

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

The impact of disasters on islands' reputations: the cases of Giglio and Ustica

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ABSTRACT: Disasters and their aftermath can leave an enduring, negative impact on the image of tourism destinations. This paper presents research conducted in relation to Giglio (site of the January 2011 *Costa Concordia* shipwreck) and Ustica (associated with the June 1980 crash of Itavia Flight 870) in order to study the impact of these two disasters on the tourism industry of these two small Italian islands. Methods employed include content analysis of articles published online and interviews with tourism stakeholders including operators, government officials and park managers. Findings suggest that disaster news coverage may initially have helped to increase the international visibility of both islands, however, even after several years, references made to the islands in the press continue to be related to such disasters. Little acknowledgement is made to the islands as tourism destinations or to the nature-based attractions that they offer. In this regard, a counter-engagement with the media and marketing efforts, including the use of social media platforms, is key to ensure that the enduring image of the islands is corrected and better reflects the characteristics of the islands.

KEYWORDS: disasters, image, reputation, small islands, Giglio, Ustica

Introduction

Small warm water islands are synonymous with tourism and are amongst the most visited destinations in the world (Fotiou et al., 2002). However, tourism demand is vulnerable and can be impacted by various external factors (Ritchie & Jiang, 2019). Such external factors include human-made disasters (Cró & Martins, 2017; Neef & Grayman, 2018). Disasters, and their ensuing crises, from the sinking of the *Titanic* (1912) to the Malaysia Airlines disasters in 2014,¹ recur throughout history (Kuipers & Welsh, 2017), and they can leave an inordinate impact if associated with small islands. This impact of external factors on island destinations is even more dramatic when taking into account that some small island economies are highly dependent on tourism, to the extent that they have been criticised for putting “too many eggs in one basket” (Briguglio, 2020).

¹ The mysterious disappearance of flight 370 in the Southern Ocean and the shooting down of flight 17 over Eastern Ukraine by pro-Russian separatists.

Disasters arise from external events over which local subjects may have no control. They are unforeseen events concentrated in time and space that lead to great damage and heavy losses that overwhelm local capacity and require external intervention and assistance (Al-Dahash et al., 2016). Disasters have implications far beyond the physical harm that takes place *in situ*, as individuals and groups construct narratives, interpretations, and meanings of – and out of – their unforeseen experience and its economic, social, political, environmental and psychological impacts (Pidgeon et al., 2003). The media may also identify positive elements from a disaster, such as solidarity shown by local communities in the face of danger, resilient survivors, healing rituals, and the recognition bestowed to local heroes and communities who may ‘rise to the occasion’. And yet, disasters and their aftermath can generate significant and continuing adverse publicity in the media worldwide (Neef & Grayman, 2018; Rindrasih, Witte et al., 2019). Research suggests that human-induced disasters, such as transport accidents, have a more negative impact on the concerned destination than natural disasters (Rindrasih et al., 2019). Volo and Pardew (2013, p. 197) argue that:

In the case of a cruise liner sinking or an airliner crash, where the most relevant cost is typically measured in the loss of human life, the severity of the disaster and the relative density of other attention-getting news stories may, however, keep the event from fading from the public's memory.

A number of islands are closely associated with such disasters, and their destination images continue to be influenced by the stubborn legacy of such episodes. In some cases, the association can be deemed positive, as it has spawned ‘disaster tourism’ visitation. The Falkland Islands, an archipelago in the South Atlantic Ocean, have, for instance, been “known primarily as the object of the 1982 war” (Takacs & Farah, 2008, p. 354), even if four decades have passed. The war has placed these islands on the tourist itinerary and war-themed tours are offered to tourists (Falkland Island Holidays, 2022; Royle, 2006). Similarly, the Mediterranean island of Lampedusa grabbed media attention when missiles were fired from Libya towards the island in 1986. This led to a rise in tourism (Surico, 2020), and its name remains associated with contemporary migration flows and detention centres that have attracted a new form of niche tourism (Agius, 2021a).

Small islands rarely feature in the headlines of major news channels or major marketing campaigns. Such events can serve to increase awareness of their existence and catch onlookers' attention, even if for a relatively short time (Agius, 2021b). However, attention given to islands can also be skewed and is almost always portrayed in a way decided by outsiders. Baldacchino (2013, p. 17) argues that “for all the drama that may unfold on their shores and scapes, an island's window of opportunity for capturing the world, or even continental Europe's attention, is usually short and fleeting,” and:

There are many islands in the world but we can be excused for assuming otherwise. These places rarely feature on our metaphorical radar; and, when they do, they risk doing so according to terms, tropes and ontologies determined by others. (Baldacchino, 2019, p. 314.)

Communication plays a key role in influencing tourists' initial perceptions of a destination. The Internet is widely used by tourists to seek information (Scuotto et al., 2017) and, hence, the presence of a tourism destination in the digital environment is extremely relevant (Cillo et al., 2021). Therefore, a positive online image is key for such islands to ‘bounce back’ from the impact of a disaster and recover (or reinvent) their allure as tourism destinations.

