



Destination image repair during crisis: Attracting tourism during the Arab Spring uprisings



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HIGHLIGHTS

- We aimed to uncover media strategies used during the Arab Spring to revive tourism.
- We analyzed marketing initiatives, media policy, media strategies and campaigns.
- The “multi-step model for altering place image” was adopted for the analysis.
- Three types of strategies were used by marketers: source, message and audience.

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ABSTRACT

The Arab Spring uprisings received intensive coverage and had a negative effect on tourism to the Middle East. This study aimed to uncover media strategies used by Middle Eastern countries' marketers to restore a positive image in times of change and challenge and to bring back tourists, by analyzing marketing initiatives, media policy, crisis communication techniques and the components of advertising campaigns. Integrating theory and practice, and adopting the “multi-step model for altering place image,” the study applied qualitative content analysis of advertisements, press interviews, and global tourism news websites. Three types of strategies were used by marketers to restore a positive image: source, message and audience.

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1. Introduction

The Arab Spring was widely covered in the global media. Framing the events in the beginning as a grassroots attempt to bring social and political changes, while replacing dictatorships with democratic regimes, evoked sympathetic reactions in the West. After several months it became clear that the situation was more complicated, and the road to achieving freedom of expression, free elections, women's rights and independent media was long and complex. In any event, since the demands for social-political changes in the Arab world involved mass demonstrations, civil war, street fighting and military intervention, the number of Western tourists traveling to the area began to fall. Now as the tourists have started returning to some of the countries in the Middle East, the goal of this study was to analyze which media strategies marketers used in their attempts to repair the negative

images and to re-attract tourists during the Arab Spring. To answer this question we used qualitative content analysis of advertisements, press interviews with Middle Eastern officials and marketers, campaigns and messages from national tourism board websites, and reports about marketing initiatives that appeared in the press and on global tourism news websites.

The concept of the “tourism crisis” is familiar to the Middle Eastern tourism industry. Over the years the area has experienced wars, terror attacks and violent conflicts all of which hamper tourism (Steiner, 2007). Nevertheless, few studies have focused on managing tourism crises and crisis communication in the Middle East. This is surprising because the knowledge accumulated around the world regarding image repair and crisis management could have been useful for marketers and decision makers in this region.

Several studies were published concerning image-restoration strategies of destinations during crises around the globe (Ritchie, 2009; Tarlow, 2005). However, these strategies were not part of an overarching theory, conceptual framework or model from the field of crisis communication (see list in Coombs & Holladay, 2010). The conceptual framework used in the current study was the “multi-step model for altering place image” (Avraham & Ketter,

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2008), which offers three types of strategies: source, message and audience. The author analyzed marketing initiatives, media policies, campaigns and messages from national tourism board websites, news reports and advertising campaigns in order to uncover the strategies used by Middle Eastern country marketers and officials to restore a positive image to their countries and bring back tourists after the crisis following the Arab Spring uprisings.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Media strategies for image restoration

The theory of image restoration includes several models. This theory is associated with a long tradition in genre and apologia studies, reputation management, recovery marketing, crisis public relations and rhetoric theory (Benoit, 1995). Brinson and Benoit (1999, p. 486) claim that "...image restoration rhetoric attempts to redress allegations or suspicions of wrongdoing," so over time researchers came to prefer the use of the term "image repair" instead of "image restoration" (Benoit, 2000). Researchers suggest several strategies to use for image repair of people, groups and organizations. "Strategy" as used here is "an abstract or general concept that represents a goal or an effect sought by discourse" (Benoit, 1995, p. 80). Burns and Bruner (2000) suggest speaking of "image restoration discourse" rather than "image restoration strategies." Stocker (1997) proposes a basic response strategy with three to four steps: expression of regret, action to resolve the situation, ensuring the situation will not recur, and if necessary an offer of restitution to the injured parties. Coombs (1999) mentioned several strategies such as attacking the accuser, providing excuses or justifications, ingratiation and offering a full apology (for additional models see Coombs & Holladay, 2010). Benoit (1995, 1997) enlarges the crisis-response list to include evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness of events and mortification.

