



UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG

# Online communication within host volunteer tourism

The case of the Global Greeter network

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Karin Hanberger

## Abstract

### *What is the Global Greeter Network and what do they do?*

*Global Greeter Network (GGN) is a voluntary association of independent Greeter programs. Greeter programs aspire to provide a personal and diverse image of the destination by matching visitors with local volunteers (called Greeters) for informal rendezvous “off the beaten tourist path”, for free. Greeter programs are a type of volunteer tourism called host volunteer tourism that refers to individuals who volunteer to provide tourism services in their own community.*

**Purpose:** The purpose of this study is to A) describe what the organizations within the Global Greeter Network (GGN) communicate on their websites; B) discover how GGN organizations use social media; and C) explore how GGN's online communication represent the image of tourist destinations.

**Conceptual Framework:** The literature reviewed in this study relates to *tourism, online communication* and *tourist destination image*. The Internet, also known as the “information superhighway”, has since the 1990s changed the relationship between customers and suppliers in the tourism industry. Going from one-way communication to a two-way interaction meant challenges but also great opportunities for tourism organizations, especially for non-profit volunteer organizations who through the Internet found budget ways of reaching customers for example by using Online Social Networks (OSN) and websites. The gains of being a member of OSN is many, the possibility to communicate about a product or a service to a wide range of people no matter time and place and electronic word-of-mouth are examples.

**Methodology:** The chosen qualitative research method is a case study approach with a non-positivistic position. For the purpose of this study, a hermeneutic stance and an interpretative approach has been used. The material have been collected and analysed through a Textual Analysis model.

**Findings:** The GGN organizations websites and 6 of the 21 GGN organizations Facebook (FB)-pages were analysed in order to reach the purpose of the study. Findings show that the GGN organizations active on FB interact with their web visitors frequently and that their visitors most often post positive comments about the service on FB. Greeter Programs are most often communicated as an attempt to explore a destination in an authentic, genuine way, however some of the GGN organizations communicate a stereotypical image of the destination. This might be interpreted as contradicting since Volunteer Tourism services (such as Greeter Programs) can be described as something that potentially breaks down stereotypes.

**Conclusions:.** What the data indicates is that GGN might have a more influential role in the online communication of destination image than they might believe. In most cases the representation of the destination in GGN's online communication seems to support the mission of the GGN – to let visitors see the “real”, authentic destination from a local's perspective based on what they highlight. However, a few of the organizations seem to communicate about the destination through social media in a way that could be perceived as stereotypical, and that might maintain reigning stereotypes of the destination. Previous research claim that many of the people attracted to/that have experienced Greeter programs can be categorized as opinion leaders. The opinion leaders of the electronic age share their opinions on websites and on Online Social Networks related to tourism. This seems to play an increasingly important role in the consumer decision-making process. Therefore the electronic word-of-mouth may serve as one of the GGN's most important ways of creating awareness about their services as well as the destination.

**Keywords:** Online Communication – Non-profit tourism organizations – Electronic word-of-mouth – Tourism destination image – Representation – Cultural Tourism – Host Volunteer tourism – Online Social Networking – Global Greeter Network – Greeter Programs – Destination marketing



## Table of Contents

<b>1. Introduction .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>1.1 Online communication .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>1.2 Online Organizational Communication .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>1.3 Tourism .....</b>	<b>7</b>
1.3.1 The two dimensions of Volunteer tourism .....	7
1.3.2 Internet and tourism .....	8
<b>1.4 Greeter Programs and the Global Greeter Network .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>1.5 The importance of the study at hand .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>1.6 The research purpose and questions of enquiry.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>2. Conceptual Framework.....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>2.1 Tourism .....</b>	<b>10</b>
2.1.1 Tourism Volunteering.....	10
2.1.2 Cultural Tourism .....	11
2.1.3 Tourism and the Internet .....	11
<b>2.2 Online Communication .....</b>	<b>11</b>
2.2.1 Online communication in the non-profit sector.....	12
2.2.2. Online social networking .....	12
2.2.3 Electronic Word-of-mouth .....	13
<b>2.3 Tourist Destination Image.....</b>	<b>14</b>
2.3.1 Representation .....	15
<b>3. Scientific Research Methodologies .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>3.1 Research approach and philosophy .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>3.2 Case selection and gathering empirical data .....</b>	<b>17</b>
3.2.1 Social media .....	18
3.2.2 Organisational websites .....	18
3.2.3 Semi structured e-mail interview .....	19
3.2.4 Secondary material/Other data.....	20
<b>3.3 Analysis .....</b>	<b>20</b>
3.3.1 Content.....	20
3.3.2 Intertextuality.....	21
3.3.3 Interaction .....	21
3.3.4 Relation .....	22
<b>3.4 Summary – Analysis.....</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>4. Case Description .....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>4.1 The Global Greeter Network.....</b>	<b>23</b>
4.1.1 Core values of Global Greeter Network .....	23
4.1.2 Historical background.....	23
4.1.3 Communication of the Global Greeter Network .....	24
<b>4.2 Key Findings .....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>4.3 Websites .....</b>	<b>25</b>
4.3.1 WT1: About the Organization.....	25
4.3.2 WT2: Meet Greeters.....	26
4.3.3 WT3: Becoming a Greeter .....	27
4.3.4 WT4: Donating/supporting.....	28

4.3.5 WT5: Interaction/Feedback.....	28
4.3.6 WT6: Creating awareness.....	29
<b>4.4 Social Media - Facebook (FB) .....</b>	<b>29</b>
4.4.1 FbT1: Destination Marketing.....	29
4.4.2 FbT2: About the organization and GGN .....	31
4.4.3 FbT3: Feedback/Interaction .....	33
<b>5. Concluding Discussion .....</b>	<b>36</b>
5.1 Using social media as a way of communicating.....	36
5.2 Communicating online and representing the image of the tourist destination .....	37
5.2.1 Interaction online .....	38
5.3 Conclusion .....	39
5.4 Practical Implications.....	40
5.5 Limitations and suggestions for future research.....	40
<b>References .....</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>Appendices .....</b>	<b>45</b>
Appendix 1 – E-mail interview with Big Apple Greeter.....	45
Appendix 2 – Summary of <i>Big Apple Greeter Visitor Survey</i> by Espeso et al (2005). .....	45

## Table of figures

Table 1: GGN organizations Facebook pages.....	18
Table 2: GGN organizations websites .....	19
Figure 4.1: Munich Greeter Website (04/04/2012 10.50) .....	25
Figure 4.2: Belgrade Greeters Website (5/04/2012 14.00).....	27
Figure 4.3: Tarn Albi Greeters Website (4/04/2012 9.30) .....	27
Figure 4.4: Athens Greeters Website (5/04/2012 13.50.....	27
Figure 4.5: Big Apple Greeter FB (27/04/2012 15.30).....	30
Figure 4.6: Dublin Greeters FB (27/04/2012 13.55) .....	31
Figure 4.7: Moscow Greeters FB (27/04/2012 14:15).....	31
Figure 4.8: Dublin Greeters FB (27/04/2012 09.00) .....	32
Figure 4.9: Big Apple Greeter FB (28/04/2012 14.00).....	33
Figure 4.10: Big Apple Greeter FB (28/04/2012 14.00).....	34
Figure 4.11: Big Apple Greeter FB (28/04/2012 14.15).....	34
Figure 4.12: Paris Greeter FB (28/04/12 15.30) .....	35
Figure 4.13: Moscow Greeter FB (28/04/12 16.30).....	35

# 1. Introduction

*In this section an introduction to the study is presented by touching upon subjects like Online Communication, Online Organizational Communication and Tourism. Moreover, the Global Greeter Network and Greeter Programs are presented as well as the purpose of the study and the questions of enquiry.*

## 1.1 Online communication

We human beings have always had a need to communicate with each other. Now, with the success and development of the Internet, the world has shrunk and country borders are becoming blurry. Our network of family, friends, colleagues and acquaintances has become more global, and there are no longer any really clear limitations, such as what before could be the neighbour's fence or the city we live in (Carlsson 2010). The emergence of the Internet has made changes in how people access and search for information and how they communicate (Kasavana, Nusair Teodosic 2010).

One way of communicating is online, meaning through the Internet. As such, the term online communication tends to refer to writing, reading and communicating through networked computers (see Warschauer 2001). To define online communication is complex. In this study when I, the researcher, mention online communication I refer to text or images published on the Internet as well as the interaction between an organization and individual (or between individuals) taking place online.

A generic term for social media that includes all tools online, which contributes to interactivity, is Web 2.0. The foundation of social media is the social interaction, which gives the participants the possibility to share opinions, thoughts and knowledge in a global forum where time and place are insignificant (Carlsson 2010). Web 2.0 contains social networks and communities such as Pirate Bay and My Space, blogs and sites where the participants themselves create the content, e.g. Facebook (Carlsson 2010). The social network site Facebook can be described as a platform or a meeting place where the participants themselves, individually or collectively create the content. As noted by Carlsson (2010) Facebook is about networking between individuals where they communicate through a personal profile.

## 1.2 Online Organizational Communication

Prior to the Internet communication between consumer (or user, client, member etc) and organization (company, producer etc) were overrepresented by the organization and categorized as "one way communication". Today, the new media environment provides the possibility of two-way communication, where the communication between organization and consumer goes both ways. One might say that communication and media have become *democratized* in the sense that the small voice that before was local and solitary now has a global forum (Ossianson, Hast 2008).

Through the Internet and social media, individuals have been given the possibility to tell their stories, share opinions and arguments, compare services and products and then share that information further as well as listen to others. The new media environment has changed the role of the consumer from passive to active in just a few years (Ossianson, Hast 2008). By sharing and viewing information online, a sort of collective intelligence is created that offers the individuals that take part of it, both knowledge and power. The credibility of the consumers (users, clients, members etc) information sharing online is experienced as high (Ossianson, Hast 2008).

The democratization of media and communication online has put organizations in a situation where it has become more difficult to control communication about their company/brand/product/service. This is a challenge for organizations. The sharing and communication of negative opinions online can be devastating, due to the high speed of information sharing, the wide spread over time and space, and the fact that information

published online is difficult to erase (in comparison to a newspaper that is published and then thrown away). An old marketing rule said that one unsatisfied customer could spread their dissatisfaction to eight others. Today the rule has changed. It is rather: one unsatisfied customer could, at least hypothetically, spread their dissatisfaction to as many as they like (Ossianson, Hast 2008). Due to the increased power of the individual consumer, it has been found that it is more important than ever for organizations to listen to consumers' opinions and needs in order to survive the demanding new media environment (Ossianson, Hast 2008).

As a company it is important to realize that the type of organization, its mission and its target group(s) are factors that decide what part social media may play in their communication. For instance, a non-profit organization with a small budget might use social media as a low cost approach to create awareness; and a for-profit company with a larger budget might treat social media as an easy accessible channel to get their consumers view on a new product. Experts say that social media is mainly good for long-term brand development, and to strengthen relationships (Carlsson 2010).

### **1.3 Tourism**

One phenomenon that has been a part of the human communication experience for decades is *tourism*, a form of nomadism that characterizes human beings. The rise of the jet airplane increased the rate of travel in the world, and as the international tourism grew it soon became a global phenomenon affecting various environments and opening new markets (Page, Connell 2006). Tourism is a part of the globalization, change and development of our world. It is no longer restricted to wealthy countries. The demand and access of tourism changes as the world develops. A challenge for researchers and organizations is to reach an understanding of why and how these changes occur, for example how tourism patterns affect tourism destinations and destination communities. Governments also have recognized the importance of tourism for national and international economies (Page, Connell 2006).

Mass tourism is by many people perceived as a commercialization of our human need to travel. As such, the tourism industry uses and exploits natural resources as a means of profit: the price we pay is sky-high and has led to exploitation of host communities and their culture and environment (Wearing, 2001). In an industry that can be described as consumer capitalism at its worst, the notion of *volunteer tourism* represents an alternative way of looking forward and providing community development, which can be of great importance for local communities. As noted by Wearing (2001), volunteer tourism stands for changed values and changed consciousness in the individual that may influence their lifestyle (Wearing, 2001).

#### **1.3.1 The two dimensions of Volunteer tourism**

Tourism volunteering consists of two dimensions, individuals volunteering at a destination (called volunteering tourism) and individuals volunteering in their own community (called host volunteering). The terms *hosts* and *guests* are common terms in tourism research and refer to the tourists and the residents at a destination. *Host volunteers* refer to individuals who volunteer to provide tourism services in their own community. In comparison, *guest volunteers* travel to a destination to volunteer (Smith et al 2010). There are three main settings that the hosts, those volunteering in tourism organizations within their own community, are involved in; attractions; destination service organizations; and events (Holmes & Smith 2009).

Since the 1990's the volunteer tourism industry has grown and developed in range and size. This has been partly due to for-profit operators entering the market, which has increased the complexity and commercialization of the volunteer tourism sector. This growth within the tourism industry has attracted attention from academia, and contributed to volunteer tourism as a research theme within the field of tourism (Holmes & Smith 2009). Research by Holmes & Smith (2009) shows that the dimensions in volunteer tourism are complex.

Host and guest volunteer tourism have been researched in isolation with little, to no, contributions or transfer of knowledge between the two fields. Guest volunteers have received

the most attention by the academic world, and when it comes to host volunteer tourism the research has mainly focused on volunteers involved in immediate event, and the role of the ongoing volunteer who is involved over a longer period of time has been overlooked (Holmes & Smith 2009).

