communication process, this paper will aim to identify the role of the mass media and which factor it has in influencing tourists' decision-making.

Methods

Although several researches have been conducted on tourists' decision-making process and destination images, the more complex relationship between tourism and the mass media is under-researched. The definition of a negative media event will be explained, followed by an example, which shows how negative media publicity can result in significant downturn in numbers of tourists visiting the destination. In addition to the role of the international mass media,

the concept of freedom of press will be discussed. Many different theorists have discussed the role of the mass media in the tourist's decision-making process. This paper will present a model, which shows a simplified sequence on how the tourists reach the 'defer', 'decline' or 'decide' stage (Manfredo, 1992) in the decision-making process.

After having established the relationship between travellers and the mass media, this paper raises the issue on how news can destroy a destination image. Examples are used to highlight how negative media events have resulted in consequences for the tourism industry in different parts of the world. For the purpose of this paper, the term tourist destination region (TDR) will be used, and can be defined as country, state, region or town that is marketed as a place for tourists to visit (Hall, 2003).

The Role of Mass Media in Crises

According to Nielsen (2001), a negative media event occurs when the mass media is communicating bad news, threats, irritations or other matters that can be seen as unfavourable by the audience. An important point is that the issues communicated by the mass media might or might not be the truth. However, the end result will not be of great difference whether or not the actual event has occurred (Hall, 2002). People feel shocked or afraid, and their degree of scepticism increases and reflects their decision-making (Nielsen, 2001).

Sudden changes in the society can have remarkable consequences for individual TDRs, as well as for the global tourism industry in general. A human act or a nature catastrophe can transform the reputation, image and marketability of the most popular tourism destinations overnight (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991). Amongst incidents that have disrupted the global tourism industry were the terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington DC on September 11 in 2001, hereafter referred to simply as September 11. According to Beirman (2003), these incidents generated a worldwide panic and fear, which especially had an effect on the tourism industry in form of economic downturns.

The combination of SARS and the war in Iraq, which took place between March and June 2003, had severe impacts for the tourism industry and caused a steep

reduction of tourism visitation globally, especially in the Asia Pacific region (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, 2003). The on-going unrest in the Middle East, after the initial war, continues to fuel global uncertainty. Haalebos (2003, p 6) quotes the Co-Director of Curtin University of Technology's Sustainable Tourism Centre (CSTC), Professor Jack Carlsen, who stated that '...at the World Tourism Organisation Conference in October 2001, it was estimated it would be two years before international tourism recovered. Since then we've had Bali, Sars and the latest events in Jakarta, Baghdad and Israel. Each event has set recovery back six to twelve months'. This is in line with what the Commonwealth of Australia announced in their White Tourism Paper where it was identified that there has been a strong market decline in travel and tourism receipts within Australia after the incidents concerned with September 11, SARS and the war in Iraq. In 2003 overseas arrivals to Australia decreased by 10 percent in April and 21 percent in May compared with the year before (Commonwealth of Australia, 2003). At the same time the effects of SARS in China were even more dramatic. According to Zhou (2003), Beijing Airport experienced a decrease of thirty percent fall in passenger arrivals in April 2003, and an estimated loss of \$US4.8 billion loss in the tourism industry.

When events such as September 11 and the war in Iraq happens, the international media plays an important role both in publishing the actual catastrophe, as well as in reporting recovery and restoration programs. However, the setback is that 'negative' news sell better than 'good' stories (Rosengren, 1994). According to Beirman (2003), there are five different events or circumstances that media should cover which can create negative impacts on a TDR's image, and again can result in a significant downturn in tourism numbers. Firstly, media should cover situations concerned with international wars or conflicts. Secondly, they should keep the public informed about specific acts of terrorism that is affecting tourists. The third type of events that the mass media should report are major criminal acts or crime waves (Silverstone, 1999), especially when tourists are targeted. The fourth area that the media has a duty to cover are natural disasters, such as earthquakes, storms or volcanos that are causing damage to urban

areas or the natural environment and consequently impacting on the tourism infrastructure. The fifth and last major type of event that the mass media are interested in is health concerns related to epidemics and diseases, which have an impact on humans directly, or diseases affecting animals (Beirman, 2003). Based on what the media should cover, Beirman (2003) does not discuss the relationship between tourism and the effects of negative news reports. Silverstone (1999, p 11), on the other hand, argues that media has a role of sharing a meaning and provide a 'taste of the everyday life'. By understanding the mass media's role, a link can be drawn to the issues concerned with tourists' motivation and how expectations are related to the tourists' decisions. Silverstone (1999) states that:

Our stories, our conversations, are present both in the formal narrative of the media, in factual reporting and fictional representations, and in our everyday tales: the gossip, rumours and causal interactions in which we find ways of fixing ourselves in our relationships to each other, connecting and separating, sharing and denying, individually and collectively... it has been suggested that both the structure and the content of media narratives and the narratives of our everyday discourses are interdependent, that together they allow us to frame and measure the experience (p. 11).