These communication strategies are used by organizations, groups and destinations, alone or in combination, seeking to repair their image after various kinds of crises. Organizations and groups can restore their image by promising to change overnight, apologizing, assigning blame, or taking responsibility for a crisis or problematic event. Events such as terror attacks, civil wars, mass demonstrations or political instability can damage a destinations' image and tourist numbers; this makes it harder for a destination to utilize the same strategies as organizations or groups. Therefore, the expansion of the image restoration field is needed in order to supply a model to help destinations suffering from negative events and imagery, such as "the multi-step model for altering place image" (Avraham & Ketter, 2008, p. 188) which was designed specifically for assisting destinations to repair their image during and after a crisis.

Avraham and Ketter's (2008) "multi-step model for altering place image" (p. 188) is a holistic model used to restore the positive image of a destination. Use of this model begins with a preliminary analysis of three kinds of characteristics that help marketers decide on the right strategy: the crisis, the place it occurred and the target audience. After this preliminary analysis, marketers define the campaign's goals and the timing of the launch. With this information a destination can choose the most suitable marking strategy or strategies, including focusing on the source of the negative message, the target audience or the message itself (SAM). Once the strategy or strategies have been selected, several techniques (e.g., advertising, public relations and promotions) and channels (e.g., television, radio, press and internet) can deliver the campaign. Several studies have used this model to analyze the marketing efforts of destinations around the world (Avraham, 2013; Stock, 2009; Walters & Mair, 2012).

This study focuses on the three groups of media strategies (SAM) that are the main part of the multi-step model. Source strategies concentrate mainly on the destination marketers' efforts to affect, influence or replace the source that they believe spread negative information about the destination, usually the Western mass media; for example, the arrest of foreign journalists whose reports on political riots and unrest lead to a decrease in tourism arrivals. Audience strategies are concerned with the audience's values, perceptions, and dreams; marketers try to show resemblance and common values between their country and the foreign audience. One example of this is the campaign sponsored by Saudi Arabia in order to restore its image in the US after the 9/11 crisis while emphasizing the kingdom's special and unique ties to America over the years (Avraham, 2013). Audience strategies may be directed at a local/national audience, for example, by using patriotism to encourage internal tourism to replace the foreign tourists who are afraid to visit a country after a crisis; such a campaign was adopted in the US after the 9/11 attacks in 2001 (Stafford, Yu, & Armoo, 2006). Message strategies focus on contradicting the negative messages, stereotypes, perceptions and generalizations spread or reported upon about the destination. These negative messages might include perceptions such as the destination's safety ("It's not safe") or the variety of attractions ("It's boring"). Here the marketers' challenge is to convince the target audience that these perceptions are not true and that the place is, in fact, "safe" or "interesting".

An examination of the existing literature on marketing places that have experienced sudden crises yields several publications that primarily contain tips for marketers (Al-Hamarnah & Steiner, 2004; Sonmez, Apostolopoulos, & Tarlow, 1999; Taylor, 2006). The current literature makes very little use of models, conceptual frameworks or the theoretical knowledge from the field of crises communication and image restoration. The aim of this manuscript is to analyze the efforts used by marketers in Middle Eastern countries during the Arab Spring events by using the "multi-step model for altering place image" to revive tourism and restore a positive image of their countries.

2.2. Marketing and branding tourism during crisis

"Place marketing" and "place promotion" are the leading fields of knowledge used by marketers and researchers to create a positive image for places. These fields have acquired many definitions (see Avraham & Ketter, 2008) and numerous publications advise best practices to use the knowledge accumulated (Kotler, Haider, & Rein, 1993). Despite this knowledge, however, it remains a considerable challenge to effectively promote places that suffer from a negative image, as mentioned by Nielsen (2001): "promoting a destination in normal circumstances is a difficult task, but promoting a destination that faces tourism challenges – whether from negative press, or from infrastructure damage caused by natural disasters or man-made disasters – is an altogether more arduous task" (Nielsen, 2001, pp. 207–208). In an image related crisis, the difficulty of achieving a positive image is great, both in regards to service and infrastructure as well as the intangible damage to the destination's image. This process is so great and such a difficult task, that it might take countries and cities several years to tackle (Baker, 2007).

Recent years have seen increasing use of the new concept by researchers and practitioners of "place/destination branding." Govers and Go (2009) believe that "place branding" refers to "building brand equity in relation to nations, regional and/or local (or city) identity" (p. 16). The academic literature contains analyses of many case studies of countries and tourist destinations that have sought to re-brand themselves by creating and promoting cultural

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