A rebound in tourist arrival numbers is an indicator of a restoration of consumer confidence and of a successful tourism recovery (Gurtner, 2016). However, islands may remain associated with a disaster long after the actual event, thus impacting tourism growth and skewing the direction of tourism development. Therefore, the restoration of small islands' positive image and the mitigation of long-term reputational consequences may be warranted. Studies about the effects of such disasters can help the industry understand tourists' needs and assist in the management of tourist destinations after such events (Angkanurakbun & Pruksorranan, 2019). The case of Iceland's marketing efforts after the Eyjafjallajökull volcano eruption grounded air fleets in Western Europe in the Spring of 2010 is a case in point (Jónsdóttir, 2011).

Studies on the impact of disasters on the tourism industry have tended to present disasters as single and short-term events (Rindrasih et al., 2019); little emphasis is made on their long-term effects on the hospitality and tourism industry (Wut et al., 2021). Furthermore, despite the high susceptibility of island tourism to disasters, there is relatively little academic research on the nexus between (especially island) tourism and disasters and its possible long-term implications. The aim of this study is, thus, to investigate the impact of human-induced disasters on the reputational image of small islands, with a focus on the long-term repercussions, mainly in relation to their attraction as tourism destinations. Based on the views of various stakeholders, the study proposes why and how small islands can have a stronger command of the self-image they want to portray. It also suggests approaches that the Western Mediterranean islands of Ustica and Giglio, both associated with disasters (the former being associated with the June 1980 crash of Itavia Flight 870, and the latter the site of the January 2011 *Costa Concordia* shipwreck), could adopt to build on existing marketing and tourism strategies in order to satisfy existing trends and future demands.

Area of study

The area of study consists of two Italian islands, Giglio and Ustica, both situated in the Tyrrhenian Sea, in the Western Mediterranean basin (Figure 1).

Ustica

The island of Ustica is located off the island of Sicily, about 70 km north of Palermo. Ustica is a volcanic island that occupies an area of approximately 8.65 km² and measures 4.5 km in length and 2.7 km in width. The island's economy is dominated by small-scale agriculture and the artisanal fisheries sector, but is constrained by its comparatively isolated location (Hogg et al., 2021). The local economy had previously revolved around the island's status as a site for political confinement but, in the late 1950s, started to shift towards tourism (Ailara, 2016). Ustica became a popular tourist destination, mainly for scuba diving, due to the rich marine environment arising from the presence of a marine protected area (MPA) (Alexandrakis et al., 2019). The MPA surrounds the island and covers approximately 159 km². It was established in 1986, becoming the first designated MPA in Italy, and forms part of the Natura 2000 network [Fondali dell'isola di Ustica ITA020046] (Hogg et al., 2021). The island also has a terrestrial reserve of 204.37 hectares, established by the Region of Sicily in 1997, which also forms part of the Natura 2000 network [Isola di Ustica ITA020010] and is home to 570 vascular plant species (Provincia Regionale di Palermo, n.d.). The island is governed through the Municipality of Ustica and, as of 2019, has a resident population of

1,318 (Garavaglia, 2020). Tourist arrivals in 2019 (pre-COVID-19) are reported as 23,937, while the number of tourist bed-nights amounted to 60,000 (Ailara, 2021, personal communication).

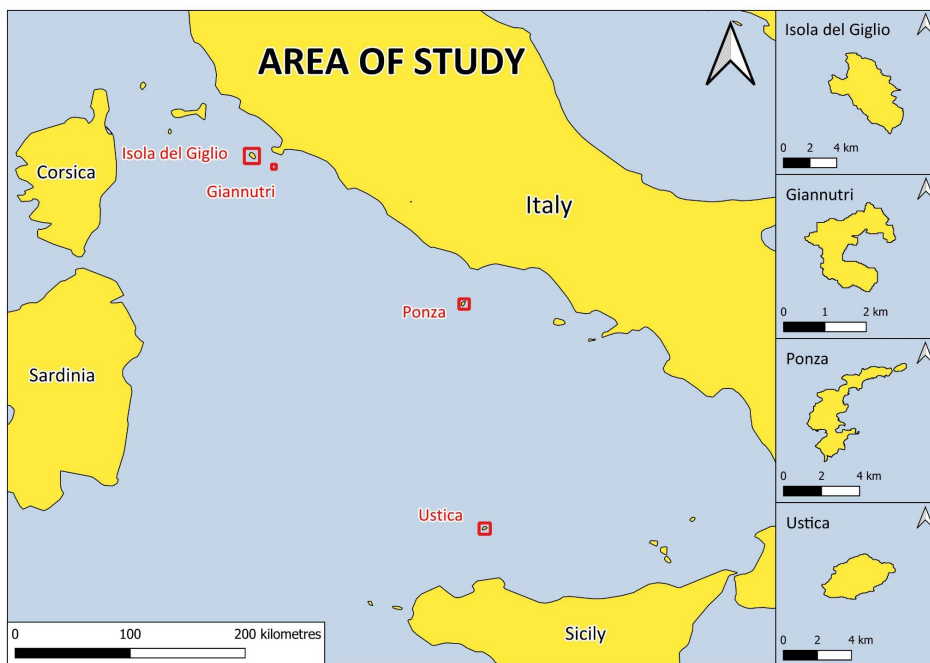


Figure 1 – Map of the area of study. Drawn for the authors by Andrea Pace.

