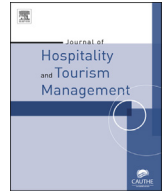




Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management

journal homepage: <http://www.journals.elsevier.com/journal-of-hospitality-and-tourism-management>



Destination image restoration on facebook: The case study of Nepal's Gurkha Earthquake



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 29 October 2015

Received in revised form

24 January 2016

Accepted 22 February 2016

Available online 7 April 2016

Keywords:

Image restoration

Destination image

Facebook marketing

Social media

Tourism crisis communication

ABSTRACT

According to the image repair theory, destination image is a critical factor that should be cultivated and protected from crises. One important communication channel in times of crisis is the social media, with Facebook as the world's leading social network. In spite of Facebook's importance as a communication platform, it has received very limited attention in the literature of tourism crisis communication and image restoration. To bridge over this gap, the current study analysed the Nepal Tourism Board's use of Facebook to restore its image following the Gurkha earthquake - an earthquake of 7.8 magnitude that took place on April 25th 2015. For this purpose, a qualitative content analysis was conducted on the posts, content, pictures and links posted on the Nepal Tourism Board's Facebook page from April 25th to May 24th, 2015. The results of the study have shed light on the role of Facebook as a mean of image restoration and on its unique characteristics as a multi-functional tool that can be used to address diverse audiences, to conduct both formal and informal interactions, to post various kinds of information, to bypass the news media and to serve as an additional distribution channel.

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1. Introduction

At noon on Saturday, April 25th 2015, an earthquake of 7.8 magnitude devastated the country of Nepal, killing more than 9000 people and injured more than 22,000. The Gurkha earthquake also triggered an avalanche on Mount Everest, killing at least nineteen people, making it the deadliest day in the mountain's history (CNN, 13 May 2015). This tragic event resulted in a tourism crisis, harming Nepal's tourism infrastructure, public image and, consequently, its ability to attract tourists and visitors. One of the key channels in Nepal's tourism recovery strategy was the use of Facebook and other social media outlets (PATA, 2015) - channels that received very limited attention in the literature of tourism crisis communication and destination image restoration (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). The current study aims to bridge over this gap between the existing literature and the constant changes in the contemporary media landscape, focusing on the role of Facebook as an image restoration channel, as conducted by Nepal following the Gurkha earthquake.

1.1. Tourism marketing and destination image

Tourism is a leading economic sector, accounting for 9 percent of global GDP and creating one in eleven jobs in the world. In 2014,

over 1.1 billion international tourists travelled abroad, generating up to US\$ 1.5 trillion (UNWTO, 2015). In order to attract these tourists, destinations must link the supply system of their products and services with the demand system of the target markets, in the process of tourism marketing (Middleton & Clarke, 2012). According to Murphy and Murphy (2004), tourism marketing is aimed to position the destination favourably in an environment together with a constantly growing supply and competition. Other important objectives include promoting the destination and its tourism products; attracting tourists and visitors; and communicating the destination's unique image and identity. Similarly, Kozak and Baloglu (2011) state that tourism marketing is an essential tool to attract tourists and visitors, maintain and increase market share and enhance the destination's image.

According to these definitions, one of the key roles of tourism marketing is to enhance the destination's image. Relph (1976) defines a place image as the cognitive output of all physical and symbolic interactions between a person and a place. While this definition focuses on how images are created, Elizur (1987) emphasizes the content of this variable. In her view, a place image is the sum of the place's characteristics, including location, regime, economy, and resources. A similar notion can be found in the work of Kotler et al. (1993), who define a place image as the sum of all perceptions, beliefs and impressions that people have of a certain place. In this definition, the image is constructed of three

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complementary layers: cognitive (perceptions), emotional (beliefs) and evaluative (impressions). This triple-layered perspective is also presented in non-tourism literature, and can be used to study the public image of firms and organizations (Malhotra & Birks, 2000). According to Baloglu, Henthorne, and Sahin (2014), destination image is a critical factor that predicts tourist behaviour, and a positive image is a favourable competitive advantage for attracting both first-time and repeated visitors.

1.2. Crises and image restoration

Despite its importance, a destination image is a fragile resource that can be damaged as a result of crises events (Beirman, 2003; Scott, Laws, & Prideaux, 2013). These incidents may include terror attacks such as the bombing of public places or plane hijackings; crimes such as robbery, rape, murder or kidnapping; accident-related crises such as airplane crashes or the sinking of cruise ships; political unrest events including violent demonstrations, uprisings and riots; natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods, hurricanes or tsunamis; and epidemics such as the outbreak of SARS, HIV or Ebola (Mansfeld & Pizam, 2006). The occurrence of such events may result in an undesired and negative impact on the destination's image, known as 'image crisis'. Small-scale and short-term negative events might result in a sudden image crisis, while large-scale and long-term negative events might result in a prolonged image crisis (Avraham & Ketter, 2013).