Especially noteworthy in the quote is the realisation that no narrative alone shapes a picture, rather the intertextual links between surface and content and between different sources of information forms the image (Phillips & Hardy, 2002). By focusing on media's role it may be easier to understand the nature of a tourist's decision making and the following travel experience. Silverstone (1999) argues further that an understanding of how the media works, will make travellers more critical to what the media presents. The relationship between the media and tourism is also commented on by Hall, who states '... in the age of global communication events can be played out live and unedited on television screens, and thereby potentially having a great impact on the viewing public' (Hall, 2002, p 459). This statement supports the argument that it is important to understand media's response to

events like September 11, which affects the tourism industry.

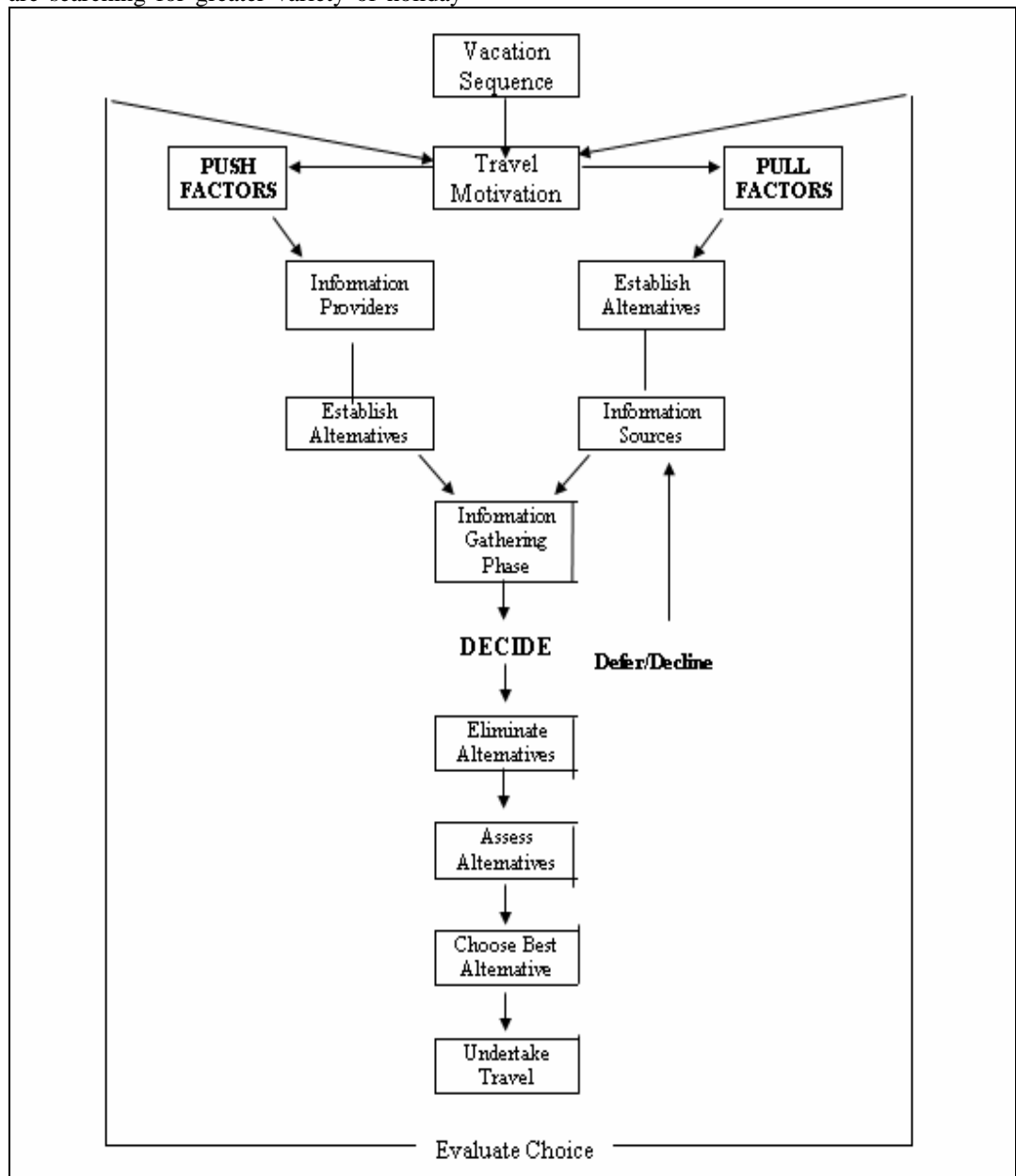
According to Beirman (2003) the role of effective media communication is critical for tourist authorities in democratic countries where the mass media's role is to inform the general public. The concept of freedom of press in these countries means that the public relation management is an especially important tool for tourism operators because they have to 'ensure that recovery and restoration efforts are reported' (Beirman, 2003, p 13). Fall (2004) confirms Beirman's view and claims that advertising activities has decreased since September 11 in USA while public relation activities have increased. In contrast, the government in non-democratic countries have far more control over what the mass media is publishing. Consequently, the media coverage tends to be managed in a staged process, and all information is filtered through the government. Although the non-democratic counties try to 'hide' destinations in crises, there are leakages. Medical epidemiologist and CSTC Professor Aileen Plant (2003, p 28) sympathised with the way the Chinese government handled the SARS crisis, and stated that 'I could not criticise the Chinese for their closed-door attitude to the virus. They were simply doing what many other countries would have done to protect their travel and trade. We live in a new world – a globalised world. We cannot hide problems any longer'. This shows that when foreign tourists are the victims of a particular event, they are often subject to media attention, (Silverstone, 1999), and consequently the media coverage can create a negative image for the TDR.

