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Curating a Gallery of Crisis Engagement:

Analysis of User Generated Content of the 416 Fire on Instagram

Tourism scholars, industry professionals, government leaders, policy-makers, and private entity institutions are on an immediate mission to understand the dynamic processes of preparation, management, and recovery associated with crises and disasters. The academic literature related to crisis management processes has been imperative as we struggle to learn how crises, specifically climate related crises, will impact tourism-based communities on economic, environmental, and social-cultural levels. The notable research by Faulkner (2001) helped pave the way for more recent research from scholars such as Amore, Prayag, and Hall (2018), Hall, Prayag, and Amore (2018), Pennington-Grey (2018), Schroeder and Pennington-Grey (2018), to name a few. The magnitude of research on this topic, further capitalized by the recent devastating climate-related disasters in Australia, Puerto Rico, and California, clearly exemplify the need for continued research in this domain, specifically research aimed at helping the tourism industry during the multiple phases of crises (Pennington-Grey, 2018) as many tourism destinations are inextricably linked to shifts in demand from climate change due to their economic foundations (Becken & Hay, 2007).

One component of the crisis management process that is being identified as a significant piece of the community resiliency process (Norris, et al., 2008), recovery (Hystad & Keller, 2008) and response strategies (Jones, 2016) is crisis communication. There are many ways in which communication in the crisis management process is being utilized: to engage with multiple stakeholders (Hystad & Keller, 2008), to educate (Jones, 2016), and to gain and hold power (Taylor & Cartier, 2019). The use of social media has changed the landscape of contemporary crisis communications through the increase in smartphone use and the ease of access to social media (Schroeder, Pennington-Gray, Donohoe, & Kiousis, 2013). Digital marketing through social media channels is a means of communication that allows for immediate response and direct interaction with the public (Ketter, 2016). Consequently, there is a significant difference in the millennial generations' response to crises than previous generations (Jones, 2016), possibly intertwined with comfort and frequency of using social media communication. Schwiensberg, Darcy, and Beirman (2020) suggest that social media can impact "the complex relationship between tourism and climate change" influencing response (p. 296).

Regardless of the plethora of research related to communication, specifically social media communication, in the crisis management process, there is little knowledge regarding the ways in which communication is utilized by observers as a means of engagement with and through the crisis. Further, there is limited knowledge of how individuals communicate their interactions and conceptualization of the crises from afar, as much of the research on crisis management communication focuses on the influence of DMO's (Granville, Mehta, & Pike, 2016; Hystad & Keller, 2008), the media (Ritchie, 2004) or the tourism industry as a whole (Jones. 2016). Therefore, this study aims to fill literature gaps and contribute to the unknown impacts of crises by identifying how communication can be used as a form of engagement by individuals impacted

by the crisis, but not directly involved in the management process, and answering the following question:

How do observers use social media to communicate their engagement with the crisis?

Guided by a critical constructivist lens, weighing on Hollinshead (2004), Holstein and Gubrium (2011), Pernecky (2012), and Philmore and Goodson (2004), and utilizing the context of the 416 Fire during the summer of 2018 in Durango, Colorado, user generated content shared on Instagram with the #416fire cue has been analyzed with a combination of two methodologies, constant comparisons and “virtual curating” (Tribe, 2008). The content of the 416 Fire was chosen as wildfires are considered “common climate-orientated disasters” (Pennington-Grey & Pizam, 2011, p. 316). And, the combination of methodologies was chosen as there is a call to study the dynamics of crises with multiple methods, notably qualitative in nature (Cahyanto & Pennington-Gray, 2017).

Review of Literature

Communication plays a key role, not only in sharing information during the crisis, but also in restoring confidence in the destination after the crisis (Ritchie, 2004). Destinations must proactively manage their image during and after a crisis since media coverage affects individual behavior (Pennington-Gray & Pizam, 2011). When there is a risk that media coverage of a crisis could result in a decline in tourist arrivals, destination managers should enact their crisis communication plans with the intent of avoiding or minimizing the possibility that the image could become tarnished (Pennington-Gray & Pizam, 2011). Marketing communication is an important piece of the crisis process, specifically in the recovery phase when messaging has the potential to influence purchase decisions of potential tourists (Hystad & Keller, 2008). However, communication can be incorrect leading to a loss in revenue and a misunderstanding of the crisis impact (Walters, Mair, & Lim, 2016).

There has been a lag in published research regarding the use of social media in tourism crises (Möller, Wang, & Nguyen, 2018). The social-mediated crisis communication (SMCC) model is one contribution that evaluates the different motivations for users accessing social media and traditional media during a crisis (Austin, Liu, & Jin, 2012). Many people experiencing a crisis rely on both media types since social media is sought by users for insider information and maintaining communication lines with friends and family, and traditional media is accessed for educational purposes (Austin, Liu, & Jin, 2012). It seems that destinations are not taking full advantage of the potential for social media to support crisis recovery strategies (Oliveira & Huertas, 2019). Social media is uniquely positioned to help users display empathy, share opinions, and generate an emotional bond with an organization (Oliveira & Huertas, 2019). It has been argued that incorporating social media into the communication strategy for crisis management should become a standardized business practice (Schroeder et al., 2013) as communication is a main aspect of engagement (Jones, 2016).

