Responding to the bed bug crisis in social media

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ABSTRACT

The increasing trend in social media changes the landscape of crisis communication and thus, calls for innovation in hotel crisis management practices. This research examined how New York City hotels responded to recent issues surrounding the bed bug crisis on the social media site TripAdviosr. This study adopted a mixed methods research design. The quantitative findings revealed that hotels' response behaviors were associated with organizational factors (e.g. hotel's popularity, average rating, and star rating) and the rating of online reviews. The qualitative findings indicated that hotels employed various types of strategies in the response, which were dominated by strategies of bolstering and enhancing. In conclusion, this study addressed the need for a proactive approach in hotel crisis management and provided practical implications.

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1. Introduction

Health and safety are public concerns that play a key role in individuals' choices of hospitality products as well as their level of satisfaction. The hospitality industry is responsible for offering a safe and secure environment where guests' well-being is the top priority during travel (Henderson, 2007; Ritchie, 2008). Bed bug infestation is one of the major public health concerns that are associated with the hospitality industry in recent years (Center for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC] and US Environmental Protection Agency [EPA], 2010; Davies et al., 2012; Liu and Pennington-Gray, 2015). As a national survey reports, about 75% of the bed bug incidents take places in hotels/motels (National Pest Management Association [nPMA], 2013).

Hotel properties are vulnerable to bed bug infestations due to their role as traveling hubs, and the occurrence of bed bug infestation in hotels is always associated with negative consequences (Davies et al., 2012; Liu and Pennington-Gray, 2015). Bed bug encounters in hotel rooms not merely can expose guests to various health risks (e.g. physical discomfort, emotional stress), but also have the potential to become crises (Davies et al., 2012). Negative impacts of a health-related crisis in the hospitality industry include disruption of daily operation, declines in revenue margin, damaged reputations, postponements of capital investment, and

even downturns in the entire market (Henderson, 2007; Pine and McKercher, 2003; Ritchie et al., 2011).

While crisis management becomes a popular topic within the hospitality industry, findings in empirical research reveal several shortcomings with regards to hoteliers' inabilities to handle health-related crises (Henderson and Ng, 2004). The industry is still lagging behind detailed plans that concern about health-related crises (Henderson, 2007); while managing a health-related crisis requires proactive efforts in preparedness, planning, and responding (Ritchie, 2008). Particularly, strategic and effective crisis responses can protect an organization's reputational assets during a crisis and reduce negative consequences (Coombs, 2014).

With the development of information technology, social media now plays an important role in crisis communication (Veil et al., 2011). Social media creates an innovative platform that allows various hospitality suppliers and guests to communicate openly, and stay connected during times of crisis (Sigala, 2011). But many organizations have not fully integrated social media into their crisis response systems, and therefore failed to embrace the potential benefits of using social media in crisis management (Liu and Kim, 2011). In the meantime, without properly managing user-generated contents on social media sites may lead to a social media crisis, which can harm an organization's reputation and amplify the crisis situation (Coombs, 2014).

A growing number of scholars have begun examining the use and impact of social media in tourism crisis management (Sigala, 2011). However, the majority of studies were conducted on the basis of experiences; few assumed a nature of explanation or prediction (Ritchie et al., 2011). Similarly, research that scrutinized

hotels' crisis response on social media sites is inconclusive thus far (Liu et al., 2015).

To fill this gap, this study examined New York City (NYC) hotels' responses on the social media site TripAdvisor regarding bed bug crisis issues. The selection of this case was based on two reasons: (1) bed bug infestation is a health-related crisis that is closely related to the hospitality industry and has receive large amount of media attention (Liu and Pennington-Gray, 2015); (2) NYC is a popular tourism destination for both domestic and international tourists, and has experienced a bed bug crisis in 2010 (NYC Bed Bug Advisory Board, 2010). Thus, this study can yield a comprehensive understanding of hotels' current crisis communication practices on social media and offer insights for effective crisis management practices.

2. Literature review

2.1. Managing a health-related crisis in the hotel industry

A crisis can be understood as "an unpredictable event that threatens important experiences of stakeholders related to health, safety, environmental, and economic issues, and can seriously impact an organizations' performance and generate negative outcomes" (Coombs, 2014, p. 3).

The outbreak of a health-related crisis can result in epidemic impacts, and therefore negatively influence the hotel industry. Noticeably, recent research examining the short-term economic impacts of the 2009 H1N1 pandemic revealed that the hotel sector turned out to be one of the most affected industries concerning a health-related crisis (Monterrubio, 2010).