Analysis

In order to determine the impact the mass media have on a tourists' decision-making process, it is necessary to ask the question whether there is a direct relationship between the information presented and the tourist's motivation (Hall, 2002; Nielsen, 2001). There are various decision-making stages by tourists, and theorists like Mansfeld (1992) have created different models for tourism planners and information providers. However, these models are complex and very theory based. Nielsen (2001) has simplified these models and created a model, which includes the effects of push-and-pull motivations, in addition to

information on the tourists' decision-making process. This model is presented in Figure 1. Even though the model shows the major phases in the tourists' decision making-process, it can be criticised that it is generalising tourists' motivations to travel. Morgan and Pritchard (2000) have established that there is a change in consumers' holiday needs, and that tourists are searching for greater variety of holiday

activities and unique experiences than what Hall (2003) defines as 'push' and 'pull' factors. The trend also shows that there is no longer merely a need for relaxation, but also for recharging and rediscovery. This means that it is questionable how reliable Nielsen's model is. However, it gives a basic overview of tourists' decision-making process.



Source: Nielsen, 2001, p 127

Figure 1: Travel Motivations and Tourists' Decision Making Process

The sequence in the figure starts with the tourists' motivation to travel (Nielsen, 2001). Motivations are dependent on a traveller's social status and background,

their stage in the personal life cycle, education and family relationships (Hall, 2003). These factors will also play an important role when evaluating the issues

that can influence the tourists' decision-making. The figure is based on an assumed motivation to travel, or at least to gather information for possible trips. Hall (2003) states that factors like geographical proximity, ease of accessibility and availability, as well as a destination's social, political and economic stability, are the pull factors that support a tourist in the decision making process. Even though the promotion of TDR's have focused on the mentioned pull factors, recent motivational research has showed that the 'push' factors, 'which is the need to have a break from the daily routine', is of greater value for the tourists (Hall, 2003, p 79).

Having established the basic travel motivation; it is possible to identify more specific motives to the selection process (Morgan & Pritchard, 2000). The next step is to search for travel alternatives through information providers. At this stage the tourists are heavily influenced by third parties' opinions. On the right hand side of Nielsen's (2001) model the tourists establish alternatives based on the 'pull' factors that draw people's interest to investigate TDRs and then they collect information about the destination. However, the whole information-gathering phase can also be a combination of 'pull' and 'push' factors, but in both cases the person seeks further travel alternatives (Nielsen, 2001).