On the evening of 27 June, 1980, a DC-9 operated by the now-defunct Itavia airline crashed in the Tyrrhenian Sea north of Sicily while on a flight between Bologna and Palermo, killing all 81 passengers and crew on board. The aircraft sank about 100 km north of Ustica, relatively far from the island. However, as the distance was slightly shorter than to the island of Ponza (the largest island of the Pontine Archipelago), Ustica became the reference point to the disaster in the popular and media imaginary (Monteleone, 2020). Known in Italy as *'la strage di Ustica'* (the Ustica disaster) or simply as *'Ustica'*, the episode led to numerous investigations, legal actions and accusations, and remains a source of controversy, including claims of conspiracy (ANSA, 2020). It has been described by Italian President Sergio Mattarella as “a deep [and open] wound in the history of the country” (Di Feo et al., 2020). It is presumed that the plane was mistakenly shot down, or crashed as the result of a near-collision with, a military jet (Ranci, 2020).

Giglio

The island of Giglio lies 14 km off the Tuscany coast and is the second largest island of the Tuscan Archipelago. The Tuscan Archipelago consists of seven major islands (Gorgona, Capraia, Elba, Pianosa, Montecristo, Giglio, and Giannutri) and several minor islets, most of which form part of the marine and terrestrial Tuscan Archipelago National Park, established in 1999. The Tuscan Archipelago is considered as the largest European marine

park and includes areas under different levels of protection (Iannucci et al., 2018). Part of Giglio's land area is protected and is also part of the Natura 2000 network [Isola del Giglio IT51A0023]. Together with the entire archipelago, the island of Giglio also forms part of the Pelagos Sanctuary, an international sanctuary for Mediterranean marine mammals, including whales and dolphins (Notarbartolo-di-Sciara et al., 2008).

Geographically, Giglio has a mountainous terrain, with 90% of its surface being uninhabitable due to natural features. Its highest peak at Poggio della Pagana (496 m) is situated in the centre of the island. Coastal areas are primarily characterised by steep cliffs and rocky slopes, and gently inclined coastal areas and beaches are rare (Grun et al., 2014). There are 1,364 inhabitants across three main settlements (Giglio Porto, Giglio Castello and Giglio Campese). The island's shape is roughly elliptical, 8.5 km long and 4.5 km wide, and it covers a surface of 24.1 km². Since 1960, Giglio has experienced a gradual increase in tourism, which is effectively its only economic resource. The number of (pre-COVID-19) tourists, deduced from ferry ticket sales and the landing fee, is about 150,000 per year (Chiocchini et al., 2017), most of whom visit the island in the summer season (Di Giangirolamo, 2012). The island is governed through the Municipality of Giglio, which is also responsible for the island of Giannutri, situated 15.5 km ESE of Giglio Island, which has an area of 2.32 km², a perimeter of 13.7 km and a population of 28 people (Rossi, 2022) and is also part of the Natura 2000 Network [Isola di Giannutri - area terrestre e marina IT51A0024] (Foggi et al., 2015).

On Friday the 13th of January, 2012, the cruise liner *Costa Concordia* collided with underwater rocks off the coast of Giglio Island, causing 32 deaths. A complex recovery of the partially submerged shipwreck was carried out, lasting over two years and ending in September 2014 with the transportation of the shipwreck to Port of Genoa, where it was scrapped (Squadrone et al., 2018). The island has been the subject of international focus ever since the incident (Chiocchini et al., 2017). The island's residents found themselves at the centre of attention due to extensive media coverage that represented them as heroes and generous hosts (Baldacchino, 2019). Apart from the disaster itself, the successful parbuckling operation (involving the righting of the sunken vessel using rotational leverage) has also received wide media coverage (Lamberti et al., 2014).

Methods

Interviews were held with stakeholders to collect relevant data. Expert sampling, which involves the selection of 'typical' and 'representative' individuals, was used to recruit interviewees (Finn et al., 2000). This was possible due to the author's network in the region and the ability to speak Italian (the language spoken in the research area). Nine stakeholders were interviewed, five from Ustica and four from Giglio: government officials (n=2); tourism industry representatives (n=3); park representatives (n=2) and media organisations/representatives based on the islands (n=2). Interviews were held in May 2021 and were conducted over the phone for safety reasons but still permitted valid and high quality interactions (Suryani, 2013). Interviews lasted between 30–45 minutes each and were kept semi-structured and informal. Necessary ethical considerations were taken into account, providing information to interviewees on the aim of the research and assuring data confidentiality.

A checklist of topics was kept in hand as a guide throughout the interviews. Topics discussed included: 1) the role that the disaster in question played in promoting the island;

2) the impact of the disaster on the tourism sector; 3) the current, lingering association of the island with the disaster; 4) how stakeholders, especially tourism operators, perceive the disaster and its association with the respective island; 5) existing marketing efforts to promote the islands for tourism purposes; and 6) what, beyond the respective disaster, should the islands' identity be and how this can be better promoted. The use of a checklist helped to ensure that a consistent range of topics was covered in each interview (Wearing et al., 2002). The use of interviews has its limitations due to the small sample size, which is unrepresentative. However, the authors sought to secure a saturation of themes, which were backed with findings from secondary data.