### **1.3.2 Internet and tourism**

In tourism planning and marketing strategies, the communication channels serve as a link between the tourism industry and the target markets. Communication channels can for example be TV, radio, written channels (writing a letter), face-to-face channel (such as a meeting), a variety of mediated channel such as through a computer or telephone etc (Miller 2012). According to a communication model by Schiffman and Kanuk (1991) the tourism organization (*sender*) sends messages that impact a belief, a fact or an attitude to the target market (*receiver*) through communication channels. After receiving the message, the receiver responds to the sender with either positive or negative feedback. Exemplified for example by reserving a hotel, booking a tour, renting a car etc. By choosing effective channels for communication, tourism organizations can promote and position services and products in a way that may attract more tourists to the destination (Uysal, Fesenmaier 1994).

The tourism industry changes as the world develops, meaning that the changing external environment shapes the industry. The most prominent change in the external environment from a communication perspective is the growth of the Internet (Johnson 1999). If we think of tourism as a product, it is characterised by the existence of information only at the point of sale and it cannot be sampled before a purchase. Because of the information-based nature of this product the Internet plays an increasingly important role in promoting and distributing tourism, it offers global reach and multimodal capacity (Doolin, Burgess, Cooper 2002). The adoption and use of the Internet differs depending on the type of tourism organization in question. For-profit organizations have been quickly integrating this new technology, whilst non-profit organizations have been slower and are perceived to be lagging five years behind. Nonetheless, it has been acknowledged that the Internet can have a big impact on virtually every non-profit activity, such as raising awareness, creating an information resource, organizing people for activities and donations (Pinho, Macedo 2006).

## **1.4 Greeter Programs and the Global Greeter Network**

Destination service organizations offer services to visitors for free. Their aim is to enrich the visitor's stay at the destination (Holmes & Smith 2009). In a similar manner *Greeter programs* aspire to provide a personal and diverse image of the destination by matching visitors with local volunteers (called Greeters) for informal rendezvous "off the beaten path", for free. With a non-profit approach Greeter programs try to create a mutually enriching opportunity for cultural exchange for both the volunteer and the visitor. (Global Greeter Network website: [www.globalgreeternetwork.com](http://www.globalgreeternetwork.com) 13/2-2012).

The concept of Greeter programs was founded in 1992 in New York. The same year the first Greeter organization was created, Big Apple Greeter (BAG). As the number of organizations providing Greeter services grew around the world, a voluntary association of independent Greeter programs was created, The Global Greeter Network (GGN). Currently GGN consists of 32 organizations in 15 countries (Global Greeter Network website 13/2-2012).

A study by Espeso et al (2005) made on the New York City organization BAG indicates that the experience of Greeter Programs influence visitors image of the destination. The study also found that visitors who attended Greeter programs promote the destination as well as the Greeter program to friends and relatives when they have returned home (Espeso et al 2005). This indicates that one of the outcomes of the Greeter service is *word-of-mouth*; a form of marketing that is not only of great importance for an organization (in this case BAG) but also for the destination (in this case New York). Even if Greeter Programs main task is not to market the destination in question (there are often official for-profit organizations for that purpose) Espeso



et al (2005) still shows that this type of service, and the communication related to it, has an influence on the visitor's perceived image of the destination.

The core values of the GGN state that: *Programs aim for a lasting positive image of each destination.* (Global Greeter network website 26/4) This indicates that the organizations that offer Greeter programs may not market the destination in a traditional sense, but their communicative actions may still play a significant role in the representation of a *tourism destination image*.

## 1.5 The importance of the study at hand

Firstly this study is important because the phenomenon of Greeter Programs is a worldwide growing trend that has not yet been studied. Since the research about this phenomenon is so limited it present a need to explore it and enhance our knowledge and understanding.

Moreover research on host volunteer tourism has mainly focused on understanding volunteering in attractions; events; visitor information centres, volunteering in parks and conservation work. The main focus has been on volunteer's motivations, experiences and satisfaction as well as aspects of commitments, behaviours, profiles and management issues in volunteer organizations. Smith et al (2010) indicates that there is a gap in research on host volunteering when it comes to Destination Services (e.g. Meet-and-Greet services). Greeter Programs fit into the category Destination Services, since the programs offer a tourism service at the destination based on host volunteers. Also, Greeter Programs may be seen as a development/extension of the Meet-and-Greet program. Meet-and-Greet programs are "a service that sends people to meet and help a person or a group when they arrive at an airport" (Definition by Longman; Dictionary of Contemporary English). In comparison to Meet-and-Greet services, Greeter programs take the concept one step further by offering to share the destination through the eyes of a local, giving visitors a chance to be shown around the city by a local, for free. Therefore I note that the research on Greeter programs also lacks attention in the academic world. There is also a lack of research about online communication in the non-profit sector when it comes to Internet adaption and use (Pinho, Macedo 2006).

In short, there is a lot more to learn about the under-researched area. Of particular interest are host-volunteer organizations that offer Greeter services and their online communication. This study aims to explore this phenomenon through performing a case study of the 32 organizations within the Global Greeter Network, and by that make a contribution to a new born research topic in the intersection of tourism, communication, internet and social media.

## 1.6 The research purpose and questions of enquiry

The purpose of this study is to A) describe what the organizations within the Global Greeter Network (GGN) communicate on their websites; B) discover and describe how GGN organizations use social media; and C) explore how GGN's online communication represent the image of tourist destinations. . The following questions of enquiry will help achieve the purpose:

What do organizations within the Global Greeter Network communicate on their websites and how is social media used in their online communication?

How does the Global Greeter Networks online communication represent the image of tourist destinations?

## 2. Conceptual Framework

*In this chapter a theoretical framework will be presented. It contains concepts that together form a frame of reference for the study. The main concepts are: Tourism, Online communication and Tourist Destination Image. By providing a review of the literature available and related for this specific study, one is able to develop new insight that may help answer the research questions.*

### 2.1 Tourism

“Tourism” and “travel” are two terms that are used by separately or in unison to describe three concepts:

- a sector of the economy or an industry
- the movement of people
- a broad system of interacting relationships of people, their need to travel outside their communities and services that attempt to respond to these needs by supplying products (Page Conell 2006).

Accordingly, within the published literature on tourism, the terms “tourism” and “travel” are often intertwined and used in different contexts to mean similar things. To make the distinction between these terms clear one can say that all tourism involves some type of travel, but not all travel involves tourism (Page, Conell 2006).

When defining tourism, researchers often talk about a technical definition of tourism and a more abstract conceptualization of tourism. The *concept of tourism* refers to the broad framework that identifies tourism’s unique characteristics and distinguishes it from similar phenomenon. According to Page and Conell (2006) a researcher’s interpretation of the concept tourism is often influenced by their social science perspective (e.g. geographical, economical, sociological or political approach).

What services provided to tourists have in common is that almost all have to be delivered at the time and place where they are produced (Urry 2002). Therefore the social interaction between the tourist and the tourism service provider such as the waiter or tour guide etc is a part of the “product” being purchased. The quality of this social interaction affects the experience of the service. If the interaction is unsatisfactory then what is purchased is in fact a different service product than expected (Urry 2002).

#### **2.1.1 Tourism Volunteering**

As mentioned earlier, tourism volunteering is a wide and complex phenomenon. Tourism researcher Stephen Wearing defines the phenomenon as “The generic term volunteer tourism applies to those tourists who, for various reasons, volunteer in an organized way to undertake holidays that might involve aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments, or research into aspects of society or environments” (Wearing, 2001 p.1). However, it is proposed by Uriely, Reichel & Ron (2003) that the Wearing (2001) definition should be expanded to include those who are involved in volunteering beyond tourists, guests or visitors (i.e. hosts or members of the local community who engage in the tourism industry).

When members of the local community or hosts engage in tourism it is called *Host volunteer tourism*, this category of volunteer tourism might include individuals who run tourism or leisure attraction and provide tourism services in their own community. Reasons for engaging as a host volunteer are found to be; the need for self-occupation, a wish to contribute to the community, the wish to interact and meet other people, be exposed to other cultures and promoting intercultural understanding and peace. One of the arguments for proposing that host volunteers

should be included in the research area of volunteer tourism is that both guest and host volunteers build the phenomenon in which volunteer activity is associated with tourism experiences (Uriely, Reichel & Ron 2003).

### **2.1.2 Cultural Tourism**

One of the various types of tourism is Cultural Tourism. Cultural tourism is challenging to define because of the lack of consensus across the disciplines about what constitutes culture. Therefore there is no complete definition of cultural tourism that is recognized and accepted among a wide range of disciplines. Nonetheless, Reisinger (1994) describes cultural tourism in two ways, either from a narrow perspective: visiting museums, old buildings, galleries, concert halls and theatres: or broadly as “the travellers desire to immerse themselves in the culture of a region” and “avoiding the artificially created touristy environments in favour of more indigenous, man-made or natural aspects” (Reisinger 1994 p, 24). Reisinger (1994) claims that the purpose of travel for cultural tourists are: to meet local people, to seek authentic quality experiences, to seek individual involvement rather than mass tourism, to demand participative and experimental activities, to seek pleasure as well as education. According to Reisinger (1994) the key feature of cultural tourism is people-to-people contact. A way for the tourist to participate in new cultural experiences is to meet and interact with local people.

Since Greeter program services allow the visitor to interact with a local and experience something more than typically “touristy” environments one could say that Greeter programs and the organizations connected to them provide Cultural tourism. They aim to achieve pleasure as well as education and to be active and participative in the activity.

### **2.1.3 Tourism and the Internet**

The Internet, also known as the “information superhighway”, has since the 1990s changed the relationship between customers and suppliers. One might say the Internet provides interactive multimodal information, instant access and increased interactivity between customer and supplier. The biggest challenge for the tourism industry when the Internet arrived was to change its marketing strategies and go from traditional ways of advertising to adapt to the new Internet age and include interactivity and two-way information flows in their communication (Page, Conell 2006).

Tourism organizations might choose different strategies of marketing and creating awareness. One strategy is called “virtual face” where the organization uses a low-cost approach to communicate their products or services online (e.g. a website). Before people decide to buy or use a service they search for relevant information to base their decision on. Therefore it is of great importance for the tourism organization to know where people are searching for that information in order to attract visitors to a specific destination or customers to a specific tourism service. The Internet has gradually taken over the role as the number one information resource when it comes to tourism. This has led to that many tourism organizations have felt the need to create a “virtual face” to be present on the web and in the new environment to market products and services (Page, Conell 2006).

## **2.2 Online Communication**

As mentioned in the introduction, online communication concerns writing, reading and communicating through networked computers (Warschauer 2001). Online communication is a new phenomenon that evolved first in the late 20th century and is growing and developing at one of the fastest rates any communication has grown throughout human history. Warschauer (2001) argues that online communication represents the most important development in human communication since the printing press. Online communication is practiced in private and public settings such as in private life and working life.

### **2.2.1 Online communication in the non-profit sector**

The non-profit sector is characterized by organizations that may not distribute their profit among shareholders. A significant difference between the non-profit sector and the for-profit sector is their split missions. A non-profit organization's mission is to fulfil the social values of "doing good", whilst the for-profit organization's mission is to make money. Today, the boundary between non-profit and for-profit has become blurred due to for-profit organizations increased awareness about the role of values and social mission and the non-profit organizations (NPO's) have become more financially oriented because of the need of finance and donations (Pinho, Macedo 2006).

Researchers claim that NPO's have to face many challenges as they compete for scarce resources. Due to this challenging environment, NPO's have become more active and involved in networks with a wide range of stakeholders containing governments, individuals, profit organizations and similar NPO's (Pinho, Macedo 2006). Internet as a communication channel has many benefits, for both for-profit organizations and NPO's, for NPO's the Internet may be the key to increased visibility and a variety of fundraising strategies (Pinho, Macedo 2006).

The study made by Pinho & Macedo (2006), indicates that NPO's don't seem to maximize the advantages that the Internet gives when it comes to creating an effective fundraising strategy. "The power of an e-mail relationship is as significant to non-profit fundraising as it is to corporations. This avenue of communication is the most dynamic tool a fundraiser could use beyond the face-to-face relationship" (Pinho, Macedo 2006 p, 187).

At the same time as the Internet can be viewed as a effective tool for NPO's to spread, collect and search for information and to be interactive, there are also barriers discovered; lack of financial resources, lack of human expertise and the non-existence of computers. The use of Internet for the purpose of fundraising and finding volunteers are interpreted as less important than other activities which shows the need for NPO's to maximize the effect of Internet use due to these activities importance for the existence of the organization (Pinho, Macedo 2006).

Information technology affects how organizations are structured and how we interact and communicate with each other. The Internet may be seen as one of the most influential communication and technology developments in our modern time, and has changed the role of the customer from a passive to an active participant. For NPO's the most prominent benefits of the use of Internet is the chance to promote their social goals, gain wider visibility, enhance the public image, spread information, create awareness about their services and programs in order to attract funding sources and increasing opportunities for networking. One might think that NPO's should watch and learn from for-profits about how to use the Internet because they are claimed to be almost five years behind, but NPO's are actually experts when it comes to using the Internet to it's fullest capacity and to do as much as possible for as little cost as possible (Pinho, Macedo 2006).

### **2.2.2. Online social networking**

Online social networking (OSN) is described as "a platform that enables users to publicize personal information and to connect with others with similar interests " (Kasavana, Nusair Teodosic 2010. P, 68) and one of the main activities of Web 2.0 technologies. OSN is defined in many ways in the literature for instance by Balas (2006) who define it as: "A platform used as a mean for building online communities, where individuals from around the world can connect with each other for a variety of reasons"(Kasavana, Nusair Teodosic 2010 p, 69). Most OSN offers users to create a personal profile and construct a list of "friends" that they can traverse; additionally OSN can include photo and video sharing, personal messaging and commenting. There are hundreds of OSN's in the world, however it varies from country to country which one is the most popular (Kasavana, Nusair Teodosic 2010).

