Optimizing Social Media Functionalities and Message Format for Persuasive Crisis Communication in Tourism

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Introduction

The use of social media for communication and information search have become the norm in modern society. The magnitude of social media usage in daily life has rapidly increased due to the expansion of Internet accessibility and advancement in mobile technology. Techradar (2013) predicted that 30 billion devices will be connected to the Internet by 2021 with most of them is mobile products. Social media is heavily used to share information through user-generated content (e.g. user opinion, personal photos and videos) and from other external sources (e.g. news agencies, private businesses, advertisement, etc.). Within tourism, these behavioral phenomena are affecting the way tourists think, plan and share their travel experiences. New generations of tourists can be considered technologically and socially savvy. They use smartphones or other mobile devices and social media to seek and share information at all stages of travel experience (before, during and after). Tourists continue to check themselves in at locations, upload memories on social media platforms and give instantaneous feedback to hoteliers, the demand has dramatically risen for Wi-Fi accessibility; so much so that it is now seen as a necessity rather than an additional feature (WTTC, 2014). Given the combination of popular smartphone use, the increased ease of access to social media, and the intensification of crises that affect the tourism industry, there is a need to explore the relationship between these trends (Schroeder et al., (2013).

The role of communication intensifies during crisis. As social media is full with cluttered, random and unfiltered information shared by the network of users, some information may caught the attention of the users, some information may be unintentionally missed and others could be intentionally ignored. These factors justify the need for tourism industry to understand the best way to develop and deliver crisis message or information via social media. A well-crafted crisis message would be worthless if it is unable to reach or grasp attention of the target audience, and most importantly, to persuade them to response and act accordingly during a crisis. A small but growing body of empirical work in risk communication and related fields has investigated the effects of different message formats (e.g. Johnson et al., 1988; Fisher et al. 1992; Gonzalez & Wallsten 1992; Kaplan et al. 1986; cited in Bier, 2001). Although, these past studies were conducted in the era when traditional media rules and mostly for persuasive advertising, they serve as excellent theoretical foundations that relatable to crisis communication field. There is a need to expand knowledge in this field by venturing into the trendy communication method; social media. Furthermore, no research was carried out to specifically investigate how different forms of modality and visual presentation of crisis message/information on social media affects response from the audience.

Social media offers numerous functionalities and message format options that can be effectively packaged together with the crisis message. For instance, an organization can opt to use a single or a mixed method of message delivery such as direct messaging (DM) function, fan/group page, hashtag (#) and status update functionality on Facebook. In terms of message format, the
message can be developed through different style such as plain text, graphical text, audio format and video format. The lack of definitive empirical evidence regarding many important questions about how to best structure risk communication messages and processes also makes it important to systematically pre-test risk communication messages, methods, and approaches (Lundgren & McMakin, 1998). This research could enrich the body of knowledge within tourism crisis communication theme. Specifically, an empirical investigation will be carried out to examine effective ways that tourism organizations can deliver their crisis communication message via various functionalities and message format offered by social media.

**Literature Review**

Commonly, a tourist will seek as much information about the destination that he/she intends to visit as a way to enhance the travel experience and reduce risk. Online reviews are said to increase travelers’ confidence during the decision making process as well as reduce risk, and assist in the selection process (Gretzel, Yoo and Purifoy, 2007). Xiang and Gretzel (2010) cited that social media become the primary medium by which travel information is shared. According to a study by TripAdvisor, some 40% of travellers use social media for inspiration for their next trip and 42% actively use it in the planning process, a staggering 76% use social networks to share their experiences with others and 91% of those who take social media into account use social networks to share their photos (Speight, 2014).

Safety is considered a top priority when making a decision to travel. Generally, tourists will be reluctant to travel to unsafe destinations, regardless of whether the safety risks are real or perceived. Risk perceptions can be more influential in a tourist’s decision making than the real conditions at the destination or region (Sönmez, 1998). Travelers alter their travel plans and seek an alternative “safer” destination when the media increases the amount of coverage of an incident or negative event associated with a destination (Sönmez & Graefe, 1998a; Sönmez, 1998). As the number of disasters and crises affecting the tourism and travel industry increases, it becomes evitable to understand the nature of these disasters and incidents, predict their potential impacts on the industry, and control their consequences (Kozak, 2007). Although it is clear that - for better or for worse - social media is very powerful, many executives are reluctant or unable to develop strategies and allocate resources to engage effectively with social media (Kietzmann et al., 2011).