Secondary data was collected through Google News which aggregates news from more than 80,000 news publishers around the world. It is considered as the world's largest news aggregator (Wang, 2020) and can thus serve as an ideal source of data. Adopting the approach of Lin and Rosenkrantz (2017), Google News was used to search news sites over a two-year period (May 2019 to May 2021). The search was based on the terms 'Ustica' (n=186) and 'Giglio' (n=161) referred to in articles published in English or Italian. Table 1 shows the results obtained and the context in which both islands were mentioned.

Island	Topic and number of mentions						
	Disaster	COVID-19	Culture	Tourism	Connectivity	Other	Total
Giglio	25	44	26	20	8	38	161
Ustica	90	27	16	12	5	36	186

Table 1 – Number of mentions of Giglio and Ustica in the media.

In addition, the study draws on the multidisciplinary expertise of the authors in the field of islands and tourism, including in the Mediterranean region. Content analysis was carried out manually on articles and notes taken during interviews following the approach adopted by Stoffelen (2019). This involved the selection of key quotes/extracts from articles and interviews based on their representative and illustrative value.

Results and discussion

Five main themes emerged from an analysis of the data collected from secondary sources and interviews. These include: (1) disasters as a means to make islands' names more familiar; (2) islands getting linked to disasters; (3) reputational damage caused to the image of the islands; (4) the limited promotion of the islands; and (5) promoting a more comprehensive image of the islands that goes beyond its mere association with a disaster from the past.

Disasters: Putting the islands 'on the map'

Both Giglio and Ustica received considerable media attention because of the disasters for which the islands served as respective backdrops. According to media sources, it was a historic moment when the island of Ustica was at the centre of media attention due to the Itavia disaster in 1980 (Monteleone, 2020). A local government official from Ustica said in their interview that, notwithstanding all the short but intense media attention, the disaster did not help the islands to gain popularity as a tourist destination. This can be confirmed

by the limited number of tourists that visit the island on an annual basis. The limited positive impact was also confirmed by tourism operators who stated that, to date, most tourists are domestic and that relatively few international tourists visit the islands, unlike the nearby Aeolian islands. While Ustica began to be projected as a tourism destination in 1950s on account of its diving offerings (D'Angelo, 2019), and had a modest amount of tourism taking place until 1966 (Cervi, 1966), there is no official data on tourism between the 1970s and the 1990s – the years before and after the disaster – and it is therefore difficult to compare figures. However, recent reports confirm an upward trend in tourist arrivals. While in 2006 there were some 10,830 arrivals (SISPLAN and IGEAM, 2011), tourist arrivals rose from 11,883 in 2014 to 15,632 in 2016 when comparing the period June–July for both years (Schillaci, 2016). Figures continued to rise in recent years as confirmed by a 30% increase in revenues from landing fees in 2017 (Libero Quotidiano; 2018), the presence of more foreign visitors in 2018 (Licata, 2018), and the number of arrivals in 2019 (23,937; Ailara, 2021, personal communication).

The island of Giglio also received considerable media attention because of the *Costa Concordia* disaster. According to an interviewee, several visitors had heard of the island for the first time because of the disaster and eventually got intrigued and started to read more about the island. A representative of tourism operators said that the disaster gave the island some badly needed visibility and gave the island global promotion. A local government official said that all this attention reflected the fact that this was one of the biggest cruise ship disasters since the *Titanic*, almost a century before. Nevertheless, according to the mayor of Giglio, the island gained little or nothing from the international publicity generated by the disaster (Agnew, 2014). One interviewed government official said, “the disaster absolutely did not help tourism.” Speaking of the impact on tourism following the disaster, a local government representative from Giglio said, “It takes years to build a house, but it can be destroyed in one day.” Supporting this argument, a park representative said, “if you learn from the media of an explosion that took place at a destination, you do not travel to this place because there was a terrorist attack.”

According to interviewees from Giglio, at first there was an influx of personnel associated with the media or involved in the salvage operations: divers, navy experts, police, environmental experts, journalists from all over the world, government officials, as well as visitors with an interest in ‘dark tourism’ (Di Gangirolamo, 2012) (who were mostly curious day trippers). However, several repeat visitors stopped visiting the islands and the island experienced a lower number of visitors for a number of years until the situation slowly returned back to normal following the removal of the unsightly wreck. Such claims have also been made by those working in the hospitality sector (e.g., Latza Nadeau, 2015). The fact that this temporary “new niche” of tourism did not make up for the loss of visitors and that tourism was badly impacted has been statistically confirmed: tourist arrivals dropped from 211,000 in 2011 to 177,000 in 2013. In 2012, the presence of tourists fell by 13.6% and the average stay fell by 9.4% (Busato, 2014). According to the mayor of Giglio, tourism dropped by 15% in the two years following the disaster (Agnew, 2014). A government representative said that, while there is a sense of pride for how locals have shown solidarity following the disaster, locals also want to forget about it because of the economic impact it has had on the islands, especially in the first years after the incident. A government official confirmed that the tourism sector had now managed to recover thanks to a lot of work, reaching approximately 240,000 visitors per year; with return visitors starting to frequent the island again. Another tourism representative said that some of the survivors and salvage workers had built a bond with the island and local communities and began to visit the island on an annual basis.

