"I will never go to Hong Kong again!" How the secondary crisis communication of "Occupy Central" on Weibo shifted to a tourism boycott

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Secondary crisis communication on social media is essential to crisis management.
- The public's online participation promotes secondary crisis communication.
- The topics Weibo users discussed about Occupy Central shifted to a tourism boycott.
- The turning point was the group conflicts aroused and negative emotions elicited.
- Therefore, secondary crisis communication may potentially threaten tourism destinations.

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Social media, an open space for the public's opinion and expression, has become an increasingly essential issue in crisis events, leading to secondary crisis communication. Realizing the potential risk of that, this study took the "Occupy Central" spreading on Weibo as a case, and applied topic clustering and sentiment analysis to examine the sequential characteristics of secondary crisis communication on social media in topics and emotions. Results show that the topics Weibo users discussed shifted from a political event to tourism boycott, with emotions turning increasingly negative. The turning point of such a transfer was aroused group conflicts and negative emotions elicited between people from mainland China and Hong Kong. The results indicate the necessity of emphasizing secondary crisis communication during a crisis due to the dynamic and sequential change of topics and public's emotions, which may result in new crises impacting the tourism destination where the initial crisis occurs.

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1. Introduction

As is known to all, tourism is an industry extremely influenced by society, the economy, politics, and nature (Ritchie, 1984)—and, especially, by crisis events (Ghaderi, Mat Som, & Henderson, 2012). In recent years, the tourism industry has suffered continual attacks of tremendous crisis events (Faulkner, 2001), both human-induced (i.e., the "9/11" terrorist attack in 2001 or the global financial crisis in 2008) and by natural causes (i.e., the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004 and the earthquake in Japan in 2011), leading to significant repercussions on tourism destinations (Breitsohl & Garrod, 2016). Therefore, crisis management is of great importance to tourism destinations (Ritchie, 2004). In the era of Web 2.0, the development of Internet and social media has greatly changed the traditional top-down spread of access to information in crisis events, which in turn has challenged and impacted applications of crisis management (Lin, Spence, Sellnow, & Lachlan, 2016).

It is acknowledged that social media plays an important role when crisis events break out (Schroeder, Pennington-Gray, Donohoe, & Kiousis, 2013). The multi-way communication channels and high interaction features inherent to social media (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011; Lotan et al., 2011) enable it not only to be an important information source and method of dissemination (Starbird et al., 2015), but also to provide an open and free space for the public (Dong, Liang, & He, 2016), which

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therefore greatly encourages public online participation in the crisis event, prompting the public opinion field to expand from offline and face-to-face to cyberspace (Xie, Qiao, Shao, & Chen, 2016). According to a telephone survey conducted by Xie et al. (2016) in China, 64.7% of interviewees participate in discussion and communication in a crisis event, and more than 40% are involved in communication on social media. At such times, social media users are no longer passive information receivers, but instead active participants in crisis communications (Cheng, Mitomo, Otsuka, & Jeon, 2016); this kind of online participation behavior greatly promotes the secondary crisis communication of crisis events on social media, which is defined as social media users' online behavior of commenting on, sharing, or forwarding posts about crises (Schultz, Utz, & Göritz, 2011; Utz, Schultz, & Glocka, 2013). Further, the secondary crisis communication will cause other, new problems (Hu, 2008) and have a social impact (Zhou, 2009), including on social media users' behavioral intentions such as the willingness to boycott the organization and negative word-of-mouth communication (Coombs & Holladay, 2009, 2007, 2008). Therefore, with the involvement of the Internet and social media, secondary crisis communication has become a new feature of crisis communication (Lin et al., 2016; Schultz et al., 2011; Utz et al., 2013), the influence of which should not be ignored.