Setting, Method, and Analysis

The 416 Fire occurred in Durango, Colorado in the summer of 2018. The county in which Durango resides has an estimated population of 55,000 (Leeds, 2019). Tourism has a large impact on the Durango community as many travel to the area for multiple outdoor activities such as skiing/snowboarding, river sports, mountain and road biking, etc. (VisitDurango.org, 2020). The 416 Fire began on June 1, 2018 and directly impacted the area north of the city center of Durango affecting approximately 54,000 acres (Incident Information System, 2018) with multiple homes and businesses evacuated or on pre-evacuation status. Indirect impacts were felt throughout the region due to smoke, decreased air quality, and subsequent mudslides and road closures. The fire negatively impacted travel to the area resulting in lodging tax being down 13% and sales tax down by 3.2% (Leeds, 2019) compared to the previous year during the same time frame.

Information regarding the fire was shared in local and national newspapers and television, local government websites, and multiple social media sites. Most of the research that has previously been analyzed includes communication from structured entities involved in the crisis management process, or entities that are controlled by local or national organizations/governments. Therefore, to answer our research question and to further identify the dynamics of crisis communication, we analyzed Instagram posts with the #416fire cue (over 5000 posts) from the start of the fire, June 1, 2018 until June 30, 2018, the most profound time frame in terms of impact and destruction. The Instagram platform is the most significant to answer our research question for the visual component as “relatively few studies have incorporated details of the content and composition of Instagram images or videos” (Laestadius, 2017, p. 576). In 2018, there were over 100 million users of this platform, which is a continuous rise in use (Clement, 2019). The popularity of Instagram opened the research to a review of the engagement of a variety of stakeholders including local residents, past visitors, present visitors, and potential visitors. The social media coverage of the 416 Fire was also a natural fit for a primarily visual platform like Instagram due to the emotionally charged images of the fire.

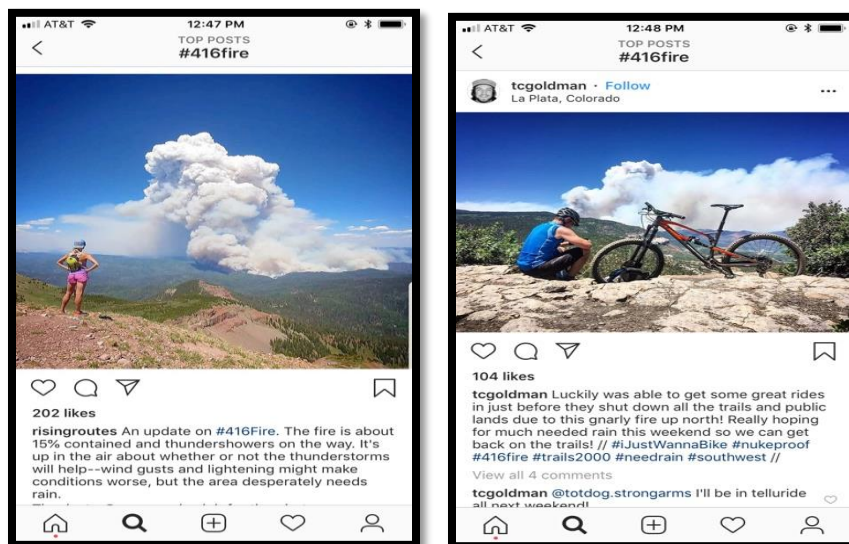
We used a combination of constant comparative methodology and “virtual curating” (Tribe, 2008) as our goal was to identify the engagement techniques connected to the 416 Fire to more fully understand the communication processes of social media users as a means of participation. In our constant comparative methodology process, we analyzed the data simultaneously with coding, or finding themes in the shared pictures and related discourse, following Taylor and Bogden (1998). For research using the Instagram platform, best practices recommend an approach to the analysis of the image that also incorporates the associated caption as considering the elements interdependently results in a loss of context and limits the researchers’ understanding of the post (Laestadius, 2017). Our coding process consisted of an independent sifting through of the pictures and related discourse and finding thematic connections, both visual and written, among them. Each post was interpreted into themes by grouping (1) actions as the focus of the picture and (2) communication/words describing the picture. Once the picture/post themes were analyzed and saturated, we deconstructed the pictures using Tribe’s (2008) idea of “virtual curating” as a method in which “the researcher assumes the role of the tourism art curator and the output is a display of the works organized into viewing galleries supported by an exhibition guide” (p. 926). These methodologies utilized together are the most appropriate for answering our inquiry from our critical constructivist paradigm (Hollinshead, 2004; Pernecky, 2012).