Interviewees from both islands said that some tourists ask where the disaster happened or want to visit the respective site out of curiosity, but this is not the key motivation behind their visit. A tourism operator from Ustica said that those who visit the island are attracted by its natural assets, including the sea, and not by the 1980 aviation disaster. Similarly, a park representative from Giglio said that, once on the island, a few visitors ask where the *Costa Concordia* disaster happened, but this is not what mainly attracts tourists to the island. In the winter of 2011, Giglio became a place of 'dark tourism', but this is no longer the case. The absence of any physical objects linked to the disasters (save for a small memorial on Giglio) explains why dark tourism never evolved – unlike, say, the Falkland Islands. In addition, the museum in memory of 'the Ustica disaster' is located off-island, in Bologna. In any case, there is also no interest amongst the locals to develop such a niche. Giglio and Ustica have now reverted to invisibility, a generic media blackout (Baldacchino, 2019) that is occasionally broken with references to the respective disaster.

Islands linked with disasters

In the period after the respective disasters, the two islands received considerable media attention; however, stakeholders remarked that journalists were reporting the disasters rather than the characteristics of the islands. Similarly, Baldacchino (2013) says that the small Italian island of Giglio was thrust into the world's attention not because of the natural attractions used to promote the island, but because of the disaster. Reporting on a trip to the island, Lyons (2012, para. 5) states, "Giglio is known around the world because of the *Concordia*, but I was hoping to see a Giglio that was not defined by the disaster in which 32 passengers and crew died." A government official said that the island became associated with the disaster, something which is not beneficial for the image of the island and which fails to reflect its natural beauty.

Many years have passed since both disasters happened, yet, from time to time, articles are still written about the islands because of the disasters. As shown in Table 1, articles published over the past two years in relation to the disasters were more abundant than those that focused primarily on tourism. This was especially the case for Ustica. Referring to the *Costa Concordia* disaster, Bancalà (2021), a local, writes, "The first light of dawn put an end to that endless night ... but, for us, it would have been only the beginning of a bad memory that will never be erased from our minds or from our history."

Recent decisions taken by authorities and reporters dealing with other events taking place elsewhere make reference to the *Costa Concordia* disaster. Two examples include news regarding a decision by the Italian Government to ban cruise liners from the area close to Venice's city centre (Connor, 2021), and reports on the events that unfolded in the Suez Canal when the *Ever Given* container ship got stuck, blocking the canal for six long days (e.g., March, 2021). A park representative from Giglio said that the association of the island with the disaster is also due to the duration of the operations (environmental monitoring and parbuckling) that ensued:

This was not a disaster that took place over one night and stopped there. While almost a decade passed since that night, the wreck was stuck for almost three years, so we are speaking of an event that effectively 'ended' seven years ago. Furthermore, environmental studies by research institutes are ongoing.

Although the association between Giglio and *Concordia* in the media is impossible to deny (Scamporrino, 2012), some articles promoting the island adopt an approach as if such disaster never occurred (e.g., Heath, 2021). While information online that aligns the island with the episode persists, an interviewee from Giglio said there is no trace left of the disaster on the island. The only remaining link is a small memorial in honour of those who lost their lives on that tragic night.

Similarly, 40 years later, Ustica still features in some news items across the world because of the aviation disaster (e.g., *The Brussels Times*, 2020). Results in Table 1 show that the absolute majority of articles written on Ustica or which refer to the island do so not to promote it as a tourism destination but to foreground the Itavia disaster. Even articles that are unrelated to the crash and which provide a guide on how to reach the island or to describe its major attractions tend to refer (in most cases, at the very beginning of the article) to the disaster (e.g., Bergamin, 2020). As Bellagamba (2020, para. 1) outlined in the first lines of her article: “A small pearl in the Tyrrhenian Sea off the coast of Palermo, Ustica is a splendid island of great environmental importance, which name is unfortunately almost always associated with the DC9 Itavia disaster of 1980.”

Sometimes, the disaster is referred to in the press simply as ‘Ustica’, further strengthening the association of the disaster with the island (Foresta Martin, 2013). A media organisation representative said that such a practice implies that Ustica is presented as a disaster and a negative trope, rather than as an enticing tourism destination. An official representative from the Municipality noted that the actual tragedy occurred closer to Naples than to the island of Ustica, asserting that, “there has been 40 years of disinformation and fake news.” Foresta Martin (2013) describes the Ustica disaster as a “recurrent lie”, especially since the incident happened at least 115 km away from the island, whilst floating debris was found 100 km north of the island. In addition, the disaster happened too far away for anyone on the island to witness it or to do anything about it. A media organisation representative said, “instead of naming the disaster Ustica, the disaster of the Tyrrhenian Sea would have been a better name.” Bergamin (2020) speaks of the anger of locals who believe that the plane fell closer to the island of Ponza and that the island of Ustica should instead be known for its natural heritage. A tourism operator said that the association of the island with the disaster is a sad form of promotion that conditions people. Instead of having a stereotypic association of the island with the MPA or the reserve, for the majority of outsiders, Ustica is closely linked to the Itavia tragedy and the tragedy only. A tourism operator said:

Hiroshima is associated with the atomic bomb, Chernobyl is associated with the nuclear disaster. Likewise, Ustica has experienced the same fate of being associated with a disaster and this can go on for many years to come, even if the association has decreased in recent years.