Direct outcomes of a health-related crisis normally manifest in the form of sharp decreases in tourist arrivals as well as economic loss. For example, the outbreak of foot and mouth disease in 2001 resulted in a 10 percent decline in international visitors, and a revenue loss of £2.3bn in the UK tourism market (English Tourism Council, 2001). Similarly, in 2003, the SARS epidemic destroyed the hotel industry in Hong Kong in a short term, where the average hotel occupancy fell to 20% (Pine and McKercher, 2003). Within a two-week period, some hotels' occupancy rates dropped from more than 80% to single digits (Pine and McKercher, 2003).

At the center of the tourism crisis management framework lies both readiness and response phases, which assume prior identification of risks, and plans to mitigate them (Pennington-Gray et al., 2011). Most scholarly attention has been paid to the stages of response (Ritchie, 2008). Because crisis events are unexpected in nature and strategic response can help remedy the epidemic impacts associated with a crisis, while accelerating the recovery process following a crisis (Coombs, 2014).

Despite the importance of crisis management and crisis communication, only a handful of studies have specifically examined the lodging industry's performance and activities during crisis events (Ritchie et al., 2011). And even fewer studies have analyzed the situation during a health-related crisis, which has the ability to inflict damage to people's personal well beings, the environment, and the entire hospitality market (Henderson, 2007; Liu and Pennington-Gray, 2015).

2.2. Crisis communication and social media

With the development of digital communication technology, social media has significantly changed the ecology of crisis communication (Coombs, 2014). Characterized with interactivity, social media provides a new type of communication with increased speed and ease. Through bidirectional dialogs, social media links hospitality organizations with the key decision-makers in the industry and general public during times of crisis (Sellnow et al., 2008).

Understanding and monitoring the content generated on social media sites are important for both marketing and crisis management purposes (Coombs, 2014; Sigala, 2011; Veil et al., 2011). From a marketing perspective, many hospitality organizations now have to establish their presence in the digital environment, in order to build a positive brand image and manage customer relationships (O'Connor, 2010). These interactions and conversations on social media sites can largely contribute to the co-creation process of guests' service experience, and influence other people's travel decisions via electronic word-of-mouth (Park and Allen, 2013).

From a crisis management perspective, social media plays a critical role in the crisis communication process. Tourists use social media to share their crisis experience, communicate their internal feelings such as anxiety and fear, and actively seek out information as a means to manage risks (De Lollis, 2010; Liu et al., 2015). For hospitality practitioners, social media acts as an important source to detect signals for potential crises, a useful tool to monitor public discourse, and references to understand how the public perceives a crisis (Pennington-Gray et al., 2011; Paraskevas, 2006).

As important as it is to monitor the public discourse on social media, the significance of hotels' responses has also been highlighted (Levy et al., 2013; Liu et al., 2015; O'Connor, 2010). However, the hotel industry has not generally adopted a proactive approach, and online managerial responses have not become a regular practice yet. (Levy et al., 2013; O'Connor, 2010). Several studies found that the majority of online reviews have not received responses from hotel properties (e.g. Chan and Guillet, 2011; Lee and Hu, 2005; O'Connor, 2010). The underperformance in providing online responses can negatively influence hotels' brand images as well as restrict their' capabilities of using social media in times of crisis (Coombs, 2014).

2.2.1. Hotels' response behavior on social media: an innovation theory perspective

The innovation theory explains organizations' adoption process of new technology and ideas (Chou et al., 2012; Rogers, 1995). Specifically, it highlights the influence of organizational factors during the adoption process. The innovation theory is also applicable to a crisis management context, where the relevant literature has provided evidence regarding the associations between organizational factors and crisis management activities (e.g. Paraskevas, 2006; Levy et al., 2013; Ritchie et al., 2011). A wide variety of elements, such as organizational type, organization performance, and organizational culture, make up the broad category of organizational factors.

In terms of operations, Paraskevas (2006) found that that chain hotels are normally equipped with crisis management plans, although the creation of crisis culture and specific procedures may vary by property. Star rating is another important factor considering crisis management practices. Studies found that hotels with higher star ratings were more likely to implement crisis management practices, and equip themselves with an enhanced level of crisis readiness compared to those with lower star ratings (Ritchie et al., 2011).

With respect to hotels' response behavior on social media, consistently, several studies have demonstrated the importance of organizational factors. For instance, it is noted that chain hotels usually use a systematic approach to manage online feedback, including replying to guest reviews, analyzing online posts and benchmarking results, and identifying strategies to improve their lodging service (Levy et al., 2013; Park and Allen, 2013). Likewise, hotels with better online performance (e.g. higher rating and increased popularity) tended to reply to customer reviews more often than not (Levy et al., 2013).

Additionally, the innovation theory suggests that the environmental influence is associated with organizations' adoption of