Negative perceptions on the safety of the destination must be managed in timely manner because it has unfavorable impacts toward travel decision making. Furthermore, stories that are shared on social media can be circulated almost instantly and to global-scaled audience. Due to this phenomena, applying effective communication strategies using social media are crucial especially when the destination is experiencing a crisis. Lindsay (2011) stated two approaches on the use of social media for emergencies and disasters on an organizational level. First, social media can be used somewhat passively to disseminate information and receive user feedback via incoming messages, wall posts, and polls. A second approach involves the systematic use of social media as an emergency management tool such as to conduct emergency communications and issue warnings; to receive victim requests for assistance; monitoring user activities and
 postings to establish situational awareness; and using uploaded images to create damage estimates, among others. A study conducted by Kim and Fesenmaier (2008) found out that visually appealing stimuli are the most important tool for converting Website lookers to users and/or making them stay longer on the Website.

Crafting the right message is an essential element in crisis communication process. The crisis message should be concise, truthful, apologetic (if needed), and reflects the credibility of the sender. Although, it is important to compose the message with careful choice of words and context depending on the type of crisis, there has been a neglect on the aspects of its delivery method and message format. Naturally, documents can be characterized along more dimensions (e.g. Hartley, 1998), but it seems far to state that digital documents have more and different possibilities for presenting persuasive information than do traditional text documents, where these possibilities are primarily related to information packaging (Vallduví 1992) rather than informational content (cited in Krahmer, van Dorst & Ummelen, 2004).

Miller (1980) defines persuasive communication as any message that is intended to shape, reinforce, or change the responses of another, or others. Conceptually, crisis message can be considered as a type of persuasive communication with the aim to influence audience to adopt a certain position and belief (such as for image/reputation recovery) and even to encourage the audience to take certain course of actions during a crisis (such as for evacuation or safety precaution measure). As cited in Mohammadi et al. (2013), early studies on the effects of communication modality in persuasion showed large inconsistency in their findings. For example, while (Frandsen, 1963) found that videotaped messages are more persuasive than audio-taped messages and writing messages are the least persuasive, other studies suggested no difference or greater persuasiveness in writing messages (Werner, 1982). Arguably, the attractive packaging of the information may also influence the persuasive effectiveness (Krahmer, van Dorst & Ummelen, 2004). Illustrations in instructional text can have variety of effects; they may add to reader interest and enjoyment, as well as affecting attitudes and arouse emotional response (Levie & Lentz, 1982). There are individual differences in cognitive processes such as attention, working memory capacity, general intelligence, perceptual-motor skills and language abilities which would have a considerable effect on computer-based performance and may product sometimes quite large variance in the intensity or type of psychological effects, such as depth of learning, positive emotion, persuasion, presence, social presence and other types of psychological states and effects as well as consequent behavior (Saari et al., 2004).
Theoretical Lenses of the Study

Figure 1: A Framework of Persuasive Tourism Crisis Communication
(adapted from Petty & Cacioppo, 1986 and Davis, 1985)

As depicted in Figure 1, the conceptual framework for this study is adapted by integrating variables from two different models in the area of persuasive communication and technology acceptance. The first model, Elaborations Likelihood Model (ELM) posit that in processing (‘elaborate’ on) the information in a persuasive message, an individual may use ‘central route’ or ‘peripheral’ (heuristic) route. The central route requires a person to think critically about issue-related arguments in an informational message and scrutinize the relative merits and relevance of those arguments prior to forming an informed judgment about the target behavior. (Bhattacherjee & Sanford, 2006). The peripheral (or heuristic) route, on the other hand, involves only limited elaboration; the receiver pays more attention to ‘peripheral’ cues, such as the presence of a credible source (‘experts are always right’), the number of prima facie plausible arguments (‘more arguments are better’) and lay-out (‘a nice design is more convincing’) (Krahmer, van Dorst & Ummelen, 2004). Based on the objectives of the research, the investigation is delimited to peripheral (heuristic) route.

Information sources and its perceived credibility include postings in social media from families and friends, public tourism organization, private and NGO tourism organization, international tourism organization, government agencies related to safety, health and law enforcement, local news channels and international news channel. The effect of high source credibility on perceptions of risk includes: (1) higher persuasion levels, (2) less counterarguments, and (3) greater likelihood to behave positively (Eagly, Wood & Chaiken, 1978; Grewal, Gotlieb & Marmorstein, 1994; cited in Pennington-Gray, Schroeder & Kaplanidou, 2011). Individual beliefs about the credibility of risk information sources have been found to affect individual preventive behaviors (Cahyanto et al., 2016). Generally, perceived credibility has positive
relationship with level of persuasiveness, which means a particular information source would be highly persuasive when it is perceived as credible. In terms of visual presentation, four crisis message formats were chosen including plain text, graphical text, audio format and video format. In essence, the research seeks to reveal the level of persuasiveness between different information sources and message format and whether it could stimulate response of the audience neither cognitive effect (e.g. change of beliefs/opinions) and nor behavioral actions (e.g. sharing/distributing the information and taking precautions).

Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) is used to measure the tendency of tourists to opt for specific social media “functionalities” to receive and response on information or message about a crisis event. TAM is a prevalent framework used by many researchers with the interest of investigating motivation of using a system or technology. As quoted in Phan and Daim (2011), technology acceptance model has been used in a number of studies on mobile services which focus on users (Amberg, 2004; Pagani, 2004; Samtani et al., 2003, Teo & Pok, 2003). ‘Functionalities’ will be measured based on the “perceived usefulness” and “perceived ease of use”. Davis (1985) defines perceived usefulness as the degree to which an individual believes that using a particular system would enhance his or her job performances and perceived ease of use as the degree to which an individual believes that using a particular system would be free of physical and mental effort. Both perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use would shape the attitude of an individual and consequently influence his or her behavioral intention (to use or reject the system/technology). Level of persuasiveness may be considered as an “attitude”. For instance, if an individual has a positive attitude on using certain functionality in social media, it could mean that the functionality is highly persuasive. Also, TAM model fits to the proposed conceptual model as the dependent variable is aiming at the behavioral response/intention of the audience.

Research Questions
Based on the model and thorough review of the literature, three main research questions were developed to guide the study:

1. What is the most persuasive SOURCE of information about a crisis at tourism destination on social media?
   a. Which social media platforms are used more frequently by tourists to gain information about a crisis?
   b. Is there any evidence from social media posts that one source is more credible than another when the visitor is caught in a crisis event?

2. What is the most persuasive message FORMAT that can be used in social media to communicate with tourists about a crisis event?
   a. What is the level of persuasiveness of using plain text format for tourism crisis information?
   b. What is the level of persuasiveness of using graphical text format for tourism crisis message?
   c. What is the level of persuasiveness of using audio format for tourism crisis message?
   d. What is the level of persuasiveness of using video format for tourism crisis message?
3. Which FUNCTIONALITY in social media is perceived as most persuasive by tourists for tourism crisis communication?
   a. What functionalities on social media are used more frequently by tourists to gain information about a crisis?
   b. Which functionality on social media is perceived by tourists as the easiest to use for crisis communication?
   c. Which functionality on social media is perceived by tourists as the most useful for crisis communication?

Research Methods

An online survey will be developed by using Qualtric Online Survey Software. It will be distributed randomly to social media users who are above the age of 18 and with travel experience in the last 2 years. A screening question will be given at the beginning of survey to ensure respondents meet the criteria above. The survey will be divided into four sections. The first section asks respondents on demographic information (e.g. age, gender and education) and social media usage behavior (e.g. number of active social media and average hours spent per day on social media). Section 2 touches on Research Question 1, containing two questions with categorical options of various social media platforms (RQ1a) such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, and Likert-scale measurement (RQ1b) with 5-point scale (1 = very untrustworthy and 5 = very trustworthy) that will measure credibility of various information sources posted in social media including families and friends, public tourism organization, private and NGO tourism organization, international tourism organization, government agencies related to safety, health and law enforcement, local news channels and international news channel. Section 3 is dedicated for Research Question 2 that will measure perceived level of persuasiveness of four different message formats namely plain text (RQ2a), graphical text (RQ2b), audio format (RQ2c) and video format (RQ2d). A mock crisis message/information will be developed with these formats and the respondents will be asked to provide their evaluation through 5-point scale Likert-scale measurement (1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree) on the effectiveness of each format. Final section of the survey will tap on Research Question 4. Categorical options indicating various functionalities of social media (RQ3a) such as direct messaging, hashtag (#), fan page, live chat and safety check will be used to identify the most frequent functionalities used by tourists. To measure perceived ease of use (RQ3ab) and perceived usefulness (RQ3c), 5-point Likert-scale measurement (1= strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree) will be used to rate a number of statements about various functionalities in social media.

In terms of data analysis, descriptive statistics will be generated for categorical variables. It allows the researcher to summarize and describe data in a simple, yet meaningful way. Frequency distribution is appropriate for demographic data, social media usage behavior and categorical questionnaire items. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) will be performed to compare means between different groups and its statistical significance for variables that used ordinal data particularly for RQ1b, RQ2a,b,c,d and RQ2b,c. The collected data will be processed with the latest version of SPSS.
References