According to Manfredo (1992), there is a relationship between the information providers and the tourist's decision-making process, which leads to 'defer' 'decline', or 'decide' upon the travel experience. The stimulation might come from television advertisements, travel programs on television or radio, a brochure, or any other source of information like travel agencies. This information gathering stage is the most critical stage when it comes to the tourist's decision making on to 'go or not go' (Nielsen, 2001, p 128). This stage of the process is important for the tourism planners in order to know what the tourist's decision criteria are when they are reaching this point.

Theorists have come up with diverse models on how the receiver of a message views the value of different kinds of information (Rosengren, 1994). Figure 1 clearly indicates that the tourists are influenced by different factors before deciding whether or not to undertake the travel, and it can be

concluded that the mass media plays an important role in the decision making process. Furthermore, the relationship between the media and the tourism operators can be discussed. According to Hall (2002), tourism operators, on the one hand, are primarily engaging with the media when promoting the TDR. However, in these cases they are only focusing on the positive sides in order to motivate tourists to travel to that specific destination. The mass media, on the other hand have, according to Silverstone (1999), a duty to inform the general public about all types of major events affecting the tourism industry.

The coupes in Fiji can be used to illustrate how media attention can have negative effects on tourist's decision-making process. Both in 1987 and 2000 Fiji experienced episodes of political instability. These events had serious impacts on the tourism industry because of travel warnings published in the mass media (King & Berno, 2002; Singh, 2000). Coup leader Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka overthrew the elected multiracial government in the first coup in 1987. Even though, according to King and Berno (2002, p 49) the coup was a 'bloodless military-dominated takeover', it had an effect on the tourism industry in terms of decreased visitor numbers. The second coup took place in 2000 when a group of political dissidents took hostage over the members of the Cabinet for two months, but failed their attempt in overthrowing the elected multiracial government (Beirman, 2003).

According to King and Berno (2002) the coups in 1987 and 2000 had severe impacts on the Fijian tourism industry, and especially the coup in 2000 became a global media event where images of unrest and violence were broadcast around the globe. As a result of this the visitor arrivals decreased with almost 70 percent in year 2000 (King & Berno, 2002). Findings by Beirman (2003) supports this, and both during and after these events the Fijian Ministry of Tourism and its marketing arm, the Fijian Visitors Bureau, carefully planned campaigns together with airlines and tour operators in order to restore Fiji's tourism industry. According to Singh (2000) the major reason why tourists did not visit Fiji was because of travel warnings and images of unrest published in the media. During the crises both the Australian and New Zealand governments used the mass media as a

communication tool and actively discouraged people to visit Fiji (King & Berno, 2002). These findings are strengthened by Brown and Junek (2004) who highlights the power government's travel advisories have over individual tourist's decision to travel after disastrous events have happened and the impact these advices have on effected TDRs.

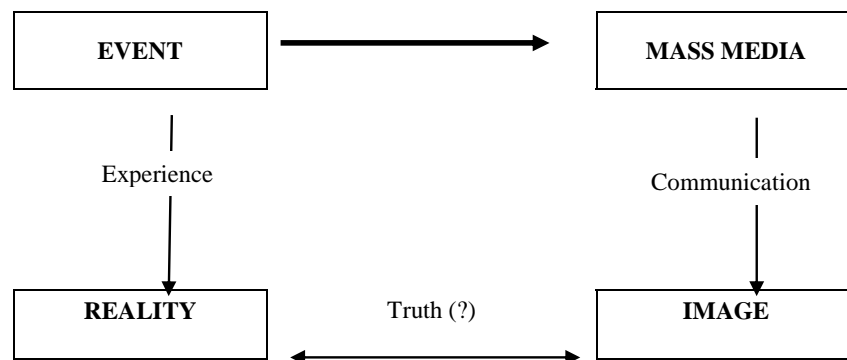
The Fijian case highlights the significance in the role of the media and of government tourism advisories as they are shaping tourism images. According to Beirman (2003) a negative media event can result in considerable economic crises, and for individuals it could result in loss of job and income. However, few tourists think about these consequences when they decide to go for holiday. Their major concern is their own well-being and security (Hall, 2002).

Discussion

The idea that the mass media can influence tourists' in their choice of destination, as well as their perception on a certain TDR, is relatively new (Riley, Baker, & Van Doren, 1998). The traditional way of collecting information has been through travel agencies or the tourism operators directly, and the

tourists have made their decisions based on this information. However, according to Seaton (2003), the trend shows that more people are likely to search for supplementary information also from other sources, and the mass media are seen as credible. The question to argue is whether tourists are influenced by the mass media.