Since the tourism industry includes engaging and connecting visitors with services and goods in a personalized way, OSN's can be seen as an effective platform for this promotion. OSN's have

changed and steered the development of communications, technological and marketing landscape of the tourism industry. The attractiveness and impact of this phenomenon has increased explosively the last years as consumers turn to OSN's to share ideas, photos and suggestions. The information that the consumer post online about a product or a service is perceived as highly credible. For organizations within the tourism industry, OSN's can contribute to strengthen loyalty and satisfaction among visitors as well as it might lead to the posting of negative, unearned criticism, inaccurate information and negative opinions (Kasavana, Nusair Teodosic 2010). Tourism organizations should be aware of the impact of their content contributions in OSN's. Although the organization obviously prefer visitors to write positive things about their experience, the feedback often tend to be subjective and unpredictable.

When organizations immerse themselves into the conversations and postings online, there is a tendency that they want to control posts or take away comments that are unfavourable. This action is often not the best way to handle the situation as most OSN users tend to be sceptical and untrusting towards sites that lack critical and negative comments. Instead it may be more favourable for the tourism organization to view such comments as a possibility to resolve the negative situation, to give an explanation or to apologize. Kasavana (2010) claims that OSN's offers an opportunity for hospitality organizations to harvest a competitive advantage by analysing the submitted feedback, advices for improvement and how to enhance the guest experience (Kasavana, Nusair Teodosic 2010).

Tourism organization participation in OSN's is considered to be a cost-effective means for interaction and engagement with potential customers. Membership in an OSN make it possible to reach and involve visitors/potential visitors that otherwise wouldn't have been interested and to improve customer engagement and expand the knowledge of the brand (Kasavana, Nusair Teodosic 2010).

### **2.2.3 Electronic Word-of-mouth**

According to Litvin, Goldsmith and Pan (2005) the most important information source when consumers make a purchase decision is ranked to be interpersonal influence and word-of-mouth communication (WOM). WOM communication describes a process where consumers share opinions and information that steers buyers towards or away from specific services, brands and products (Litvin, Goldsmith, Pan 2005). In the tourism industry, where the products are intangible and difficult to evaluate before a purchase, this influence might be especially important. In the early years WOM was defined as strictly face-to-face communication, later the definition was broaden and came to include all informal communications meaning communications of interpersonal relationships. Litvin, Goldsmith & Pan (2005 p.3) defines WOM: "WOM is the communication between consumers about a product, service or a company in which the source are considered independent of commercial influence".

Recently, with the increased use of online services and online communication, online interpersonal influence have been included as a type of WOM, so called *electronic word-of-mouth* (eWOM). eWOM is defined as "all informal communications directed at consumers through Internet-based technology related to the usage or characteristics of particular goods and services, or their sellers" (Litvin, Goldsmith, Pan 2005. p, 9). This definition includes both communication between consumer and producer as well as between consumers themselves (Litvin, Goldsmith, Pan 2005).

There is a big difference between WOM that takes place face-to-face and eWOM, the main difference is the awareness about the other persons social status. When talking to someone face-to-face one might categorize the person from appearance and accent; this is somewhat more difficult in online communication. However, research has suggested if we are given enough time we might create fully formed impression of others based only on linguistic content written in electronic messages (Brown, Broderick, Lee 2007).

The *value* of online word-of-mouth communication, both regarding the influence on decision-making and impact on attitude formation, is considered to be a shared function between the communicator's credibility and the receiver's involvement in the communication (Brown, Broderick, Lee 2007).

Studies show that the effect of word-of-mouth is larger when it comes to experience-oriented services (e.g. trip, guide tour) than result-oriented services (e.g. car repair, dry cleaning). According to Mossberg & Nissen (2006) this is due to that experiences have a higher value and affect when it comes to people's perception of us. When we tell someone about an amazing trip, it often has a larger impression than if we tell about a successful car repair.

With eWOM, new challenges and possibilities for the tourism industry have occurred: 1; because of the low cost of access and information exchange, eWOM can appear in such large scale that it has the possibility to create new dynamics in the sector. 2; problems related to the communicators anonymity might appear since this might lead to out-of-context and misleading messages, that in turn can lead to a negative image (Litvin, Goldsmith, Pan 2005).

### **eWOM on websites**

The website is usually considered a passive means of communication, but can be used to create a "buzz" to encourage eWOM among visitors. A website is an asynchronous medium (i.e. one-to-many medium). For the tourism industry a website offers the possibility to not only share information but also to create a desire to learn more about a destination, and to visit it. On a website eWOM is usually created by offering web visitors access to the opinions of satisfied guests (i.e. testimonials). Therefore, in order to encourage eWOM guests should be invited to share their personal experiences about the destination on the website (Litvin, Goldsmith, Pan 2005).

### **eWOM in Virtual Communities**

Virtual communities are groups of individuals who share interests and interact online (Litvin, Goldsmith, Pan 2005). Private persons have created some of these communities and companies and organizations manage some. The virtual community is considered to be strong source of eWOM, since the interaction between consumer and producer and consumer to consumer are easy of use and low cost.

There are different reasons why people spread WOM. Positive and negative feelings (e.g. satisfaction, sadness and pleasure) associated with a purchase create a inner tension, which is discharged by WOM. Within tourism some people simply enjoy sharing their tourism experiences and see it as a part of the joy of travel. The key players in word-of-mouth are the so-called *opinion leaders* (Litvin, Goldsmith, Pan 2005).

Opinion leaders are persons that have a particular field of interest and are trusted by others (opinion seekers) to be able to give knowledgeable advice. Research shows that the originators of WOM can be friends and family (i.e. strong bands) however they can also be strangers, e.g. on the web (Litvin, Goldsmith, Pan 2005). The opinion leaders of the electronic age that share their opinions on websites and in virtual communities related to tourism and hospitality, seem to play an increasingly important role in the consumer decision making process (Litvin, Goldsmith, Pan 2005). In the study made by students from New York University; Big Apple Greeter Visitor survey, several types of opinion leaders were discovered among the Big Apple Greeter's visitors (Espeso et al 2005). This assumption was based on the comments provided in the survey as well as the respondents' professions (Espeso et al 2005).

## **2.3 Tourist Destination Image**

The term "tourist destination image" is used in a variety of contexts, which means it can be problematic to provide an exact definition of the term. These contexts can be for instance "stereotype" image of destinations, the destination image held by individuals or the destination

image communicated by tourism promoters (Jenkins 1999). In addition, a part of the dilemma of defining “tourist destination image” is the understanding of the term “image”. Image has been used in a large number of disciplines for instance in psychology and behavioural geography where the term is defined in slightly different ways. However, in marketing, “image” is related to consumer behaviour and the attributes underlying image. In this study a definition of “tourist destination image” need to include both the stereotyped images formed by groups and the image formed by individuals, therefore the following definition has been chosen:

“the expression of all objective knowledge, impressions, prejudice, imaginations, and emotional thoughts an individual or group might have of a particular place” (Jenkins 1999 p. 1)

The image of a tourist destination is important because it influences the level of satisfaction of the tourist experience and the decision making of potential tourists. Beerli & Martín (2004) present a set of factors that might influence the formation of a destination image. These factors divide into stimulus factors and personal factors; stimulus factors involve information obtained from different sources and personal factors involve characteristics of the individual. Since this study aims to understand how the GGN's online communication may represent the image of tourist destinations, the stimulus factors related to *information sources* are most relevant.

Information sources refer to the information that individuals are exposed to related to the destination, these sources influence the forming of the destination image by perceptions and evaluations. The forming of a destination image can be viewed as a continuum of information sources that act individually and together form one image in the individuals mind (Beerli, Martín 2004).

There are different classifications of information sources a) *overt induced*: advertising in mass media, information conveyed by relevant organizations in the destination or by tour operators. b) *covert induced*; use celebrity endorsement in the destinations promotion material or articles about the destination. c) *autonomous*; using TV-programs, mass-media broadcasting news or documentaries about the place, d) *organic*; involving friends and relatives to give information about a place based on their own experience, in other words word-of-mouth e) *a visit to the destination*, the end of the continuum and the image forming process (Beerli, Martín 2004). The image formed by induced, autonomous and organic information sources is the perceptions of a destination before experiencing it (i.e. secondary image). Primary image on the other hand, is formed after experiencing the destination in question (Beerli, Martín 2004). The result of the study shows that autonomous and organic sources are the most influential when forming a destination image.

The factors influencing the forming of a destination image are of relevance and of interest for this particular study when answering the research question about how GGN's online communication can represent the image of tourist destinations.

### **2.3.1 Representation**

Sociologist and cultural theorist Stuart Hall claims that language operates as a *representational system*. Language is built on signs and symbols that can be presented in different forms e.g. written text, sounds, musical notes, objects etc. These signs and symbols, no matter form presented in, stand for or represent our thoughts, feelings and ideas to other people. Namely, language is a medium through where thoughts, feelings and ideas are represented in a culture. Hence, the representation through language is a central part of creating meaning (Hall 1997).

We have, in our conscious, mental images of places and destinations even though we have never been there. So, even if a person hasn't been to France for example the person could still have a mental image of what is typically French (i.e. baguette, Eiffel Tower and inhabitants reluctance to speak English etc). The media often influences the mental images of destinations, however their representations tend to be stereotypical and could provide a simplified and skew image of reality (Hall 1997). Previous research found that people tend to rely on their expectations, beliefs or stereotypes rather than on the actual data about a destination. Cliché's and stereotypes related to

a destination are generally expected concepts about the attributes of the destination (Decrop 2006).

The information provided by the tourism sector in different forms (i.e. brochures, TV-commercials, ads, website content etc) can be viewed as symbolic markers of a place. Moreover, the representation of destinations may have an impact on the consumption of travel. One of the main subjects discussed considering the representation of destinations is the link between representation and reality (Xiang, Wöber, Fesenmaier 2008).

Representation within tourism is often about bringing out the best of the destination; the most salience, fascinating and original in order to attract visitors. The information provided at a destinations official tourism site for example is mainly written for visitors. However, this representation may still affect the local inhabitants because the representation on the website shape expectations and images about the destination by the web visitors which the local inhabitants have to live up to if the representation of the destination should seem credible (Moilanen, Rainisto 2009). For instance, if a destinations official tourism site solely highlight generally stereotypical traditions related to the destination, that representation might clash with the “real” destination in case the value of these traditions have changed or the inhabitants aren’t as dedicated to them anymore. A conclusion can then be made that these traditions are a stereotypical representation of the destination.



### 3. Scientific Research Methodologies

*The research in this study is curiosity-based (i.e. Treadwell 2011). It has a purpose of exploring **how** organizations within GGN communicate (write) about Greeter programs online and to discover how they use social media. The study further aims to explore **how** this type of online communication may represent the image of tourist destinations. The chosen research method is a case study approach with a non-positivistic position and a philosophical basis in hermeneutics. A textual analysis model is selected for analysing the empirical material. The following sections of this chapter are devoted to present the research methods used, and to provide reasoning for their selection.*

#### 3.1 Research approach and philosophy

As a researcher I take a hermeneutic stance. Moreover since the purpose of this study is to examine an empirical phenomenon within a specific context (the Greeter phenomenon within the context online communication) a case study method has been suitable. The benefit of using a case study in this specific study, is that the method allowed me, the researcher, to bring together relevant information with the purpose to summarize and present an informative story to the reader. Since Greeter programs are understudied the informative story presented will enhance knowledge about the phenomenon, and the analysis will help readers further understand the phenomenon (Treadwell 2011).

A critical issue of case studies is the question about *generalizability* of the result. Walsham (1995) claims that case study researchers within social sciences should view the result of their studies as “tendencies” rather than generalizations since the explanations can be valuable in past data but maybe not in future situations. For this study this means that the findings cannot represent all Greeter organizations online communication but can explain tendencies of this phenomenon that may be valuable in future research about Greeter programs and online communication.

In this study an interpretative approach has been used. The interpretative approach is suitable for this study since facts and values are intertwined and that the interpretation and values are part of scientific knowledge (Walsham 1995). Within case study research there is also a positivistic approach where, in contrast to the interpretative approach, facts and values are distinct and scientific knowledge only contain facts (Walsham 1995). The interpretation is a big part of this study since the communication online have been analysed and interpreted in relation to the conceptual framework in order to summarize and present an informative story where facts and values are intertwined. If a positivistic approach had been chosen instead, focus on only facts (i.e. what is written word by word) and not the values behind the facts (e.g. how can these words/images represent a value?). Therefore I have followed an interpretative approach rather than a positivistic one when it comes to collecting and analysing data (Hartman 2010).

When research questions in a study strive to answer questions like “how?” case study is a preferred research strategy (Walsham 1995). Mangers (1984) claims that it is of great value to examine the philosophical basis of different types of interpretative approaches, he identifies four main stances: phenomenology, ethnomethodology, the philosophy of language, and hermeneutics (Walsham 1995). Hermeneutics is the most suitable stance in this study since the material demands an interpretative approach that allows both written text and images etc to be analysed.

#### 3.2 Case selection and gathering empirical data

This study concerns the case of the Global Greeter Network (GGN). Primarily the GGN was chosen as a communication case study for investigation because it has not been studied before, it is representing the organizations in 15 countries that result in a broad cultural spectrum and Greeter programs are a new tourism phenomenon. The organization that started the GGN, and still is a member of it, was the New York based organization Big Apple Greeter (BAG), the first Greeter organization of this kind. Since BAG started both the tourism service Greeter programs and the GGN, the network has a credibility that could have been hard to find elsewhere.

As mentioned earlier the study aims to explore how GGN organizations communicate Greeter programs online (i.e. on websites and in social media). It also aims to understand how this type of communication may represent the image of tourist destinations. In order to achieve the purpose of the study then empirical data of qualitative nature has been collected from multiple sources (i.e. email interview, websites, social media channels, and secondary documents).

### 3.2.1 Social media

With the purpose to discover and describe how GGN organizations communicate in social media then data has been collected from GGN organizations Facebook (FB) pages. The data collected here contains 6 months of posts and comments on GGN organizations FB pages. The time period of collected FB material begins on 25/10/2011 and ends 25/04/2012. The data was collected as screenshots, in total 196.