A representative of tourism operators said that journalists had played a detrimental role in this association. A journalist said that young reporters keep on repeating the same mistakes published in previous articles. Some locals have proposed to speak to media houses to stop referring to the disaster as the *Strage di Ustica*. However, literature about the topic is so vast that it would be literally impossible to erase the narrative (Foresta Martin, 2013). Cioccio and Michael (2007) outline that engaging with the media is key in such circumstances, since misleading information and sensationalism could bring negative impacts on the visitors' image perception. A tourism operator said that this association has been further strengthened through various documentaries and films, one of which is called *Ustica* (Renzo Martinelli, 2016), which has irked locals and tourist operators, leading to

complaints. According to an interviewee, in Bologna there is also 'a museum in memory of Ustica' to commemorate the victims of the disaster and this further continues to align the island with the disaster.

The two islands do, however, differ in some significant respects. A tourism operator from Ustica claimed that the persisting correlation of disaster with that island is also a function of the fact that, even 40 years later, the case remains open and no justice has been accorded to victims and their families. As long as this uncertainty persists, it is proving difficult for Ustica to disengage from associations with the 1980 disaster (Monteleone, 2020). This also explains the relatively higher mentions of Ustica with respect to the disaster (see Table 1). In contrast, the Giglio islanders gained attention because of the disaster but also because their communities were praised for the solidarity and agency they showed. An interviewee from Giglio said that the media had communicated the solidarity and warm/open character of locals. Referring to the way Giglio was portrayed in the media, Baldacchino (2019, p. 314) says:

But it can count itself lucky for the positive manner in which it has been portrayed, even if fleetingly, as the backdrop and spontaneous refuge to one of the most tragic accidents affecting the cruise ship industry in recent decades.

A government official from Giglio said that one aspect of the disaster was a sense of pride among the local community for having played a role in saving people's lives, as well as to offer shelter and support to the survivors of the disaster. In fact, a gold medal for Civil Merit was awarded to the community of the island of Giglio by the President of the Italian Republic in recognition of the commitment of citizens, local government and local institutions in rescuing the passengers and crew of the *Costa Concordia* (Agenzia Impres Editorial Board, 2013).

Reputational damage

Disasters have shed some welcome light on the existence and location of these (and other) small islands, and at times portrayed the solidarity expressed by local communities when faced with such tragic events. And yet, the negative associations that developed in the aftermath of the respective disasters, as well as the prolonged association of the islands with the disasters (rather than with tourism and/or the environment), have caused reputational damage that is still felt, years after the tragic event. This is especially worrying when taking into account that both Giglio and Ustica depend heavily on tourism.

The island of Giglio has sought €20 million in compensation from Costa Crociere, the *Costa Concordia's* operator, for the damage caused to the island's image. According to reports in the press, through a letter sent to court, Giglio's mayor argued that "damage to the island exists" and that the damage was such that nobody will forget what happened in the days and years that followed the disaster, to the extent that the image of the shipwreck would remain on people's minds. In an interview, the mayor added, "with certainty, we can say that there has been no gain, either economically or in terms of identity and our reputation among tourists" (*The Local Italy*, 2014). Reputational damage has also been named by hospitality operators as the culprit for the decline in business for a number of years as compared to revenue secured before the shipwreck (Latza Nadeau, 2015).

Likewise, Ustica locals believe that the attribution of disaster to the island has damaged Ustica's image and, according to literature, even proposed to file a lawsuit to claim

compensation from the press for the constant association of the island with the disaster (Foresta Martin, 2013). While acknowledging that the link of Ustica to the disaster is a problem, an official from the MPA management body believes that the disaster did not impact tourism; while the first web search on Ustica might render information on the disaster, further research should identify that Ustica is much more, and that it is a “paradise” for those interested in scuba-diving. Another operator from Ustica said that authorities had never helped the island to counteract the reputational damage it has suffered: “Unlike Ustica, in the case of Lampedusa that experienced a near miss from a missile attack and constant arrival of migrants, authorities helped the tourism sector to recover.” These two events have, in fact, led to a tourism boom on Lampedusa (Agius, 2021a; Surico, 2020).

Islands remain off the radar

Promotion of tourism on the island of Ustica falls under the responsibility of the regional government, which has a considerable territory to promote, including the largest island in the Mediterranean – Sicily, with a population of over 5 million – as well as several small islands and archipelagos. As a result, the small island of Ustica is often forgotten and overshadowed by the other, established ‘big names’ of tourism in the sprawling Sicilian archipelago (Baldacchino, 2015). Little reference is made to the island’s name and, unlike other, perhaps more famous islands, it does not serve as a main destination for either domestic or international tourism, which is disproportionately directed to Sicilian islands (Monteleone, 2020). This challenge has already been faced with the initial inception of tourism on the island (Cervi, 1966). The municipality participates in tourism fairs to promote the islands, in parallel with regional efforts. Marketing also depends on collective initiatives of tourism operators, such as the portal *Visit Ustica* (an initiative bringing together some 20 local operators) and documentaries on national television channels. A representative from the association said that, from time to time, influencers and travel bloggers/journalists are invited to promote the island (e.g., Razzetti, 2021). The representative added that marketing costs money and resources are limited. Another tourism operator said that, apart from the limited budgets, there was little collaboration between tourism operators, and that initiatives involving the Internet were too limited to even consider them as marketing efforts. Most marketing was being done by the island’s ten diving centres, sometimes in collaboration with hotels. Furthermore, the fact that the island is not part of an archipelago puts the island at an additional disadvantage in terms of competitiveness. In order to address core-periphery relationships in marketing and the limited financial means, some tourism operators from Ustica have teamed up with operators from other small Sicilian islands and are planning a joint marketing strategy under the name of ‘Islands of Sicily’. The island-hopping product encourages tourists to visit several islands, including Ustica (Agius, 2021b).