A model created by Lombardi (1990) shows that tourists rely on an 'abstract truth'. According to it there are two major ways of creating a destination image. The first type of image is created through a specific event that the mass media is communicating to the general public. The image that the mass media is creating can be real or not, however, once it is prototyped to the tourists, it is up to the receiver of the message to recall the image when making a choice of holiday destination (Seaton, 2003). The second way that an image can be created is according to Lombardi (1990) through a person's experience. In this case the image is based on an event or experience that a person is a witness of. The image is then supported by reality and truth. Lombardi's theory is showed in Figure 2.



Source: Adapted from Lombardi, 1990
Figure 2: Model of Communication.

Lombardi's model gives a picture that a TDR's image can be created through a real experience, which again leads to a true image. However, it can be argued what the truth is, because it can be perceived in different ways. Understanding how a destination is perceived is fundamental to the image of a TDR. There are several studies that examine this theory of how a destination image is formed, and amongst the most important are those that discuss the

relationship between the image and the tourist's motivation (Baloglu & McLeary, 1999; Milman & Pizam, 1995). However, Gunn (1988) supports Lombardi's (1990) theory by stating that there are two dimensions to a destination's image. The first one is based on the tourist's impression of a TDR without visiting, and in this case different communication channels have influenced the tourist. The second dimension is 'included', which is formed by visiting the

destination. In this case the image is created by the tourist's own perceptions. This theory supports Lombardi's (1990) model of communication; however the created image is based on the tourist's perception, and not described as the 'truth'. To sum up, travellers' perceptions are formed based on their knowledge about a destination from various sources.

Images and the process of creating images can also be explained as a 'mental picturing where pieces of information create individual features and attributes of stimuli' (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991, p 4). This can be related back to the example from the coups in Fiji where images were projected around the world showing a shattered and burning TDR in strong contrast to TDR images of a relaxing and peaceful holiday destination (King & Berno, 2002). Baloglu and McLeary (1999) have developed a model that includes the factors that influence a destination image and the relationship between the various factors. The model focuses on three main factors, which are personal, social and stimulation factors, which again are related to a perception a person have of a TDR, and these perceptual evaluations do have an affect on travel motivation.

The criticised model of communication created by Lombardi (1990) can be used to illustrate how the Foot-and-Mouth disease has had an effect the tourism image in the United Kingdom (UK). During the first half of year 2001 the outbreak of the Foot-and-Mouth disease had severe impacts on the British agricultural sector and caused significant harm to the UK's tourism industry (Beattie, 2001; Scott, Christie, & Midmore, 2004). The British farm industry and rural regions had to face negative consequences for a previously well-marketed tourism infrastructure. According to Reynolds and Balinbin (2003), the intensity and degree of the mass media's coverage resulted in an image of Britain as a country that was damaged by this disease. Findings by Beirman (2003) support this, and explain further that the Foot-and-Mouth disease caused a major downturn in visitor demand, as foreign tourists cancelled trips to the UK. Mass media was contributing to the decrease in tourism, due to the graphic images of burning and slaughtered animals broadcast around the world (Express Hotelier & Caterer, 2001). As a result of this

the overall image of UK as a TDR was severely damaged. However, the way the British Tourist Authority's reacted to the crises of the Foot-and-Mouth disease is interesting. Instead of only using communication channels like television, newspapers and radio that already had contributed in creating the less appealing tourism image of the country, the British Tourist Authority was one of the first in the world to use the Internet to change the image (Reynolds & Balinbin, 2003). With this tool the British Tourist Authority explained the 'real' situation, and actually managed to create a truthful image without using other mass media as communicators. The Internet-pages played an important role in the management of Britain's marketing during and after the tourism crisis (Express Hotelier & Caterer, 2001).

As illustrated in Figure 2 and in the example from the UK, it is evident that the use of mass media can create a 'wrong' perception on a destination. According to Lombardi (1990), people believe what they see, hear and read in the media. The general public view the media as an important authority on the same level as government warnings (Hall, 2002). When looking at this issue historically it is important to note that it is especially in recent years that the mass media has had a significantly increasing role as a communication tool. The mass media has given a new importance to the society because it is a source people tend to trust. Mansfeld points out that 'one of the main problems facing destinations that were hit by tourism crises resulting from security turmoil is the evolving negative image. Because tourists do not tend to thoroughly check the reality behind conveyed images, these images become highly biased and distorted' (1999, p. 31)

According to Machin (2000), the media gives popular representations of what is going on in the world. Seen in a historical perspective, this has undoubtedly had an impact on people in most developed cultures, as well as it has had an enormous influence on the TDR's images (Machin, 2000). Also illustrated in the examples from Fiji and UK, it is clear that some travellers are influenced by the mass media, and that they use it as an educational tool to learn about the wider society (Silverstone, 1999). This supports Beirman's (2003) argument that reported incidents, like the terrorist

attacks on September 11, have had negative effects on the evolution of the global society, as well as tourism images.