#### *Purposeful sampling criteria*

GGN organizations FB pages were selected according to specific purposeful sampling criteria. For instance, in order to collect data that I, the researcher, was able to comprehend and analyse, then GGN FB pages in Nordic languages or English language were required. This resulted in FB pages from 9 GGN organisations. Then, in order to obtain an evenly spread representation of GGN organisations one greeter organisation per country was chosen. In this way, country bias was eliminated. During this process, in situations where a country had more than one GGN organisation with a FB page in English, selection was based on the number of fans that the pages had. The numbers of fans provided a suitable indication of how active the organisations were, which then made it a suitable choice. As a result 6 countries (e.g. Russia, Holland, France, Ireland, England, USA) and 6 organisations fitted the selection criteria. Data was then gathered from their FB pages by taking screenshots of posts and comments during a timeframe of 6 months. Thematic treatment of FB data generated 3 themes, which are described in detail in chapter 4.2 Key Findings. The purposeful sampled GGN organisations and their FB addresses are listed below:

Table 1: GGN organizations Facebook pages

GGN organization	Facebook address	Fans/Likes	Nr of posts	Nr of comments
Big Apple Greeter	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/bigapplegreeter">https://www.facebook.com/bigapplegreeter</a>	1631	79	28
Dublin Greeters	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/dublingreeters">https://www.facebook.com/dublingreeters</a>	31	20	1
Kent Greeters	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/kentgreeters">https://www.facebook.com/kentgreeters</a>	14	13	1
Moscow Greeters	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/moscowgreeter">https://www.facebook.com/moscowgreeter</a>	0	26	10
Parisien d'un jour (Paris Greeters)	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/Parisgreeter">https://www.facebook.com/Parisgreeter</a>	1016	74	111
The Hague Greeters	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/pages/The-Hague-Greeters/135515803217712">https://www.facebook.com/pages/The-Hague-Greeters/135515803217712</a>	126	26	0

### 3.2.2 Organisational websites

To describe how GGN organizations communicate online then the websites hosted by 31 GGN organizations' were explored. At the time of data collection, the website belonging to Brisbane Greeters was unavailable. Therefore data from 31 out of the 32 websites was collected. The country, organization, its website address are shown in Table 2 overleaf. During this process the text on each website were gathered in separate documents. After collecting the data from each organizations website, 6 main themes were found that represented the type of communication

provided at the GGN websites. The data from each organizations website were then divided into 6 empirical themes. The data within each theme were then gathered into 6 documents representing the thematic findings from the GGN organizations websites. The chapter Case Description & Findings presents the most relevant findings within this study, regarding websites. This data was collected during three days: 4/04/2012 – 6/04/2012. Thematic treatment of website data generated 6 themes.

Table 2: GGN organizations websites

	<b>Country</b>	<b>Organization name</b>	<b>Website address</b>	<b>Facebook Link FB</b>	
1	Argentina	Buenos Aires Cicerones	<a href="http://cicerones.org.ar">http://cicerones.org.ar</a>	x	x
2	Australia	Adelaide Greeters	<a href="http://www.cityofadelaide.com.au/information/adelaide-greeters/">http://www.cityofadelaide.com.au/information/adelaide-greeters/</a>		
3	Australia	Melbourne Greeters	<a href="http://www.thatsmelbourne.com.au/Getting-around-the-city/Visitor-assistance/Pages/Melbourne-Greeter-Service.aspx">http://www.thatsmelbourne.com.au/Getting-around-the-city/Visitor-assistance/Pages/Melbourne-Greeter-Service.aspx</a>		
4	Australia	Brisbane Greeters	<a href="http://www.brisbanegreeters.com.au/">http://www.brisbanegreeters.com.au/</a>		
5	Belgium	Brussels Greeters	<a href="http://brusselgreeters.be">http://brusselgreeters.be</a>	x	
6	Canada	Toronto Greeters	<a href="http://www.toronto.ca/tapto/">http://www.toronto.ca/tapto/</a>		
7	Côte d'Ivoire	Greeters Côte d'Ivoire	<a href="http://www.greeterscotedivoire.org/">http://www.greeterscotedivoire.org/</a>	x	
8	France	Bourgogne Greeters	<a href="http://www.bourgogne-greeters.fr">http://www.bourgogne-greeters.fr</a>	x	
9	France	Only Lyon City Greeter	<a href="http://www.lyoncitygreeter.com">http://www.lyoncitygreeter.com</a>		
10	France	Greeters Marseille Provence	<a href="http://www.marseilleprovencegreeters.com">http://www.marseilleprovencegreeters.com</a>	x	x
11	France	Greeters Mulhouse Alsace	<a href="http://www.greeters-mulhouse.com">http://www.greeters-mulhouse.com</a>		
12	France	Nantes Greeters	<a href="http://www.greeters-nantes.com">http://www.greeters-nantes.com</a>	x	
13	France	Paris Boulogne Greeters	<a href="http://www.boulognegreeters.fr">http://www.boulognegreeters.fr</a>		
14	France	Parisien d'un jour (Paris Greeters)	<a href="http://www.parisiendunjour.fr">http://www.parisiendunjour.fr</a>	x	x
15	France	Pas de Calais Greeters	<a href="http://www.greeters62.com">http://www.greeters62.com</a>	x	
16	France	Tam-Albi Greeters	<a href="http://www.greeters-tam-albi.com">http://www.greeters-tam-albi.com</a>		
17	Germany	Berlin Greeters	<a href="http://www.berlin-greeter.org">http://www.berlin-greeter.org</a>	x	x
18	Germany	Munich Greeters	<a href="http://munich-greeter.de">http://munich-greeter.de</a>	x	x
19	Greece	Athens Greeters	<a href="http://www.athensgreeters.gr">http://www.athensgreeters.gr</a>	x	x
20	Ireland	Dublin Greeters	<a href="http://www.dublingleeters.com">http://www.dublingleeters.com</a>	x	x
21	Republic of Serbia	Belgrade Greeters	<a href="http://www.belgradegreeters.rs">http://www.belgradegreeters.rs</a>	x	x
22	Republic of Serbia	Kragujevac Greeters	<a href="http://kragujevacgreeters.com">http://kragujevacgreeters.com</a>		
23	Republic of Serbia	Subotica Greeters	<a href="http://www.greeters.visitsubotica.rs/en">http://www.greeters.visitsubotica.rs/en</a>		
24	Russia	Moscow Greeters	<a href="http://www.moscowgreeter.ru">http://www.moscowgreeter.ru</a>	x	x
25	Spain	Bilbao Greeters	<a href="http://en.bilbaogreeters.com">http://en.bilbaogreeters.com</a>	x	x
26	The Netherlands	The Hague Greeters	<a href="http://www.denhaaggreeters.nl">http://www.denhaaggreeters.nl</a>	x	
27	United Kingdom	Kent Greeters	<a href="http://www.visitkent.co.uk/greeters">http://www.visitkent.co.uk/greeters</a>	x	x
28	United Kingdom	London Greeters	<a href="http://www.londongreeters.org">http://www.londongreeters.org</a>	x	
29	United Kingdom	Visit Brighton Greeters	<a href="http://www.visitbrighton.com/greeters">http://www.visitbrighton.com/greeters</a>		
30	USA	Big Apple Greeter	<a href="http://www.bigapplegreeter.org">http://www.bigapplegreeter.org</a>	x	x
31	USA	Chicago Greeter	<a href="http://chicagogreeter.com">http://chicagogreeter.com</a>	x	x
32	USA	Houston Greeters	<a href="http://www.houstongreeters.org">http://www.houstongreeters.org</a>	x	x

### **3.2.3 Semi structured e-mail interview**

One of the prominent organizations within GGN, Big Apple Greeter (BAG), was contacted by e-mail about the possibility of doing a semi structured e-mail interview. The organization approved and a semi-structured interview containing ten questions was conducted by e-mail with the Director of Programs and Volunteers at Big Apple Greeter. The e-mail interview was conducted between 4/4 2012 – 18/4 2012.

By performing this semi-structured e-mail interview some inside aspects of the communication by Greeter organizations, that can be difficult to discover as an outsider, was found. The purpose

of this interview was to get a insight of how a Greeter organization view their communication and to improve the understanding about **how** they communicate online but also **why** they communicate in a certain way. This interview helps to set an example of how a Greeter organization might reflect on their communication.

#### **3.2.4 Secondary material/Other data**

Other information has been collected from multiple sources including secondary documents such as a study called *Big Apple Greeter Visitor Survey* by Espeso et al (2005). Students from New York University Tisch Center for Hospitality, Tourism and Sport Management, conducted a study called *Big Apple Greeter Visitor Survey* in 2005. The study's purpose was to reach an understanding about the psychological impacts of the services that Big Apple Greeter provides. The purpose was also to prove if the organization (BAG) was accomplishing their mission of enhancing the image of New York City through the unique experience formed by the interaction between visitors and volunteers (Espeso et al 2005).

To answer the research question about how GGN's online communication can represent the image of tourist destinations, the *Big Apple Greeter Visitor Survey* was used in combination with the findings from websites and social media. The survey was used as an example to better understand how GGN organizations can accomplished their mission of enhancing the image of a destination. The secondary material was analysed and the result of the study was interpreted in relation to the purpose of this study. The *Big Apple Greeter Visitor Survey* was found and collected on BAG's website.

### **3.3 Analysis**

Textual analysis is a methodology – a data gathering process and analyse method- that is a way for researchers to collect data about how people make sense of the world (McKee 2003). A Textual Analysis can be used in both qualitative and quantitative studies. In this specific study, a qualitative approach has been used for the purpose to reach a deeper understanding about the online communication of Greeter programs.

Everywhere in our everyday life we come in contact with texts that we have to relate to and more or less interact with, whether it is about read and reply to emails, cook according to a recipe or listening to radio it is based on our interaction with a text. When analysing texts, we can reach a deeper understanding about how society and people work. However it is important to remember that a text is only a representation of something and not a reflection of the reality (Ekström, Larsson 2010). This means that the writer can choose what to describe and what not to describe which means that the text is affected by the writer's preconception and the purpose of the text. A text creates meaning from how it is represented, and the reader interprets the content according to his/hers own frame of reference (Ekström, Larsson 2010).

The analysis in this study was inspired by a Textual Analysis model (e.g. Ekström, Larsson 2010), which is a useful qualitative research method because the model allows you to analyse case findings in a way that fits the collected material. This can of course be problematic since the method can be perceived as being too influenced by the researchers interpretations. However when taking a hermeneutic approach the textual analysis model is highly suited. As a result the analysis has contained of four textual analysis categories: *Content*, *Intertextuality*, *Interaction* and *Relation*. Below the categories will be presented one by one.

#### **3.3.1 Content**

When using this model, the first step of the analysis involved looking for themes in the text as well as different functions of the text and how these were related. On a basic textual level, phrases, words and expressions were found that reflected the perspective of the text. On a higher level the writer's stance to something was explored, which is called modality (Ekström, Larsson 2010).

### **3.3.2 Intertextuality**

A text is always based on previous events and is written in relation to another text, one can imagine the text as an intertextual chain (Jørgensen Winther, Philips 2000) In this second part of the textual analysis model, the text was approached from a intertextuality perspective with the purpose to identify different *genres* and explore relationships to other texts. The difference between genres is characterized by the specific order of arranging the text, for instance a text in a diary and a text in a technical manual are arranged in different ways which makes it easier for the reader to understand what type of text he/she is reading and how to approach it. However this order is not constant, but could change as the society change (Ekström, Larsson 2010). For instance when the micro blogg Twitter made its entrance on the Internet, a new way of writing with only a certain amount of characters was developed. In this specific study this development of writing e.g. within social media, is of relevance since the material analysed contain of different genres (website communication and communication within social media) that you, as a researcher, have to treat in different ways. For instance, an informative text written on a website might seem to lack details enough to understand the whole message. The same text written within a social media channel might seem too thorough and too long for that specific genre. Therefore it is important for the researcher to be able to rule out different genres and their characteristics in order to make a suitable analysis. ‘

When bringing up the issue of different genres, it is useful to mention the characteristics of social media and how these characteristics can affect this study. Social media is a type of media that is active and interchangeable. Therefore the issue with data collected from this type of media, is that if someone wants to make an exact same study, the data might be changed e.g. comments might have been taken away and new ones could have appeared. To avoid this problem, the data in this study collected from Facebook have been screen-printed and collected in folders.

### **3.3.3 Interaction**

Interaction is a concept about the interplay between speaker and listener, mostly in speech conversations but interaction also exists in online communities, for instance Facebook. However there are differences between speech interaction and interaction online. In a face-to-face conversation facial expressions and the situation are factors that affect the conversation. Online, these aspects are not as influential since we can't see each other's reactions nor can tell what type of situation or environment the other person is in. However the language online has also developed to be more like face-to-face conversations with the help of symbols, for instance *smilies* (Ekström, Larsson 2010).

Another difference between written interaction and speech interaction is that it is harder, in written interaction, to tell who is the sender and who is the receiver. A written text often has a certain target group, a collective of people, which the text is directed at. It can be hard to reach the whole collective since everyone has his or her own preconceptions and ways of reading a text (Ekström, Larsson 2010). However the Internet makes it easier to reach a wider range of people because of the nonexistence of time and space, even though text written online also has different target groups the ease of reaching these groups (and groups related to these groups) has increased. That information/communication is available to a big variety of people at the same time and that the border between sender and receiver is blurred, especially within social media, can be considered both good and bad aspects of the Internet (Ekström, Larsson 2010). In this study the blurred border of sender and receiver within social media (i.e. who creates content, and what meaning do the message have depending on the sender?) is an interesting aspect and allows concept like electronic Word-of-mouth to be discovered.

