



#Strongerthanwinston: Tourism and crisis communication through Facebook following tropical cyclones in Fiji

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ABSTRACT

Because the tourism industry can be affected by various natural disasters, the media landscape with increasing social media, brings to tourism new possibilities and challenges in its preparing for, and handling, such disasters. The literature has paid little attention to social media's part in such phenomena. Therefore, this study explores how social media are used by hotels following Tropical Cyclone Winston in Fiji using mixed methods, based on interviews (n = 12) and hotels' real time Facebook posts (n = 1288). While we find that social media were underused in preparing for the disaster and response that followed, it played a crucial role in raising funds and donations during the recovery phase. We apply the social mediated disaster resilience (SMDR) model to allow this study to fill the knowledge gap in organizational disaster resilience literature. We show how social media are integrated in resilience-building and its potential for increasing hotel resilience.

1. Introduction

Over the last few years, several tourism destinations have faced severe natural disasters, including earthquakes in New Zealand, hurricanes in the Caribbean, and volcanic activities in Bali. In February 2016, the Fiji Islands were hit by the tropical cyclone Winston (TC Winston), with winds exceeding 300 km an hour. This Category 5 cyclone significantly devastated local Fijian communities and seriously damaged hotel business (Government of Fiji, 2016; Robinson, Harris, Ray, Morrison, & Cross, 2016). Disasters like TC Winston demand preliminary and on-going communication between local communities and tourists. Accordingly, the increase of social media use involves new and faster ways for affected people to prepare and handle disasters (Liu, Palen, Sutton, Hughes, & Vieweg, 2008; Veil, Buehner, & Palenchar, 2011). Previous research into crisis informatics shows how social media are important to disaster communication to warn people, request assistance, and raise funds and donations afterwards for affected communities (Bruns, Burgess, Craford, & Shaw, 2012; Cho, Jung, & Park, 2013).

Yet the role of social media in crisis and disaster communication remains “an embryonic area of research in tourism” (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014, p. 32). In other words, the studies that have been published cover only three aspects of social media: how they affect how tourists perceive risk, how the media can be used to manage brand and reputation, and how they restore the image of destinations or businesses following

a crisis (Horster & Gottschalk, 2012; Liu, Kim, & Pennington-Gray, 2015; Schroeder, Pennington-Gray, Donohoe, & Kioussis, 2013; Sigala, 2011). So far, from an organizational perspective, research focuses little on how social media is included in tourism businesses' disaster communication strategies. That is, few analyze tourism businesses' ‘real time’ social media use during a disaster to prepare, respond and recover (Houston et al., 2015; Hvass, 2013).

Resilience can generally describe the ability of a system to cope with disturbances (Holling, 1973). Walker, Holling, Carpenter, and Kinzig (2004, p. 6) go further to define it as “the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and reorganize while undergoing change so as to retain essentially the same function, structure, identity and feedbacks”. In organizational research, *resilience* commonly refers to the way a business responds and resists the unfavorable effects of negative events (Annarelli & Nonino, 2016). Unsurprisingly, tourism organizations need to resile from the unpredictable and changing environment that results from significantly impactful natural disasters (Hall, 2017). Nevertheless, business resilience research is fragmented (Linnenluecke, 2015).

Although organizations and communities are often analysed separately in the resilience literature, we suggest that they should be analyzed as being closely interlinked. Firstly, tourism businesses and organizations are not merely commercial enterprises; they also serve as small communities during disasters. Organizations frequently act as emergency responders to sustain damage, to assist its employees and

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customers. Secondly, previous studies from Pacific Island countries show that tourism resorts in the local communities are the main employers and income providers for the local population (Bradly, 2015). In Fiji, the relationship between resorts and host communities can be described as interdependent in that the resorts rely on employing staff and local goods from villages, while some local village businesses ‘piggy back’ on successful resorts, by providing, for example, village stays and nature tours (Bradly, 2015; Movono, Pratt, & Harrison, 2015). Ongoing community projects in line with a resorts' corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, including donations and development projects, also illustrate the links between Fijian resorts and villages (Scheyvens & Hughes, 2015).