Depending on whom the news is affecting, one of the major advantages or disadvantages with mass media as a communication tool is that it is seen as credible (Hsu & Powers, 2002). This means that news written by a neutral third party is seen as reliable, while an advertisement or commercial presents an image from the advertiser's point of view. 'Bad' news presented in the media is therefore seen by the audience as objective and factual (Beirman, 2003, p 12). This publicity can be seen as a hazard for tourism operators because it is only the editorial staff of the mass media that control it. In some cases the communicated message is presented in a vague and incomprehensible way, and this may confuse the audience and create problems for the tourism operators (Baloglu & McLeary, 1999). In some cases, according to Hsu and Powers (2002) the media also make a situation worse than it actually is. This happens when the editorial staffs chooses to humiliate a tourist operation or publish a story with negative attributes in some other way.

The paradox is that both the tourism operators and the mass media are dealing with the same target group, the general public. However, a clever tourism operator will learn how to deal with the mass media and use it as a part of their marketing strategy (Seaton, 2003). One way to do this is to follow Fall's (2004) suggestion and put a greater focus on public relations activities rather than direct advertising. News that can have an effect on a TDR image has captured front-page headings during the last years, and tourists are not only motivated by stories from glossy brochures, but they are searching for a third party's opinion about the TDR (Nielsen, 2001).

According to Hsu and Powers (2002), the mass media is an effective communication tool because it reaches a wide and enthusiastic audience, and there is no doubt that tourism has achieved a special status in the news. However, many regions suffer from bad publicity, even if many years have passed since anything was last reported from the region. Few Australians would, for example, consider Belfast in North Ireland as a cheerful city full of character, with people that are warm and friendly. The

coverage of unrest by the mass media has discouraged tourists to travel to North Ireland (Brunton, 1995). The media has drawn a picture of Belfast as an unsafe place to travel to, and according to Hall (Hall, 2002), it is human nature to prefer to travel to places that are perceived as safe.

Sonmez, Apostolopoulos, & Tarlow suggest that TDRs in areas affected by unrest should incorporate crisis management in their overall strategies in order to construct and protect the image of the destination. This should be done in order to have the capabilities needed to manage peoples opinions before during and after unrest has taken place in the TDR for the mass media (1999, p. 3). Richter furthers this point by stressing that: 'rebuilding tourism requires more than repairs and promotion. A one-size-fits-all mentality will not do. Just as the sources of instability and their manifestations will differ, so too will the appropriate responses' (1999, p. 41). What she suggests is that managers in the tourist industry start to look more holistically at their practices and appreciate the fact that they are a part of an industry vulnerable to negative publicity. To manage a TDR effectively does not just mean that the product is enjoyable to visitors but also that it is secure (Richter, 1999).

Conclusions and Implications

The aim of this paper was to discuss the relationship between tourism and the effects of negative media events. Overall, the main objective of the mass media is to communicate news to the general public. The mass media has in this paper been defined as a third party that tourists are likely to trust, and they are therefore influenced by the mass media in their decision-making process. Although tourists have different perceptions and motivational factors, it can be proven from this paper that the mass media plays a paramount role in travel behaviour because it is affecting the tourist's decisions. However, further research is needed to establish the extent to which the tourism experience is shaped by the mass media.

The popularity and desirability of a specific TDR is influenced by different 'pull' and 'push' factors as explained in the 'Travel Motivations and Tourists' Decisions Making Model', Figure 1. This model can be used as a basis for tourism operators to understand traveller's decision-making process and be

able to meet future demands. Operators are equally reminded of the fact that tourist's perception of destinations is formed through the dialectic of different narratives in the society. By learning how to use the mass media to the advantage of the destination, a positive perception is possible to create.

This paper was limited to discuss the role of the mass media, its effect on traveller's decisions and how a TDR image is created. Nevertheless, tourism operators can use the frameworks presented in this paper to strategically prepare themselves for how to restore tourists' confidence in a destination after a major crises, and how to strengthen a positive image before negative events have occurred.

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