In this step of the analysis, social media was explored in order to be able to describe how the GGN organizations interact online.

### **3.3.4 Relation**

In this phase of the analysis questions were asked such as; is the purpose of the text to inform or is the purpose that the reader should act or react in some way? Are questions, statements or encouragements used in the text? In this part of the analysis, the content on websites and in social media were explored to describe the writer's expressed attitude towards stereotypes and representation of the destination. How is the destination represented online by organizations within the GGN?

### **3.4 Summary – Analysis**

In line with the purpose of this study a hermeneutic stance and an interpretative approach has been used. The empirical material has been collected and analysed through a Textual Analysis model. The four textual analysis categories have been used for the purpose to reach a deeper understanding about the online communication of Greeter programs and how that communication can represent the image of tourist destinations. The analysis of the material doesn't have to contain these four categories since the purpose of a textual analysis is to come to an understanding about what characterises the text, although it is useful to have the criteria's as a starting point (Ekström, Larsson 2010). By using the Textual Analysis Model for collecting and analysing the material in relation to the conceptual framework, the addressed research questions could be answered.

## 4. Case Description

*In this chapter, an introduction to the Global Greeter Network is presented. The introduction includes a presentation of the core values, an overview of the online communication related to the GGN organizations and GGN website requirements. The second part of this chapter presents the key empirical findings from the collated empirical data. First, the key findings from the GGN organizations websites are presented. Then, the findings from the GGN organizations most used social media channel, Facebook, are presented.*

### 4.1 The Global Greeter Network

The Global Greeter Network (GGN) contains of 32 organizational members (see table on page 19) in 15 countries and is a voluntary association of independent Greeter programs. The organizational members of the GGN are all non-profit organizations. A Greeter program is a tourism service run by non-profit organizations based in cities/regions. This free-of-charge service is based on host volunteers (called Greeters) who, on request, accompany one to six visitors on a two-to-four hour informal tour at the destination. Greeter programs aim to generate a cultural exchange between the host volunteer (the Greeter) and the visitor to enhance cross-cultural understanding. The purpose of Greeter programs is also to provide an alternative way of exploring a destination through a more local, authentic, and personal perspective. To meet a Greeter the visitor needs to fill in a request form on the specific organizations website.

The organizations within the GGN have agreed to share core values:

#### 4.1.1 Core values of Global Greeter Network

- 1) Greeters are volunteers, a friendly face for those visiting a city/destination
- 2) Greeters welcome individuals and may serve small groups of up to six people
- 3) Meeting a Greeter is free of charge
- 4) Visitors are welcomed without regard to race, colour, creed, gender, age, sexual orientation, marital status or disability.
- 5) Greeter programs support sustainable tourism. Programs respects natural and man-made environments, it brings both cultural and economical enrichment to the local communities. Programs aim for a lasting positive image of each destination.
- 6) Greeter programs create a mutually enriching opportunity for cultural exchange; create links between ordinary people in creating a better world.

#### 4.1.2 Historical background

The Greeter concept was created in 1992 with the New York City non-profit organization Big Apple Greeter. Big Apple Greeter's slogan is "*Share New York Through the Eyes of a New Yorker*". The founder of the organization, Lynn Brooks, realized her city New York was suffering from a image problem: nearly everyone she spoke to had a wish to visit New York City but thought that the city was too expensive, dangerous and overwhelming. "Lynn wanted the world to know New York City as she did: a great big small town with diverse neighbourhoods, mom-and-pop stores, fun places to dine, and friendly residents who go out of their way to help an out-of-towner feel welcome. (BAG website)" Today Big Apple Greeter is considered one of the most establish Greeter organizations of it's kind.

### **4.1.3 Communication of the Global Greeter Network**

A common aspect of all organizations within the GGN is that a main communication channel for contact with “customers” is the Internet. It is through the Internet that the visitors book their Greet by submitting a request on the organizations websites. The GGN have a website which contains a members list of links to each 32 members websites within the network. Of the 32 organizations 28 have individual websites. Three of them (the Australian organizations in Melbourne and Adelaide as well as Toronto, Canada) have websites that are a part of the official tourist site of the destination. The majority of the GGN organizations are active in some type of social media: 21 of 32 organizations have an account on Facebook (FB).

#### **Global Greeter Networks Website requirements**

Due to the process of branding the Global Greeter Network and the Greeter concept, GGN are advising all members to meet the website requirements set up for the network. There are five website requirements: Website address, Global Greeter network logo, Languages, Core values and Global Greeter network members list (Website Requirements PDF).

##### *1. Website address*

The requirements considering the website address says that it should be as simple as possible and contain: the name of the city/region, the term “greeters” and the extension of the domain should preferably be the country (e.g. in Sweden: .se) or impossible .org or .net.

##### *2. Global Greeter network logo*

This requirement brings up issues like the placement of the logo on the website, the size of the logo, the page the logo should link to (<http://www.globalgreeternetwork.info>) and the background of the logo for maximum visibility.

##### *3. Languages*

The requirement is that all members must have an English version of their website and you can add as many foreign language versions as required.

##### *4. Core values*

A copy of the core values should be included on the website.

##### *5. Global Greeter network members list*

GGN dissuade all members to maintain a list of Greeter destinations on the website since this would mean that they have to update it frequently which is considered to be a painful task. They should instead link to the GGN members’ list, which is maintained centrally.

If all members follow these principles, GGN believe it will lead to increased visibility of the brand, which will enforce the communication of all the organizations within the network. They mention the advantages of following these principles as: increase international media reach, decrease marketing costs, offer opportunities to expand the global network, economies of scale as production and distribution and bring more visitors to the Greeters (Greeter website requirements PDF).



## 4.2 Key Findings

*In this section, the key findings from the data collected from websites and from the social network site Facebook will be presented.*

When analysing the website material, six themes were discovered:

WT1: About the organization

WT2: Meet Greeters

WT3: Becoming a Greeter

WT4: Donating/Supporting

WT5: Interaction/Feedback

WT6: Creating awareness

In the themed analysis of the collected Facebook material from 6 of the GGN organizations Facebook pages during a time frame of six months, three main themes were found:

FbT1: Destination Marketing

FbT2: The organization and GGN

FbT3: Interaction/Feedback

## 4.3 Websites

*In this sub section key findings from the collated material of the GGN organizational websites is presented.*

### **4.3.1 WT1: About the Organization**

The collected data indicates that some of the GGN organizations write online about Greeter programs as a way to decrease stereotypes associated with the destination. For example, Munich Greeters claims

- We want to show that Munich is a friendly and open minded city with much more then Oktoberfest and Hofbräuhaus.

Figure 4.1: Munich Greeter Website (04/04/2012 10.50)

New York based Greeter organization Big Apple Greeter, the first Greeter program, was created because the founder thought New York City had an image problem: many people had a desire to visit the city but thought it was too dangerous and overwhelming. In the e-mail interview, Big Apple Greeter mentions this image problem as a misconception that they would like to prove wrong.

*“Also, in all of our marketing and fundraising materials, we talk about New York City as a “friendly, inviting and manageable destination.” There are still many misconceptions that New Yorkers are rude and too busy to pay attention to others, and journalists and visitors are always so amazed that it is not true! With television shows like “Law & Order” - every show starts with a dead body - and many crime movies set in New York City, many visitors think the city is dangerous“. (BAG e-mail interview)*

It was found that some of the organizations call attention to the increased pride that volunteers would feel for their city. This indicates that Greeter programs might be benefiting, not only for the visitors and the destination image, but also for the wellbeing and comfort of the inhabitants. For instance, Houston Greeters claims that through their mission statement: “Houston Greeters

strive to enrich visitors' experiences by connecting them one-on-one with volunteer Greeters who share their knowledge of, and passion for, the Houston region (Houston Greeters website)" they will also: Enhance Houston's Image, Contribute to cross-cultural understanding, **Increase the pride Houstonians feel for the region**, Preserve Houston's Cultural assets (Houston Greeters website).

### *GGN Members list*

According to the Greeter Website requirements, GGN advise all members *not* to maintain a list of Greeter programs on their website but instead link to GGN website. This recommendation is due to the updates that need to be done as soon as a Greeter program is started or closed down. Despite this advise, the material collected from the websites shows many GGN organizations actually do have a list of Greeter programs. Moreover none of them seem to be correct according to the official GGN members list. Often members are missing or members that are no longer active. For instance on their website Berlin Greeters mention other German Greeter programs such as Hamburg, Manheim and Heidelberg. Those programs are not on the GGN members list but do exist online with the GGN logo. This could be confusing for a person visiting the websites, as there can occur hesitations about organizations seriousness and authenticity within the GGN. This might also indicate a lack of organization and seriousness.

### *Language*

Members of GGN are obliged to have an English version of their website. With exception to Athens Greeters who only offer their website in English it was found that the majority of the organizations offer their website in two languages (English and the native language). Most of the native English speaking organizations communicate online in only one language, English. However Big Apple Greeter inform that they offer 8 different language options, (French, Spanish, Italian, German, Portuguese, Chinese, Japanese, Hong Kong Chinese) but at the time of data collection only the European languages actually work.

#### **4.3.2 WT2: Meet Greeters**

It was found that to meet a Greeter, visitors must fill in a Greeter request form online. The organizations collect different information, but all ask for contact details, number of people that would like to attend the Greet, date of visit and language skills. The request is a request and not a booking because it depends on the Greeters availability on a specific date. The majority of GGN organizations ask to provide information about personal interests (often pre choices), since the Greet can be of a specific theme. If the visitor is interested in for example architecture or second-hand shopping, a Greeter with the same interest can show them to their favourite places related to that interest. To pick a certain interest can therefore be one of the reasons that visitor and Greeter are matched, the strongest reasons for matching Greeters and visitors are however language and the requested date.

Another key finding is that GGN organizations present their Greeters in different ways. Two main ways that was found in the material was 1) a personal approach and 2) an anonymous approach. The larger organizations such as Big Apple Greeters, Paris Greeters and London Greeters use an anonymous approach and do not present any of their Greeters personally. On the contrary, some of the smaller organizations use a personal approach and present their Greeters by name, picture, personal interests (proposed themes for a Greet) and the languages the Greeters speak. Mulhouse Greeters in France is an example, where one can select a certain theme (e.g. Hiking, and then see the Greeters available that are interested in that theme) and on the personal Greeter profile there is an option to request a specific person for a Greet. In addition registration forms seems to be provided in English by all organization, only Paris Boulogne Greeters have the option to choose between two languages, French and English.

It was also found that Chicago Greeters and Brighton Greeter offer a concept called Instagreet. Instagreet is for visitors that haven't had the opportunity to request a Greeter in advance (i.e. a more instant way to meet a Greeter). All organizations within the GGN also found to have an

access policy. This means that they work towards informing travellers with disabilities of some accessible travel options within the destination as well as organizing Greets for these travellers for them to get the most out of their stay.

#### **4.3.3 WT3: Becoming a Greeter**

*How GGN organizations attract volunteers*

The collected material indicates how GGN try to attract volunteers online. One way to do this appears to be to highlight the benefits of being a Greeter. For example on Belgrade Greeters website:

##### ***Benefits of Becoming a Greeter***

**Greeters have the opportunity to show pride in Belgrade and impact its economy. If you speak a foreign language, you'll have the opportunity to use it. Plus, making new friends from all over the world is exciting! While you're teaching your new friends about Belgrade, you'll learn about *their* culture, and why they love their city or country.**

Figure 4.2: Belgrade Greeters Website (5/04/2012 14.00)

Another way to attract volunteers seem to involve to present testimonials based on previous or present volunteers experiences of being a Greeter for that specific organization. When asking Big Apple Greeters in the e-mail interview how they reach their volunteers they answered: “We reach potential volunteers mostly by word-of-mouth, but also by listings on volunteer websites (for example: idealist.org or nycservice.org) and through organizations that find volunteer jobs for people (for example: Volunteer Referral Center)” (E-mail interview Big Apple Greeter).

Tarn-Albi Greeters have an approach where it might be interpreted as they are searching for only male Greeters. If the purpose of Greeter programs is to communicate the “real” destination, would it not be required that the group of volunteers should represent the inhabitants of the destination i.e. both men and women?

**The Greeter is a volunteer with Tarn heart, who wants to share his passion, his enthusiasm for "his" territory, "his" city or "his" village, "his" country or "his" little unusual place.**

Figure 4.3: Tarn Albi Greeters Website (4/04/2012 9.30)

In the core values of the GGN, there are guidelines about visitors: “visitors are welcome without regard to race, colour, creed, gender, age, sexual orientation, marital status or disability” (GGN core values). However the core values do not include anything similar for volunteers. Nonetheless, the collated material shows that many of the organizations have transformed this specific core value into something that regards volunteers by simply replacing the word “visitors” to “volunteers”. The example below is from Athens Greeters website.

**Athens Greeters welcomes all volunteers without regard to race, colour, creed, gender, age, sexual orientation, marital status or disability.**

Figure 4.4: Athens Greeters Website (5/04/2012 13.50)

##### ***What's expected of a Greeter***

From the collated website material, it appears that most organizations within GGN follow similar principles regarding their expectations of a Greeter. For instance they communicate that Greeters should know the city well and be proud of it, have an e-mail address or mobile phone number, preferable speak a foreign language as well as to like to meet new people.

However a small number of the GGN organisations communicate differently than the majority about their expectations of a Greeter. For instance, Athens Greeters demand that their Greeters wear a uniform and a badge when meeting visitors. Athens Greeters also writes on their website about the difference between a Greeter and a professional tour guide: “A Greeter becomes a new friend and shows you around the way a friend would”. This friendly atmosphere that they want to achieve during the Greet might not be achieved if the Greeter wears a uniform since uniforms could be perceived as something a professional guide would wear, not a friend. Another example of when members of the GGN communicate differently than the majority is Buenos Aires Greeters who, against GGN core values and rules, expects visitors to pay for the Greeters expenses during a Greet (e.g. restaurants, museum entry fees etc).