In the case of Giglio, promotion is undertaken by the Region of Tuscany. The Tuscan archipelago is promoted collectively, with Elba – the largest island – being the primary focus (Regione Toscana, 2021). In addition, the municipality works closely with the Pro Loco (a tourist office based on a public-private partnership) and the management body of the National Park to promote the territory. Compared with Ustica, Giglio has been better promoted online and this can be mainly attributed to the efforts of its local government. The municipality has dedicated an annual budget to promote the islands on social media platforms such as Instagram through a marketing agency. As part of this initiative, following wide consultation with stakeholders, in 2020 the Municipality launched the *Visit Giglio Island* portal to promote Giglio and Giannutri. The site receives over 20,000 visitors

daily in the peak season (Comune di Isola del Giglio, 2020). Representatives of the municipality and the Pro Loco said that the island is promoted in fairs such as the Swiss International Holiday Exhibition and the International Travel Exhibition (BIT) held in Milan. An interviewee said that collaboration between the three bodies is key: in fact, these organisations operate from the same building. A park representative said that 30 operators have recently been gathered to promote the territory and excursions.

While the islands received considerable attention due to the respective disasters, analysis of journals and interviews confirmed that there are relatively little efforts in place to counteract the ongoing association of the islands with disasters and any reputational damage, as well as to promote the islands on terms decided by the islands themselves. Owing to the limited efforts in place, the islands remain mostly unknown and 'off the radar' of international tourism. Most visitors are, in fact, domestic tourists or even people residing in a nearby region – a form of tourism that has been further strengthened by the recent COVID-19 pandemic.

Nature-based attractions as a vital component of the islands' images

An interviewee representing a media organisation said that, after the *Costa Concordia* episode, the island of Giglio started to detach itself from the disaster and shift discourse back to the real characteristics of the island: the tourism product based on the environment, trekking, gastronomy and visits to the small wineries. A park representative from Giglio said that the National Park has helped to relaunch tourism after the disaster. The environment was also used as a backdrop to relaunch tourism during travel fairs (Degl'Innocenti, 2015). The fact that the environment played a key role in luring tourists back to the island was confirmed by the mayor who, in an interview, stated that when it comes to winning back its traditional tourists, Giglio needs to convince them that there has been no lasting pollution from the disaster (Agnew, 2014).

Interviewees from the park and the tourism sector said that, as in most islands in Italy, the establishment of the National Park was met with initial opposition from the local communities. However, the park has now started to have a positive impact and locals have started to realise its potential to lure tourists. A park representative from Giglio said that, while the primary objective of the park is conservation, it also serves to promote the territory and attract tourists. Speaking about the important link between the natural environment of the island and tourism, a tourism representative said that the Pro Loco is receiving funds from the municipality to maintain the over 50 km of 30 trekking paths across the island. The interviewee added that, together with the park, several nature-based cultural excursions are being organised in the off-season to reduce seasonality. Festivals on archaeology, art, music, photography and enogastronomy are also being organised. Furthermore, a visitors' centre is being developed on the island of Giannutri to add further attractions for this tourist segment.

Interviewees from Ustica highlighted the role of the MPA and the reserve to promote the island territory. A local government official from Ustica said that the islands are pushing tourism that values their natural attractions. Indeed, the small island is ideal for cycling, trekking, scuba diving to observe marine life and sub-archaeological remains, and to experience local food and wine with negligible food miles. This is also reflected in the articles written to promote the island (e.g., Monteleone, 2020); in particular, the MPA serves to attract diving tourism. An official from the municipality of Ustica said that the MPA is one of the most well-preserved in Italy due to the remoteness of the island, and this

was an added bonus to attract tourists looking for pristine environments. While acknowledging this potential, a tourism operator said that the MPA management, which falls under the responsibility of the municipality, has however not always been well utilised: “the MPA can promote the islands miles away, but better coordination is required.” Furthermore, too much emphasis is made on the MPA while little attention is given to the reserve. The island of Ustica thus needs to diversify its nature-based tourism product. Being a volcanic island, geotourism can also help to attract tourists in the off-season.

In order to support this sector and address seasonality, price incentives (e.g., 25% reduction on accommodation for those staying for a minimum of two nights) are offered in the shoulder months and off-season. Tourism operators from Ustica said that while they were doing their part, more investment was needed in marketing. This may involve inviting journalists to the island to experience what the island can offer and to counteract the excessive coverage given to the disaster. According to officials, this may help reduce the existing problem of having articles written about the island from a distance and which depict a distorted image of Ustica.