Preliminary Results

Our preliminary results suggest that there were two major galleries of pictures shared on Instagram with the #416fire cue: “Self and Crisis” and “The Crisis Process.” The “Self and Crisis” gallery consists of pictures that reflect one’s personal engagement with the fire. This gallery encompasses two different trends in engaging with the crisis, “Activities Alongside the Crisis” and “Events.” This gallery is filled with pictures of people expressing how their lives continued regardless of the fire in the form of exercise or the maintenance of scheduled events. The second gallery, “The Crisis Process,” consists of three themes of engaging with the fire apart from the self, “Actual Fire,” “Getting the Job Done,” and “Thank You.” Each of these parts of Gallery 2 reflect how individuals engaged with the fire through sharing photos of what was happening in terms of growth, extinction, and community effort. Preliminary explanations of each gallery are included below.

Gallery 1: Self and Crisis

Activities Alongside the Crisis: In this segment of Gallery 1, the personal reflection of self and the crisis is echoed in pictures that showcase the individual alongside the crisis. These pictures showcase individuals a distance from the fire completing a usually fun, daily task in which they are taking a pause with the fire in the background. Both of the pictures shown, and many that will be added to the final gallery, showcase the person looking away from the camera on a high peak/place with their sporting gear on them or close on hand.



Events: There were a number of pictures/posts that focused on events that were impacted by the crisis, but still continued in a different space. In this segment of Gallery 1, the pictures mainly used the fire as a backdrop for their photos, almost as if the fire was a view through which to frame the individuals in the photo. The pictures reflect a happy or joyous moment in which the fire is providing light and color for the actors. The picture included here reflects one way in which individuals engaged with the fire, allowing the fire to become part of their situation through its use in framing their particular event.



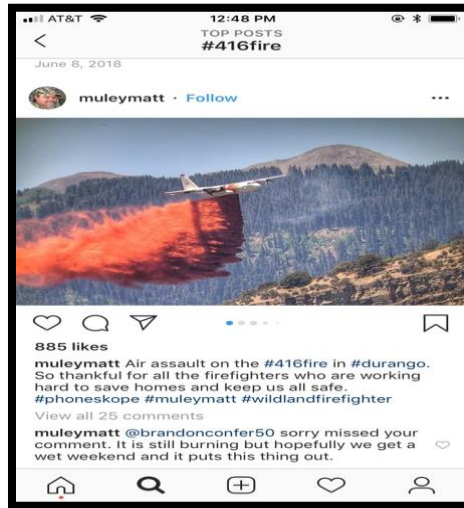
Gallery 2: The Crisis Process

Actual Fire: The first segment of Gallery 2 is filled with pictures of the actual fire. There are numerous pictures on Instagram that showcase the flames, colored red and orange, often times above trees. Other photos reflect smoke near the mountains of the town. In the photo included here, one can see both, the red flames and the smoke. After a closer look, one can also see that a First Responder is tucked into the mid-right-hand frame of the photo. It is also important to note the description under the photo that suggests the photographer is engaging with the crisis through visualization and sharing this representation through the photo.



Getting the Job Done: In this segment of Gallery 2, we share photos of the process of trying to put the fire out. This gallery is filled with photos that reflect the crisis reduction effort. In the photo included here, which is similar to many we have encountered, a plane dropping red retardant on the fire, an “air assault,” is showcased. This piece of the gallery, in comparison to others, showcases pictures in motion, where the plane/vehicles are moving at a fast pace to reduce the spread of the fire. These pictures reflect individuals desire to engage with the crisis and their specific audience by sharing what movement was being done to reduce the fire. It is also important to note that many of the photos in this segment of Gallery 2 include an

acknowledgement or encouragement to connect with and support the pictures, as seen in the picture/post included here.



Thank You: In the last segment of Gallery 2, we share photos that reflect the community appreciation during and after the fire. These photos showcase businesses (similar to the picture on the left) and personal (similar to the picture on the right) signs or bulletin boards thanking individuals involved with the crisis management process. Often, these pictures are closely zoomed-in on the thank you notes reflecting the picture takers engagement, or agreement, with the words used. Unlike other pieces of both Galleries 1 and 2, this segment of Gallery 2 is the only to reflect discourse within the pictures.



Contribution

This research will make scholarly and practical contributions that are vital and timely with our current world-wide climate crisis. First, this research will contribute to and extend the work of Jones (2016) as it is becoming clear that sharing pictures of crises on social media is a response strategy in which the impacted individual is reflecting on how they feel through the use of a picture and related post. Each individual sharing photos is engaging with the crisis in a way that invokes reflection for them and a connection with others, similar to the findings of Oliveira and Huertas (2019). The galleries formed in our research process showcase how communication, specifically social media communication with visual messages, can be used as a way to engage with and through the crisis in an effort to connect, reflect, share, and contribute to the crisis management efforts. Further, this research utilizes and contributes to the application of an emerging methodology with Tribe's (2008) "virtual curating." This type of methodology gives the researcher the ability to analyze and showcase the data in a unique, transformative way that gives the reader extended interpretation of the topic.

Finally, our hope is that this research will provide a practical contribution to the crisis management process and the need to understand and encourage engagement from various stakeholder groups. Further knowledge of communication processes, especially those linked to social media users impacted by the crisis, will help policy-makers and decision-makers in determining the best course of communication during and after a crisis. We hope this research helps world leaders understand and acknowledge the impact crises have on communities beyond economic impacts.

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