#### **4.3.4 WT4: Donating/supporting**

Another key finding is that some members of the GGN keep quite a rather low profile regarding donations and financial support based on their website communication. By a low profile I mean that they don't seem to encourage giving donations on the website and/or don't mention financial donations at all and/or make it seem complicated to donate. For instance, Moscow Greeters have a page they call “Support” on their website where they do not mention financial support but encourage people to mention their organization in blogs, forums and sites simply to spread the organizations name in order to increase the awareness of it in other communication channels. The information provided on Kent Greeters website is also an example of when donating money may seem complicated. Kent Greeters mention that they are a non-profit organization that relies on public and private funding assistance, and that the visitor should feel free to donate money (Kent Greeters website). There appears to be no information however about how you can donate which might make the reader sceptical or less likely to actually make a donation.

In the collated website material it was also found that some GGN organizations provide more descriptive information about how to donate money: these organizations use Paypal (an e-commerce company that offers services for safe payment online). The American organizations like Houston Greeters and Big Apple Greeters dedicate a page on their website to their donors and sponsors, by providing information about their name, both private persons and cooperation's, and how much they have donated to the organization.

The material also shows that Bilbao Greeters is the GGN organization that stands out in their way to communicate about financial donations. They inform that if you donate they will, in return, send you a small gift (a painting made by a local artist who has donated artwork to Bilbao Greeters). They have as well created a Bilbao Greeters Friend Establishment that contains of a selection of local hotels, restaurants, bars, cafés and businesses. These “friends” of the organizations collaborates with Bilbao Greeters and contribute to keep Bilbao Greeters services alive. The Friend Establishment have special offers for visitors who have used the services of Bilbao Greeters, the visitor gets a card after the Greet that they may use in the selected local businesses to get special offers.

#### **4.3.5 WT5: Interaction/Feedback**

The collated data indicates that the organizations within the GGN have different approach regarding interaction and feedback. As mentioned before, 21 of the GGN organizations use social media however six of the organizations do not link to these interactive channels on their websites which might lead to that less people discover them.

Three of the organizations seem to have adapted to the new media environment by including a blog on their website. The French organizations Paris Greeters and Pas de Calais Greeters both have blogs in French which makes the amount of readers restricted to French speaking visitors. Munich Greeters have a broader audience in mind since their blog is written in English, the blog contains personal stories from Greeters about Greets they have taken visitors on, recommendation for restaurants and events etc. These blogs have in common that readers can leave comments, which makes it into an interactive communication channel.

Within WT5 theme, the collated data shows that the most common used feedback tool for these organizations are feedback forms that visitor may fill in after their Greet. This feedback is then, on some of the websites, presented as testimonials. However, the testimonials are controlled by the organization (i.e. parts of the feedback sent to the organization are selected and published on the website as testimonials). This can indicate that feedback is more for the organization itself to improve its services rather than to promote the service to others. One can compare to feedback or comments given in social media, when the information is for everyone to read. Therefore the feedback could also work as electronic word-of-mouth.

#### **4.3.6 WT6: Creating awareness**

It was found that GGN organizations communicate about activities on their websites that might be interpreted as marketing strategies or ways to create awareness. For instance Big Apple Greeter have a Greeter concept called *Greeter for a Day* where business, government and community leaders as well as celebrities are invited to “fill a Greeters shoes for a few hours” (Big Apple Greeters website). According to Big Apple Greeters themselves they took this initiative to raise their profile in New York City and to increase donations. When the organization evaluates the benefits from this event, they highlight one of the benefits as increased publicity about the organization rather than financial donations. It was mentioned by BAG in the e-mail interview that “Greeter for a Day started as a way for celebrities, politicians and company heads to get involved with Big Apple Greeter, hoping that they would fall in love with us and make a big cash donation. That has never happened, but we have gotten some good publicity. Dominic Chianese (“Uncle Junior” on The Sopranos television show) is a friend of the public relations firm that works with us (the friend is also on our Board of Directors). When Dominic was Greeter for a Day, we were able to get CNN to cover it. Mostly we get local politicians who write about it in their newsletters. The politicians are good for us because it can lead to government funding“.

Another example of when organizations initiate activities that might lead to increased attention/raise their profile is Belgrade Greeters. They inform on their website about the possibility to be a part of a reality show. The show is supposed to show Belgrade from a tourist perspective. The reality show about Belgrade Greeters is in association with the Tourist organization of Belgrade, a production company and a TV station. On the website they communicate that they are inviting people that are interested in taking a tour with a Belgrade Greeter which will be filmed. Belgrade Greeters highlight the benefits of participating as helping promoting Belgrade and become famous in Belgrade and Serbia. The participants will get two nights for free at a Belgrade hotel.

### **4.4 Social Media - Facebook (FB)**

*In this sub-section of the study the usage of the social network Facebook (FB) have been explored in 6 of the 21 GGN organizations with a FB account. The organizations chosen are: Big Apple Greeters, Paris Greeters, Moscow Greeters, Dublin Greeters, Hague Greeters and Kent Greeters. In this chapter three main themes discovered in the collated material will be presented.*

#### **4.4.1 FbT1: Destination Marketing**

Within the theme Destination Marketing the focus is on how and if FB is used as a channel to market the tourist destination. The collated FB-material indicates that the organizations post information on their FB pages that may be interpreted as a form of destination marketing. All six organizations have in common that they post pictures of places at the destination and informative text about them; the difference lies in what response they get in comments and how many posts of this kind they publish.

Paris Greeters is the organization that appears the most active in a destination marketing perspective. This is based on the number of published posts about the destination, published photos taken at the destination and comments generated by those posts and photos. The places in Paris that the organization chooses to highlight by posts and photos are often hidden places and streets/street art that tourists might miss rather than typically “touristy” attractions. Paris

Greeters is also the organization that appears to receive the most comments when communicating something about the destination.

Big Apple Greeter (BAG) publish so called Neighbourhood profiles on their website which they post information about on Facebook and attach links to. Neighbourhood profiles are according to BAG “a fun and user-friendly way for both visitors and native New Yorkers to experience the City’s diverse neighbourhoods.” An example of this is shown I figure 4.5 below.

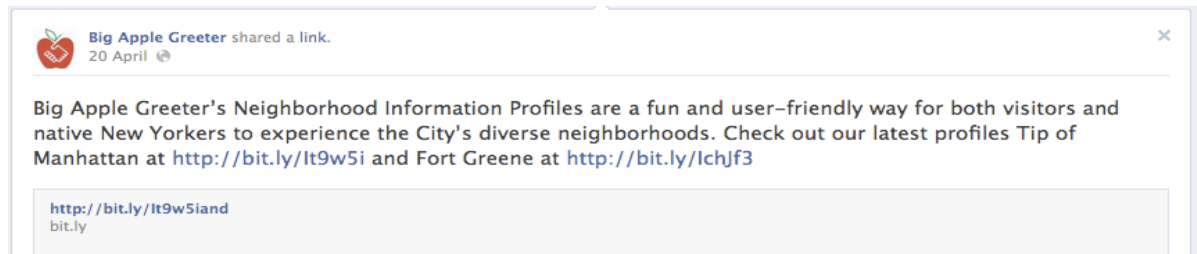


Figure 4.5: Big Apple Greeter FB (27/04/2012 15.30)

In the email interview, Big Apple Greeters answer to the question: Please describe some of the challenges and difficulties that Big Apple Greeter experience when trying to market New York City as a destination? was:

*“Big Apple Greeter does not market New York City as a destination. That is the job of NYC & Company, the city’s convention and visitors’ bureau and tourism marketing organization. Big Apple Greeter is an independent, not-for-profit organization. If we included destination marketing in our activities, we would be “stepping on the toes” of our important partner.”* (BAG e-mail interview)

Here, one might discover a clash between what Big Apple Greeter does and says. It seems like there is a thin line between marketing a destination and marketing a service that in turn markets the destination. For instance, the Neighbourhood profiles could be perceived as a way of marketing the tourist destination New York City.

In another question about BAG’s part in marketing the destination that was asked in the e-mail interview was; *How do you work to promote New York City differently than other organizations?* Answer from BAG: *While we do not directly promote New York City, our tag line is “See New York City through the eyes of a New Yorker,” promoting the fact that greeters are “real” New Yorkers. Journalists like to write about Big Apple Greeter because we can provide a real New York City personality for them to use in a story about the city. The fact that a greeter visit is free and given to visitors from the heart is very important. Also, in all of our marketing and fundraising materials, we talk about New York City as a “friendly, inviting and manageable destination.”* (BAG e-mail interview)

It was found that, although Big Apple Greeter do not intend to market the destination NYC, they still communicate values about the destination online (e.g. when they talk about NYC as a “friendly, inviting and manageable destination”), which may influence the image of the tourist destination NYC. Moreover the purpose of Espeso et al’s study (2005) was to look at the psychological impacts of the Greeter service and the result suggests that the Big Apple Greeters service can positively influence the perceptions of the destination New York City (Espeso et al 2005). So, now it is known that GGN services can influence the perception of a destination but what part does the GGN online communication play in communicating the image of tourist destinations?

The findings from the gathered FB material indicate that two of the GGN organizations (Moscow Greeters and Dublin Greeters) highlight cultural traditions typical for the destination more often than the other organizations. For instance Moscow Greeters publish posts about Easter traditions in Russia as well as traditional Russian clothing and traditional Russian food. Dublin Greeters post about St.Patrick’s Day, which represent a typical Irish tradition (see figure 4.6).

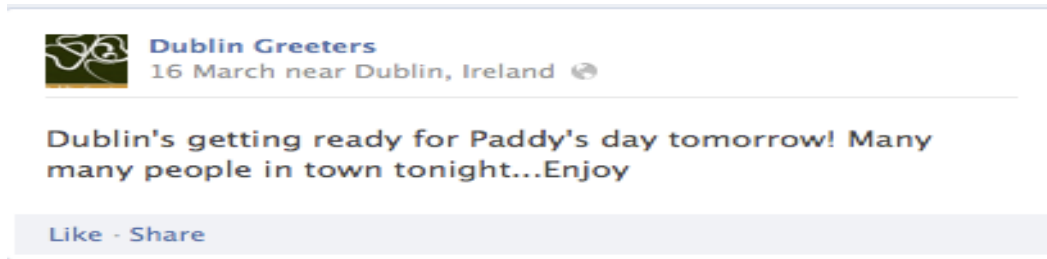


Figure 4.6: Dublin Greeters FB (27/04/2012 13:55)

These organizations communication about traditions and typical cultural characteristics can be a positive aspect as the knowledge about these traditions might be low among their future visitors. However it may also lead to stereotypical representations of the destination and its inhabitants. For instance, Moscow Greeters post an ad on their wall that comes from another FB page: “Do you speak Russian? - Da, Vodka!”. The ad shows two pictures, one of a group of smart looking businessmen drinking vodka and a text saying “drinking vodka in commercials” and another picture below showing a man lying on the street with a text saying “drinking vodka in real life”. The FB page they took the ad from (“Do you speak Russian? - Da, Vodka!”) is representing a stereotypical Russia where everyone drinks Vodka (see figure 4.7). The ad is posted with a sentence written by Moscow Greeters saying: “After Purty (After Election)”. By this post Moscow Greeters might be perceived as representing Russia in a stereotypical way, which may contradict their mission of showing the “real”, “genuine” Moscow.

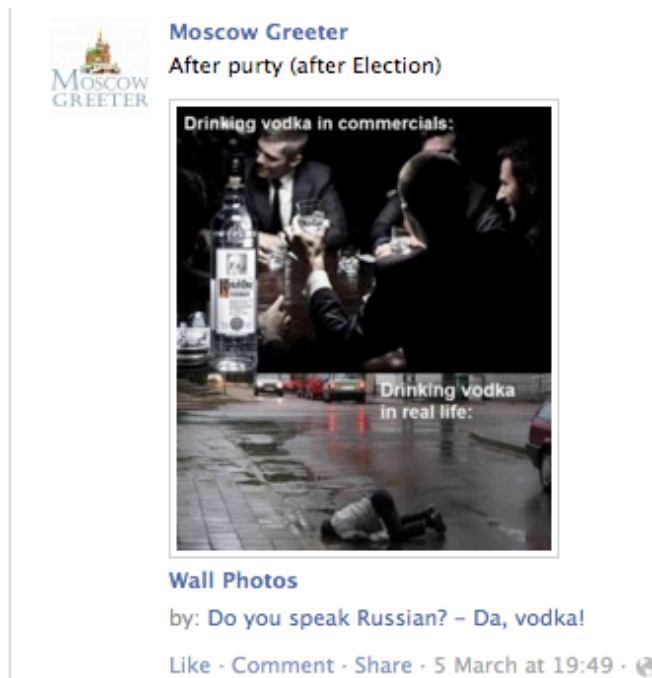


Figure 4.7: Moscow Greeters FB (27/04/2012 14:15)

#### **4.4.2 FbT2: About the organization and GGN**

It was also found that the six organizations post on their FB page when the organization has been mentioned in other media and link to that specific piece. This specific article below (Figure 4.8) is an example of Dublin Greeters linking to an article.



Figure 4.8: Dublin Greeters FB (27/04/2012 09.00)

Another way for the GGN organizations to communicate about the organization on FB seems to be posting pictures from Greets, accompanied by a descriptive text to give examples of how a Greet might be like. On Big Apple Greeters FB page it is also common for visitors to post pictures from their Greet accompanied with a text saying Thank-you directed to the Greeter.