Beyond the perceived image, there might be other issues that hinder tourism development on the islands. A tourism operator from Ustica said that:

connectivity is an ‘Achilles’ heel’ for tourism on the island. Unlike other small Sicilian islands such as Pantelleria and Lampedusa, there is no airport; travel to the island is more difficult as it depends on ferry/hydrofoil.

Another tourism operator said that the return hydrofoil ticket is expensive, costing over €50 for visitors. In order to relaunch tourism, which was badly hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, tourism operators called to extend the reduced fare applicable for locals to all visitors. However, instead of providing incentives for people to travel to the island, the favourable terms for second homeowners and reductions of 30% on fares for those who stay for more than two days on the island during the off season have been removed. In the case of Giglio, there are only ferries linking the island to the mainland and the voyage takes over an hour. According to a government official from Giglio, a high-speed ferry may reduce this time by half. A park representative said that the frequency of the service needs to be improved. Furthermore, there are no intra-island connections provided by the public sector, and limited connections (in some cases once per week) are offered by private companies that have no public obligation.

Multi-island visits and island hopping can increase the competitiveness and attractiveness of the two islands as tourism destinations (Agius, 2021b). While some opportunities are already available, these must be further promoted. Between May and October, tourists to Giglio can also visit the island of Giannutri. Visits take place twice per week in small groups through guided tours. In the case of Ustica, during the peak season when weather conditions are favourable, tourists can take a hydrofoil to Palermo and eventually travel to the Aeolian archipelago.

After an initial shock, the COVID-19 pandemic has provided an opportunity for such islands. The low incidence of COVID-19 cases afforded by the natural geographical isolation, plus the preferential treatment in terms of mass vaccination campaigns of local island communities by the Italian health authorities, helped to relaunch tourism and develop an edge over other destinations. This has also received considerable attention in

the media, portraying the islands as a safe destination. Such islands are mostly visited by domestic tourists, with these still on the rise due to a preference to travel closer to home (Agius et al., 2021). Furthermore, small islands such as Ustica and Giglio can offer a product which permits staying away from crowds (due to their low population density and limited visitors) and immersing in nature: a welcome balm after such a long period of lockdowns and quarantine. Indeed, research suggests that, post-COVID-19, people will seek out natural spaces and quality experiences (Global Environment Facility, 2020).

By strengthening nature-based tourism, islands can respond to the latest tourism trends, such as raising awareness on sustainability among tourists (United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2019). Islands can also further address seasonality in tourism influx. In its recent communication concerning a sustainable blue economy, the European Commission (2021) committed to promote and support the development of marine and coastal ecotourism to diversify the offer and extend off-season tourism. Therefore, marketing efforts encouraging tourism in protected areas and focusing on the natural environment, which is the major asset of the islands, can help strengthen their profile and counteract or dispel their association with the disasters (over which they have little control), promote the islands as tourism destinations, and also relaunch tourism following the dip experienced due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusion

Using interviews and secondary data, this study assessed the performance of tourism on two islands that had experienced human-induced disasters. The small Italian islands of Giglio and Ustica have received considerable media attention mainly because of such events and, despite the passage of time, the media has continued to associate the islands with their respective disasters. This, coupled with the limited promotional efforts from authorities responsible for marketing, explains why the islands continue to suffer from reputational damage. For most other Mediterranean islands, the image from the outside is primarily one representing seaside tourism destinations; however, in the case of Giglio and Ustica, there is an added burden, as they are perceived as the islands of disaster. In spite of the adage, time has not healed. This situation undervalues nature-based attractions that have the potential to address existing seasonality in tourism flows.

In the case of Giglio, the disaster and ensuing recovery operations had no long-term impact on island tourism and, while the island's reputation remains associated with the disaster, the number of visitors has been restored to original levels. This can be explained by the fact that the disaster did not leave a detrimental environmental impact, the predominant domestic tourism market was reinstated, and repeat visitors returned. Furthermore, efforts have been made to restore the image of the island online through protected area tourism. In the case of Ustica, while official data is lacking, recent upward trends in tourist arrivals show that the disaster and reputational damage did not halt tourism development and thus there was no long-term impact. However, nature-based tourism has failed to boost tourism development, notwithstanding its potential supported through the establishment of an MPA and a nature reserve, both post-air tragedy. Whilst the association of the island with the disaster impacted the reputation and image of the island, especially with the predominant domestic market, there are other factors that have contributed to this slow upward trend in tourist arrivals. These include the limited marketing efforts, overemphasis made on one niche (diving), and connectivity issues that need to be addressed.

The study foregrounds the need for islands such as Giglio and Ustica to improve their online reputation management and increase their competitiveness as attractive tourism destinations. In this regard, such islands need to build on good practices, including joint marketing strategies, further developing archipelago tourism (island hopping) and promotion of protected area tourism (both terrestrial and marine). This will help the islands attract more of what local operators perceive as the 'right type' of tourists (including off-season), reduce dependence on domestic markets that focus on sun-sea-sand tourism, portray a more comprehensive image of the islands that media houses fail to explicitly outline in respective coverage, as well as counteract and correct sensational stories that may taint the islands' images.

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