This study takes the "Occupy Central" event in Hong Kong as a case study. Occupy Central was a political protest campaign calling for the general election of Hong Kong's chief executive. Occupy Central was officially launched on Sept. 28, 2014 (while began on March 27, 2013), and ended on Dec. 15, 2014, lasting 79 days in total (Jiang, 2015). Because of the event's political sensitivity, the information spreading in mainland China was under strict control, and reports from mainstream and mass media were of obvious political orientation (Chen, 2015). However, it is worth noting that social media have come to constitute a significant tool for promoting the communication of Occupy Central (Min & Liu, 2015). Based on statistics collected by the author, with the spread of Occupy Central on the Chinese social media Weibo, more and more people in mainland China began to get involved. Weibo (weibo.com) is a micro-blog platform created in August 2009 by Sina.com, and is the biggest online news portal website and one of the most popular social media in mainland China (Shao, Li, Morrison, & Wu, 2016). Similar to Twitter, a Weibo user can post texts, photos, or videos to all his/her followers or selected friends, and meanwhile get messages updated by other users they follow or that are automatically recommended by Weibo, for which they can comment, forward, or "like" the posts they are interested in. With all these features incorporated, Weibo has become an important field of public opinion in mainland China (Ji, 2016). This study focuses precisely on the secondary crisis communication of Occupy Central on Weibo, that is, of Weibo users' sending comments, forwarding, and sharing with regard to this political event. As collected by the author, there were only 232 posts by official Weibo accounts (those certified with a capital "V" on Weibo, such as "People.com V") on Occupy Central; however, the number of total forwarded posts and comments by Weibo users grew to 46,037 and 22,399, respectively. Although public opinion on Weibo is in some degree under control, there is no denying that Weibo users played a very important and active role in spreading messages about Occupy Central. Within the secondary crisis communication, especially, of Occupy Central on Weibo, more and more negative emotions toward Hong Kong were displayed, along with the intentional behavior of a tourism boycott. These showed a strong reluctance to travel to Hong Kong, as for example, one suggesting "Only those who have nothing to do will go to Hong Kong" [JWHSZGD 2014-11-02 09:34]. This phenomenon of secondary crisis communication regarding Occupy Central on Weibo—the shift from a political event to a tourism boycott—aroused the author's attention.

This study aims to understand: (a) How did the secondary crisis communication of Occupy Central on Weibo shift from a political event to a tourism boycott?, (b) What was the turning point of this transfer?, and (c) What role did emotions play in this process? To these ends, by analyzing the secondary crisis communication of Occupy Central on Weibo, this study exploratorily researches the general characteristics of secondary crisis communication of such kinds of crises on social media, enriching and developing crisis management theories with regard to tourism destinations. In addition, in an innovation, this study introduces the Internet thinking component of crisis management in tourism destinations, which is of practical import for potential crisis prevention through social media for tourism destinations.

2. Literature review

2.1. Crisis communication on social media

Because tourism is extremely sensitive to and easily influenced by external environmental factors such as politics, the economy, and nature, research on crisis events has received great attention in tourism (Araña & León, 2008; Blake & Sinclair, 2003; Paraskevas, Altinay, McLean, & Cooper, 2013; Sönmez, Apostolopoulos, & Tarlow, 1999). More importantly, the development of the Internet and social media has greatly changed the spreading pattern of crisis events and the public's participation in them, thus giving rise to new challenges for crisis management in tourism destinations. The containment of the crisis and communication are the key points of crisis management (Coombs, 1999). Media play a significant role in crisis communication (Cheng et al., 2016), with tremendous influential power (Ball-Rokeach, 1985) to not only influence the crisis event itself, but also to have a counter effect on people's understanding and construction of society (Jackson, Nielsen, & Hsu, 2011). Compared to traditional mass media, the significant influencing power of social media in a crisis event has been recognized and a subject of wide concern (Cheng et al., 2016). During a crisis event, social media will potentially impact individuals' thoughts, behaviors, and reactions (Schroeder & Pennington-Gray, 2015). Ha and Fang (2012) think that the Internet can competitively replace the mass media, and Olorunnisola and Martin (2013) also agree that social media will greatly challenge the role and function of traditional mass media. Realizing the importance of social media, the government has also begun to use it in crisis information communications (Park, Choi, Kim, & Rho, 2015). Thus, the role of social media in a crisis event should not be ignored (Cheng et al., 2016). Currently, the research on crisis events and social media mainly focuses on demographic characteristics of social media users (Sutton, Palen, & Shklovski, 2008), how crisis information spreads (Paraskevas et al., 2013), and crisis management (Schroeder et al., 2013). Specifically for crisis management, the management after the crisis is of the most concern, such as the image repairing of tourism destinations on social media (e.g. Avraham, 2015).

More importantly, social media greatly changes the spreading pattern of crisis events (Utz et al., 2013), enabling them to spread quickly to a large scale (Derani & Naidu, 2016). Moreover, traditionally the information of mass media such as television or newspapers is transmitted in a single and top-down way (Utz et al., 2013) and the public are only passive information receivers (Cheng et al., 2016). The development of the Internet and social media, however, has provided the public with an equal and interactive communication platform, whereby social media users can express their own opinions online (Sandoval & Fuchs, 2010) as well as by sending comments, sharing, and discussing the crisis event with other followers (Lin et al., 2016).