It was also found that Dublin Greeters use FB as a channel to recruit volunteers by posting that they are searching for volunteers to their newly started organization. FB as an interactive, cost-free communication channel could be seen as an effective way to get in touch with potential volunteers. The majority of Kent Greeters posts on their FB page seem to be about them searching for volunteers to the Games Time Kent Greeter (a volunteer project to welcome visitors to Kent during the time for the Olympic games in London). The Games Time Kent Greeter is an extension from Kent Greeters. In this way, Kent Greeters have the chance to promote the organization in a different context than usually and therefore they might attract people that otherwise wouldn't have an interest to get involved in Greeter organizations or wouldn't know they existed.

When the six organizations communicate about the Global Greeter Network on FB it is mostly about new Greeter organizations started in the same country. However there are some challenges with mentioning new GGN members online since that might not be accurate according to the GGN members list. For instance the 2<sup>nd</sup> of April, Paris Greeters post about a new Greeter organization although that organization was not at the time of data collection or current time presented as a member of the GGN at the GGN website. This might be confusing for potential visitors. One can also find post by other organizations within the GGN on the FB pages of two of the six chosen organizations, then the posts are connected to a link to their website. Moreover in the collated material there appears to be a pattern where the smaller organizations in GGN posting on the bigger organizations FB wall's, but not the opposite. This might indicate that the smaller organization, with less fans on their FB page, do this as a strategy to create awareness by connecting themselves to the bigger organizations virtual audience.

#### Events and link to website

The collated data also shows that out of the six organizations, Big Apple Greeter use FB to most to communicate about events related to the organization. This can also indicate that they may have more events going on than other GGN organizations. For example Big Apple Greeter communicate about single events such as a 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Recognition Breakfast as well as more recurrent event about a New York Councilman who was involved in their concept Greeter for a Day and show support towards an Community Recreation event.

Accordingly the most common way for the organizations to communicate on FB about their services seems to be to link to their websites. For instance The Hague Greeters link to their website in five out of 24 posts on their FB page. However it was found that they do not link to their FB page on their website, and neither do six other.



#### 4.4.3 FbT3: Feedback/Interaction

The collated data indicates that through FB there are two major types of interaction between the GGN organizations and their users. The first type of interaction takes place before the Greet (e.g. questions from users about how to do if they would like to meet a Greeter and comments about that they have booked a Greeter). The second type of interaction is feedback given after the Greet. The collated material shows that this interaction is most common on the Big Apple Greeter FB page.

##### *Before/Leading up to the Greet*

Before and leading up to the Greet people post questions about how to meet a Greeter. In this situation the organizations reply to comments, describe how to meet a Greeter by referring to the registration form and link to their website. There are also comments where people, future visitors, write about that they have managed to get a Greeter, in a positive and exited tone. As shown in figure 4.9 the GGN organization reply in a way that indicates they are interested in the visitor's thoughts about the Greeter experience.



Figure 4.9: Big Apple Greeter FB (28/04/2012 14.00)

Additionally in shown in figure 4.10 it was found that some GGN organizations might experience shortcoming in their communication when it comes to replying to requests to book a Greeter. This post might as well, in addition to the above example of happy comments about having a Greeter booked, indicate that it might be difficult to actually get a Greeter. This might, in turn, make it more attractive for people since it may indicate that Greeter services are very popular. Considering that Big Apple Greeters reply to this negative feedback it indicates that, instead of ignoring the problem or deleting the post, they deal with it and take the opportunity to apologize and explain publicly.



**Martin Thurner**

I applied several month ago but nobody contacted me! I also gave them a donation via paypal. Tomrrow I will start my trip to NY, without big apple greeter. :--(

Like · Comment · 6 April at 00:21



**Big Apple Greeter** We are sorry that we did not have a Greeter for you. We tried until the last possible moment to find one. When we couldn't, we left a message April 6th on your hotel phone, apologizing. Hopefully, you will return to NYC and try us again.

9 April at 22:27 · Like

Write a comment...

Figure 4.10: Big Apple Greeter FB (28/04/2012 14.00)

### *After the Greet*

The data shows that visitors that have experienced Greeter programs are likely to give feedback and recommendations in social media channels. In this type of feedback the name of the Greeter is often mentioned. In organizations where the Greeters are presented by name on the website this could be an effective way for visitors to discover certain recommended Greeters that might increase the attraction to the service. None of the organizations whose Facebook usage has been analysed have this personal approach of presenting their Greeters, which means the visitor cannot request a specific Greeter. However, for organizations that do present their Greeters by name on their website, feedback like this could be rewarding since the Greeters (the volunteers) personality seems to be an important part of the Greeter concept.

The feedback received at the organizations FB pages seems to be characterized by positive comments about the service rather than constructive feedback that could help the organization to develop the service. In many of the post that qualify as feedback people write that they would recommend the service to other people travelling to the destination. An example of this is shown in figure 4.11 below.



**Áine Masterson**

Spent a wonderful sunny Saturday morning strolling through Greenwich Village and then along the Hi Line with Mr Joe Lovalvo. He is such a charming, warm & friendly man...a complete asset to the Big Apple Greeter programme for sure! Thanks again for facilitating our request...will be sure to recommend BAG to friends and family who are visiting the Big Apple!!

Like · Comment · 5 April at 22:17

Figure 4.11: Big Apple Greeter FB (28/04/2012 14.15)

### *How does the GGN encourage interaction on FB?*

It was found that the most common ways for the GGN organizations to encourage/generate interaction was to post questions or/and pictures. The organization with the most active visitors seems to be Paris Greeter due to the amount of comments made by other people. What they post seem to generate more comments than the other organizations posts. The fact that Paris Greeter is the only organization among the six GGN FB profiles analysed that write every post in both English and French might be a reason. It seems like people are more likely to answer/comment in the language that the question/statement is written in, this means that if one

write a question/statement in two languages there are also two language options to answer/comment in i.e. a broader spectra of people might interact than if only one language option was available. This more cross-cultural communication approach might broaden their social media audience. It might as well increase the electronic word-of-mouth about the organization.

The collated material indicates that the organizations are willing to assist visitors with more than only aspects related to their service. There are examples of when web visitors ask the organization questions about other aspect related to the destination e.g. about accommodation or restaurant suggestions. Some of the organizations show that they support smaller, local organizations that have a similar approach as them, in order to show the “real” destination. Paris Greeters for instance, reply to a woman’s question about accommodation in Paris by providing suggestions for areas to stay in and a link to a organization that provide rooms and flats for rent for visitors that are looking to stay with Parisians. Advising this organization in favour of big tourist hotels supports the key concept of Greeter programs: discover the destination as a local. Another finding that indicates that Greeter programs highlight less official ways of exploring a destination is when they link to an independent journalists blog about restaurants in Paris (see figure 4.12).



Figure 4.12: Paris Greeter FB (28/04/12 15.30)

Moscow Greeters have a slightly different approach when it comes to seeking interaction with their FB visitors. For instance they ask questions of more serious matter (e.g. who will win the election?) a question related to the Russian election for president. These posts do not appear to generate any interaction/response from their audience; it might be because of the sensitivity of the subject politics or the lack of knowledge about the destination in relation to the subject, in this case Russian politics (see figure 4.13).

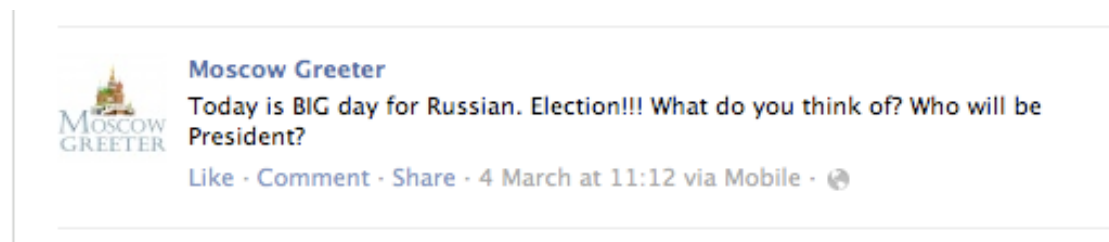


Figure 4.13: Moscow Greeter FB (28/04/12 16.30)

## 5. Concluding Discussion

*In this chapter, in order to help achieve the purpose of this study, a discussion is made in relation to how Greeter Programs are written about online by organizations within the Global Greeter Network (GGN) and how these organizations interact and communicate in social media. In particular the discussion links to previous research to help us further understand how GGN organizations use social media as a way of communicating and how GGN's online communication represent the image of a tourist destination.*

Due to the information-based nature of the product tourism, Internet plays an increasingly important role in promoting and distributing tourism services as it offers global reach and multimodal capacity (Doolin, Burgess, Cooper 2002). The key findings from this study support what Doolin et al (2002) drew attention towards. The Internet, and more specifically websites/social media, seems to offer the GGN the possibility to reach current and potential consumers. For instance, organizations within the GGN use the Internet as their main communication channel, communicating about their organization as well as accessing customers. Moreover, findings from the collated website material indicates that GGN organizations communicate about Greeter programs most frequently as an attempt to offer a more authentic way to experience a destination, and as a way to experience the destination through the eyes of a local.

It was also found that a few of the GGN members communicate through their website how Greeter programs may actually affect the image of a destination; that Greeter programs can act as a way to decrease stereotypes and increase the pride of the inhabitants. As Espeso et al (2005) write in their report on the "Big Apple Greeter visitor survey", Greeter programs may change the perception of a destination to the better. Espeso et al arrived to that conclusion by measuring visitor's perceptions of the destination before and after the Greeter experience. Although this study's purpose is not to explore the visitors perceptions, Espeso et al's findings might be influential in relation to GGN members' online communication with potential donors (e.g. governments, for the purpose of building trust and motives for donations).

For instance Pinho & Macedo (2006) claimed that NPO's (non-profit organizations) don't seem to maximize the advantages that the Internet offers when it comes to creating an effective fundraising strategy. As such the findings from the study at hand support what Pinho & Macedo drew attention towards. The members of the GGN keeps a low profile regarding donations and financial support based on their website communication, i.e. they don't encourage giving donations on the website and/or don't mention financial donations at all and/or make it seem complicated to donate. One might say they don't take advantage of the possibilities that Internet offers when it comes to building relationships with donors. The US-based organizations; Big Apple Greeter, Houston Greeter and Chicago Greeter, have a strategy of publishing donors names, both persons and companies, that might be effective since the donors may want the society to know they are involved with charity for the sake of their image.

### 5.1 Using social media as a way of communicating

The empirical findings indicate that the GGN organizations use social media to communicate with guests (current and potential), volunteers (current and potential) and other GGN members. It also indicates that the social media communication, from the organizations side, is mostly about the destination. This can be exemplified by the use of posing photos of places and information about events occurring in the destination. In most cases this representation of the destination seems to support the mission of GGN – to let visitors see the "real", authentic destination from a local's perspective based on what they highlight (e.g. photos of not so touristy places and giving advice to experience the destination in an alternative way from the beaten tourist path). However a few of the organizations seem to communicate about the destination through social media in a way that could be perceived as stereotypical, and that might maintain reigning stereotypes of the destination.

The empirical material also shows that social media is used to highlight when the organization has been given attention in other media channels such as newspapers, TV-shows or magazines. The main way of communicating about Greeter services on FB is for web visitors to post about greets that they have been to, and for the organization to link to their main website. As such the findings tell us about how and when GGN organizations interact with the users on FB (and how and when the users interact with the organization). The main time for interaction is before/leading up to a Greet and after a Greet (feedback). Moreover the findings also tell us that only 2 out of 6 organizations use FB to search for volunteers. Additionally, the findings illustrated how 21 of the 32 GGN organizations (65.63 %) are active in social media. This might be an indication that the GGN should provide some social network requirements and tips on top of the website requirements available on the GGN website.

Page & Conell (2006) claim that when the Internet arrived the biggest challenge for the tourism industry was to change its marketing strategies and go from traditional ways of advertising (one-way communication) to two-way information flows and interactivity. Uysal & Fesenmaier (1994) also noted that by choosing effective communication channels organizations can market and position tourism services in a way that may attract more tourists to the destination. The communication channel "Online social networks" (OSN) have changed and steered the development of communication and marketing landscape of the tourism industry. The impact of social networks has increased explosively the last years as consumers turn to these networks to share ideas, photos and suggestions of services and destinations. As the information that the consumer post online about a product or a service is perceived as highly credible, social networks can be perceived as a communication channel of great importance for GGN organizations and the marketing and positioning of their services.

## **5.2 Communicating online and representing the image of the tourist**

### **destination**

Beerli & Martín's (2004) research states that there are certain sources of information that influence the formation of a destination image. Results of the study shows that two of these information sources are more influential than the others; *autonomous* and *organic* sources. *Autonomous sources* are TV-programs, mass-media broadcasting news or documentaries about the destination and *organic sources* are basically word-of-mouth.

The GGN organization Belgrade Greeters serve as an example of when GGN organizations use autonomous information sources that might ad to the formation of the image of the destination, in this case Belgrade. On their website they promote a reality show about Belgrade Greeters in association with the Tourist organization of Belgrade, a production company and a TV station. The thought is to invite visitors to attend a Greet that will be filmed and broadcasted on TV and/or online to promote Belgrade. This might be a way to communicate in a different channel about the organization and the destination, a TV program will probably attract a different audience than the Belgrade Greeters website and might be a part of the formation of a destination image of Belgrade.

Beerli & Martín (2004) claims that organic information sources (e.g. word-of-mouth) is considered to be the most truthful and believable communication channel and a factor that significantly influences the mental image of a destination. The GGN organizations generate word-of-mouth when they post testimonials on their websites, according to Litvin et al (2005) testimonials are a proven way of encouraging eWOM. Based on Beerli & Martín 's (2004) research WOM can influence the image of a destination, in other words: the GGN organizations can by publishing testimonials on their websites contribute to the forming of the destination image.