Trying to prevent image crisis and protect their image, destinations should act proactively (Beirman, 2003; 2014). One line of action is suggested in the image repair theory, stating that when encountering image problems, organizations should take preventive and restorative measures to protect their public image. Such measures take the form of five major image repair strategies: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing the offensiveness of events, corrective action and mortification (Benoit, 1997). While these strategies are more appropriate for organizations, Avraham and Ketter (2008) list 24 media strategies for altering negative images of tourist destinations. These strategies can be divided into three categories following the three basic components of the communication process: source, message and audience. Media strategies focusing on the source of the message mainly try to affect the destination's media coverage; media strategies focusing on the message itself, aim to present a different image; and media strategies focusing on the target audience, shift the focal point to the destination's target audience or to alternative audiences.

1.3. Marketing techniques and social media marketing

The marketing messages aimed at battling an image crisis can be delivered through five major techniques, known as the promotion mix. The first technique is advertising - the purchasing and placement of persuasive messages in mass media channels such as television, radio or newspapers. The second is public relations - the use of publicity and other indirect means in order to promote the media coverage of the destination. The third technique is sales promotion - a predetermined change in the pricing policy and the use of other incentives in order to stimulate demand. The fourth is direct marketing - delivering marketing messages to specific individuals using inter-personal or mediated communication. The fifth and last technique is digital marketing, employing the internet, social media, mobile devices and similar technologies in order to communicate with the selected audience segments. The use of digital marketing is a direct, cost-effective and efficient marketing tactic that has become a leading promotion tool in the last decade (Kotler, Keller, Ancarani, & Costabile, 2014).

Studies in the field of destination marketing have found that

digital marketing is a highly effective tool for promoting tourism (Buhalis, Leung, & Law, 2011; Hays, Page, & Buhalis, 2013; Ketter & Avraham, 2012; Leung et al., 2015). Particular importance was found to social media - online platforms focused on user-generated content in which people share information, knowledge, and opinions using conversational media (Hays et al., 2013). Examples of social media platforms include social networks, blogs, virtual communities, wikis, collaborative tagging, and media files shared on sites (Schroeder, Pennington-Gray, Donohoe, & Kioussis, 2013). Using social networking websites such as Facebook, destinations can engage customers with the place, facilitate the creation of user-generated content related to the destination, form direct relationships with past/future tourists, and promote online conversations to enhance the destination's image (Ketter & Avraham, 2012). Similar activities are offered by Lange-Faria and Elliot (2012), noting some major implications of social media for DMOs (Destination Marketing Organizations). These include building the destination's brand through direct interaction with customers, promoting electronic word-of-mouth marketing, creating a destination blog aimed at influencing travellers decisions, and gathering authentic information from actual consumers based on their social media contents.

In addition to the role of social media in the eyes of destinations, Leung et al. (2015) note that social media is also important for the consumers, as travellers use social media before their trip as a source of information to support the planning process, during their trip as a guide for travel-related decisions, and following the trip for sharing their experiences. These findings are supported by Zeng and Gerritsen (2014), stating that social media has fundamentally changed the way in which individuals plan travel, consume destinations and share experiences. In the pre-trip phase, potential tourists rely on the experiences of others to support their decision-making process, reduce their level of uncertainty and increase their confidence in visiting new places and consuming local services. During their travel, tourists rely on social media to provide them with reliable destination-related information and for sharing experiences. Lastly, in the post-travel stage, travellers use social media to share pictures, write reviews and tell their story (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014).

1.4. Social media in tourism crises

In addition to their day-to-day role in destination marketing, social media can also support destinations in times of crisis (Sigala, 2011; Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). In fact, it is argued that in some countries, the key drivers of social media use were negative images caused by crime, disease and epidemics, climate-related issues, health-related issues, cultural barriers, and political crises (Schroeder et al., 2013). There are some characteristics that makes social media an effective communication tool during turbulent times. Firstly, social networks such as Facebook and Twitter focus on current events, allowing DMOs to communicate what is happening now (Hays et al., 2013). Secondly, social media platforms are a direct means of communication that can bypass the mass media, which often focus on flat representations of negative events (Evans, 2012). Thirdly, social media is largely based on user-generated content, which is considered to be authentic and trustworthy. In times of crisis, official messages by the DMO might be treated carefully, while social media content might be treated as a reliable information source (Ketter & Avraham, 2012).

It is widely agreed that social media has undoubtedly influenced crisis communication in the tourism industry (Avraham, 2015; Schroeder et al., 2013; Sigala, 2011). Key findings from recent years have shed light on some of the roles of social media in crisis communication and image restoration. For example, Pennington-

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