In particular this case study's findings indicates that despite BAG's statement that their job is not to market the destination, the GGN organizations activity on FB might be interpreted as a representation of the destination. In the theme FbT1 one can view an example of BAG's

communication about the destination NYC and that they are aware of that they talk about NYC as a “friendly, inviting and manageable destination”, but still don’t see that expressions like these may contribute to represent NYC. According to Hall (1997) the representation through language is a central part of creating meaning; therefore statements like these could be a part of creating perceptions of NYC. Xiang et al (2008) suggests that the information provided by the tourism sector in different forms (brochures, TV-commercials, ads, website content etc) can be viewed as symbolic markers of a place and a representation of a destination. So, even though the communication on FB is not categorized as marketing of the destination, the organizations still communicate something about the destination by being active in OSN’s (Online Social Networking), which can serve as a part of the representation of the destination online.

What the findings also indicated is that GGN might have a more influential role in the online communication of destination image than they might believe. Although some of the organizations communicate about their destination in a way that supports their mission and the foundation of Cultural Tourism of letting visitors see the “real” destination better than others (i.e. highlighting less touristy/unknown places etc). Some of the organizations, through their social media communication, might be representing the destination in a way that can be perceived as stereotypical. An example is Russian Greeter who relates Russia and the alcohol Vodka in a way that might be interpreted as a stereotypical image of Russia as a tourist destination (see FbT1). These stereotypical representations might come across as contradicting since the mission of a GGN organization is to show the destination in a more authentic light.

Decrop (2006) claims that cliché’s and stereotypes related to a destination are generally expected concepts about a place. One of the main subjects discussed considering the representation of destinations is the link between representation and reality (Xiang, Wöber, Fesenmaier 2008). The information provided at a destinations official tourism site for example is mainly written for visitors. However, this representation may still affect the local inhabitants because the representation on the website shape expectations and images about the destination by the web visitors which the local inhabitants have to live up to if the representation of the destination should seem credible (Moilanen, Rainisto 2009). The GGN organizations challenge is to, as well as showing the visitor an authentic and local image of the destination through the Greeter service also communicate this image online in order to provide a strong link between representation and reality.

As noted by Guttentag (2009 s. 545) “an important part of what comes out from voluntourism is social capital: it breaks down stereotypes. For the traveller it can help you retool and rethink your life philosophy, and the local people end up with a different image of foreigners”. This statement regards primarily guest volunteer tourism. However since the research within volunteer tourism (e.g. Holmes & Smith 2009) and the intertwined relationship between guest and host volunteer tourism has gained more attention, this could come to regard host volunteer tourism as well. This means that, yes, volunteer tourism may break down stereotypes but could also reinforce them.

The case findings also shows that GGN organizations use FB to communicate when they have been mentioned in other channels such as newspapers, TV-shows and magazines and link to that article/clip etc. They use social media to communicate about their service by posting pictures and short stories about recent Greets on their FB page (this regards post from web visitors as well as from the organization), however the most common way for the organization to inform about their services is to link to their own website.

### **5.2.1 Interaction online**

Users of GGN FB pages appear to write mainly positive comments. Their comments, both positive and negative, can be considered as eWOM. Litvin et al (2005) suggests there are two main reasons why people spread WOM, positive and negative feelings and within tourism some people see sharing of experiences as a part of the joy of travelling. On the FB pages, the positive comments are dominant. Users seem to be satisfied with the service and are not reluctant to communicate that satisfaction with other people online. In the study “Big Apple Greeter visitor

survey” several types of opinion leaders were discovered among the Big Apple Greeter’s visitors (Espeso et al 2005). According to Litvin et al (2005) opinion leaders are key players in word-of-mouth. Their research shows that opinion leaders can be both people with strong bonds (e.g. family and friends) as well as strangers. This indicates that people that uses Greeter services might not only spread the word about their experiences of Greeter programs and the destination to their family and friends but also to strangers (e.g. through comments on social network sites). Since Greeter services are intangible and difficult to evaluate before a purchase, the influence of opinion leaders will be especially important (Litvin, Goldsmith, Pan 2005).

When looking at how the GGN organizations interact with their web visitors, most of the findings come from the FB page with most fans, Big Apple Greeter. On their page one can see clearly that Ossianson & Hast (2008) statement that the new media environment has changed the role of the consumer from passive to active is accurate since the web visitors clearly are very active sharing their opinions. On Big Apple Greeters FB page web visitors often post pictures of themselves and the Greeter during or after Greets, recommends Greeters and write their opinion in general on the concept of Greeter services. Big Apple Greeter interacts with web visitors by always answering/commenting on web visitors’ questions and statements. The FB page that generated most comments were Paris Greeters who had 111 comments compared to BAG who had 28 comments during the same period of time. The difference between Paris Greeters and BAG’s FB pages were that Paris Greeters wrote in two languages, French and English. This indicates that by using two languages, more people will be able to discover the organization and take part of the online “conversations” on the page.

When organizations get involved in the conversations and postings online, they have a tendency to want to control posts or take away comments that are unfavourable (Kasavana 2010). This does not seem to be the case on BAG’s FB page where they, when negative comments are posted, take the opportunity to make up for the issue in some way e.g. apologizing or give an explanation. Kasavana (2010) claims it is more favourable for the tourism organization to view negative comments in social media channels as a possibility to resolve the situation. Moreover, according to Kasavana (2010) OSN (Online Social Networks) offers tourism organizations a competitive advantage by giving the opportunity to analyse the submitted negative feedback and turn it in to tips about how to enhance the guest experience, especially when it comes to services. So, by interacting with web visitors, BAG may achieve greater knowledge of what their visitors think of their services. Therefore it might be easier for them to know what to do to enhance the quality of the service, and thereby increase the amount of customers.

Pinho and Macedo (2006) found that the use of the Internet for the purpose of finding volunteers is interpreted as less important than other activities by NPO’s. This study concurs with what Pinho and Macedo (2006) drew attention towards, only two out of six GGN organizations (Dublin Greeters and Kent Greeters) use FB to search for volunteers.

### **5.3 Conclusion**

This study has indicated that GGN might have a more influential role in the online communication of destination image than they might believe. In most cases the representation of the destination in GGN’s online communication seems to support the mission of the GGN – to let visitors see the “real”, authentic destination from a local’s perspective based on what they highlight (e.g. photos of not so touristy places and giving advice to experience the destination in an alternative way from the beaten tourist path). However, a few of the organizations seem to communicate about the destination in a way which could be perceived as a stereotypical representation, and that might maintain reigning stereotypes of the destination.

Previous research claims that many of the people attracted to/those that have experienced Greeter programs can be categorized as opinion leaders. The opinion leaders of the electronic age that share their opinions on websites and in Online Social Networks related to tourism and hospitality, seem to play an increasingly important role in the consumers decision-making

process. Therefore the electronic word-of-mouth may serve as one of the GGN's most important ways of creating awareness about their services as well as the destination.

As research has focused on the link between representation and reality, it seems important that what is communicated about the destination is also true and not a façade. This is one of the reasons why eWOM is such a significant source of information, the person that spread word-of-mouth have experienced a service/used a product and afterwards share this experience/usage with other people around them. WOM is considered to be the most truthful and believable communication channel and a factor that significantly influences the mental image of a destination (Beerli, Martín 2004).

## **5.4 Practical Implications**

Although this study has improved our conceptual understanding of online communication there are also some practical implications for organizations and managers working with host volunteer tourism, online communication and destination marketing. Listed below are the key implications for practitioners to consider:

- What the organization communicates online about the destination may be a part of the overall image of the destination. Therefore, strive to represent the destination in a truthful way and avoid reinforcing stereotypes just because they are easily accessed.
- Continue with the frequent interaction with web visitors to encourage eWOM. Because some of the people attracted to Greeter services seems to be categorized as opinion leaders, their shared opinions online might be one of the most important ways of creating awareness of the organization as well as of the destination, both through interaction in social networks and by publishing testimonials on websites.
- Use online social networks to search for volunteers. It is a cost-free communication channel through which you can reach many people and create awareness about the organization.
- Put a bigger focus on building relationships with current and future donors online. Have a page specifically to present donors, and mention these donors in all social networks you are active in. This will help increase others will to donate.
- Make it easier to donate money on the website through more informative text and using services as PayPal, this could enhance the donations from “regular people”.
- The GGN should have something similar as the website requirements but for online social networks. However, as the website requirements mainly include what the organizations are allowed to do and not allowed to do, the “social network requirements” could with benefit include tips of success, creative ideas of how to get more web visitors and why NPO's could benefit from being a member of these networks, (in addition to the basics of social networks of course).
- The findings indicate that if an organization writes in more than one language in online social networks they also tend to get more comments. Therefore, writing in the native language as well as English could increase the number of web visitors and their comments.

## **5.5 Limitations and suggestions for future studies**

Even though this study has provided further understanding about host volunteer tourism and online communication there are some limitations that need to be highlighted (why?). One of these limitations is language. Because of my limited language skills only data in English or Nordic languages could be analysed. There are no Nordic organizations in GGN so the data had to be in English for me, the researcher, to be able to analyse it. Another limitation is that the Internet is a



dynamic and constant evolving media. Therefore the data gathered might for example have been taken away in the future or the page may not exist any more.

Future research could use this study as a background if one wanted to do interviews with visitors from various countries that have experienced Greeter services, to find out how they perceive the destination different after the Greeter experience than before. Next step would be to link this result to how it affects the destination image.

One could also expand this study by analysing all the FB pages of the GGN organizations and during a longer timeframe to get a richer material. You could also compare how an organization with the purpose to market the destination communicates and how other tourism organizations communicate.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1 – E-mail interview with Big Apple Greeter

1. Could you please describe Big Apple Greeter's target group(s)?
2. How do you reach each of your target groups? Please explain about your main ways of doing this.
3. What ways of communicating with your target group(s) have you experienced most successful and why?
4. Please describe some of the challenges and difficulties you experience when trying to market Big Apple Greeter?
5. Please describe some of the challenges and difficulties that Big Apple Greeter experience when trying to market New York City as a destination?
6. What *benefits* do you experience from the face-to-face communication between the Greeter and the visitor?
7. What *disadvantages* do you experience from the face-to-face communication between the Greeter and the visitor?
8. Regarding your "Greeter for the Day" program: How do you choose the celebrities that have been involved (e.g. Mike Woods and Ines Rosales)? Are there special criteria?
9. Could you explain why or why not word-of-mouth is important for the Big Apple Greeter organization?
10. How do you work to promote New York City differently than other organizations?

### Appendix 2 – Summary of *Big Apple Greeter Visitor Survey* by Espeso et al (2005).

Students from New York University did in 2005 a visitor survey on Big Apple Greeter. The purpose was to reach an understanding about the psychological impacts of the services that Big Apple Greeter provides. The purpose was also to prove if the organization was accomplishing their mission of enhancing the image of New York City through the unique experience formed by the interaction between visitors and volunteers (Espeso et al 2005). The survey consisted of three parts: image and perceptions of New York City; the Big Apple Greeter experience; and the actions taken by visitors after their visit to New York City. The first question aimed to measure the visitor's perception about New York before and after the Big Apple Greeter experience. The respondents were asked to rate their experience in four different criteria; confidence to use New York public transportation; confidence to visit local, less well-known neighbourhoods; the friendliness of New Yorkers, and the perceived safety of New York City. The general result of this part of the survey showed that prior to their Big Apple Greeter experience the respondents had less confidence in both using public transport and visit local, less well-known neighbourhoods than after using Big Apple Greeter's services. Prior to their Big Apple Greeter experience, 82 % of the respondents rated the friendliness of New Yorkers as good, fair or poor. After experiencing Big Apple Greeter's services 76 % of the respondents rated the friendliness of new Yorkers as very good or excellent. Before their Big Apple Greeter experience 49 % of the

respondents rated the safety of New York as fair or poor, after their Big Apple Greeter experience 97 % of the respondents rated the safety of New York as good, very good or excellent (Espeso et al 2005).

The second question was about the Big Apple Greeter experience divided into four different variables; the success of their trip; the culture and life in New York; suggestions made by greeters; and visiting lesser-known areas with a Greeter. Results tells us that 96 % of the respondents learnt more about life and culture in New York by the Big Apple Greeter experience. 95 % of the respondents followed suggestions made by the Greeter. 91 % of the respondents visited areas that they would not have visited without the Greeter. 97 % of the respondents said that their Big Apple Greeter experience made the trip more successful (Espeso et al 2005).

The third and fourth questions focused on the actions that the visitors took after the trip. The result showed that the majority of the respondents shared their experience of Big Apple Greeter with 10 to 19 people when they got home from their trip. 90.3 % of the respondents recommended New York City as a destination after they returned to their hometown and 94.4 % of the respondents recommended Big Apple Greeter to other travellers going to New York (Espeso et al 2005).

The result of this study indicates that the visitor's image of safety and friendliness change after their experience of Big Apple Greeter's services. It also reveals that the visitor's confidence in visiting less well-known areas and using public transport enhanced, this may lead to better-distributed tourism based economic benefits for different parts of the city. The findings suggest that Big Apple Greeter can, by the organizations services, positively influence the perceptions of the destination New York City (Espeso et al 2005).

Espeso et al (2005) point out the fact that people using Big Apple Greeter's services do not only spread the company's name and values but also promote New York City as a destination to friends and relatives. Among the respondents (that is, people attracted to the type of services Big Apple Greeter provide), Espeso et al discovered several types of "opinion leaders". Opinion leaders are people that have particular influence on what their friends and other people around them feel about certain subjects or issues. The authors define opinion leaders among the respondents mainly by their occupation, such as professors, travel agents, journalists etc (Espeso et al 2005).

The visitor survey of Big Apple Greeter supports that the organization has accomplished its mission; "Big Apple Greeter's mission is to enhance New York City's worldwide image and enrich the New York experience by connecting visitors with knowledgably and enthusiastic volunteers." (BAG website)