The levels of preparedness and procedures to avoid, minimize and handle the risks and impacts of disasters within the hotel sector are low (Brown, Rovins, Feldmann-Jensen, Orchiston, & Johnston, 2017; Wang & Ritchie, 2012). Thus, there is a need to analyze how communication through social media may be a way of achieving goals for tourism businesses to adapt during disaster, which goes beyond merely reputation management (Brown et al., 2017; Williams, Gruber, Sutcliffe, Shepherd, & Zhao, 2017).

This article explores the use of social media in disaster communication by hotels and its potential as a platform for building organizational resilience. We thus analyze both qualitative and quantitative data from two sources: (1) Facebook data (Facebook posts) from hotels in areas affected by the cyclone, based on location, size and operation, and (2) An interview study with hotel managers in Fiji, conducted in June 2016.

2. Literature review

2.1. Disaster management and resilience in tourism

The tourism industry is inevitably affected by various external uncontrollable factors, ranging from terrorism, financial crisis to natural disasters. The events sometimes result in relatively minor disturbances, but may cause a significant loss of services, business reputation or even human lives. In the wake of several disastrous events affecting tourism destinations, the last two decades have seen an increasing number of studies discussing crisis management within tourism (Pforr, 2009, pp. 37–52). Because of the overlap between ‘crisis’ and ‘disaster’, many scholars use both terms simultaneously (Faulkner, 2001; Moreira, 2007). Faulkner (2001) distinguishes between the definitions of ‘crisis’ and ‘disaster’, based on whether the cause is due to some internal organizational failure to act in a crisis or an external event over which the organization has no control (e.g., a disaster). He suggests that good management can avoid crises to some degree, whereas disasters are often more unpredictable. With that in mind, this study focuses more on cyclones because they are a natural disaster. Tourism research acknowledges the need for disaster management in different phases of cyclones and other disaster events, stressing the need for prevention, preparedness, response and recovery (Shurland & de Jong, 2008). However, tourism scholars have only recently started to recognize that building community and organizational resilience is important because the industry is vulnerable to disasters (Biggs, Hall, & Stoeckl, 2012; Butler, 2017). In tourism, resilience is widely understood to be the ability of the industry to cope with disaster/crisis so that its stability is sustained with the flexibility and diversity required for future development (Bruneau et al., 2003; Luthe & Wyss, 2014). Resilience was introduced to tourism research during the 1990s to extend the value of biodiversity in tourism development (Lovejoy, 1994).

The literature linking resilience to disaster management is vast. The “4R” model of resilience introduced by Bruneau et al. (2003) has been widely adopted. According to these authors, ‘resilience’ involves *robustness* describes the ability to immediately resist and overcome operational problems; *rapidity* refers to rate that the time required to solve those problems can be reduced; *redundancy* involves substituting

resources and replacing inventories needed to perform critical functions; and *resourcefulness* describes the ability to detect, prioritize and resolve problems by mobilizing resources. While ‘rapidity’ reflects mobilizing resources at great speed, ‘redundancy’ can be viewed as a ‘planned’ operational replacement function to ensure resource availability. The other two properties, ‘robustness’ and ‘resourcefulness’, are highly interrelated, and both refer to the ability to cope with problems during disasters. Bruneau et al.’s 4R resilience model (2003) has been criticized for excluding “how actors acquire resources and how resources are used” (Kapucu & Liou, 2014, p. 183). Zobel (2011) further commented that both robustness and resourcefulness are viewed as “means” rather than the “desired end” to enhance resilience by influencing redundancy and rapidity. Norris and her colleagues (2008) have therefore adapted three properties (namely ‘3Rs’ – *robustness*, *redundancy* and *rapidity*) under *resourcefulness* to highlight the link between resources and resilience.

Therefore, we apply the research model of resilience to crises and disasters within tourism (Cutter, Ash, & Emrich, 2014; Hall, 2010; Hayward, 2013) using the revised 3Rs: robustness, rapidity and redundancy. This means that we separate in our analysis the broader resilience measure, resourcefulness, to the extent of using it as the subject of our second research questions (see Section 2.4). We took this approach to extend most tourism resilience studies that focus both on tourism strengthening destinations economically and its “communities, policy and planning, and sustainable development” (Hall, 2017, p. 55). We also add quantitative research to the tourism literature which, till now, has measured how resilience is applied qualitatively (Luthe & Wyss, 2014).

2.2. Organizational resilience in the tourism context: the hotel sector

Tourism organizations, including hotels, are passive in risk assessment and planning in the case of disaster (Lamanna, Williams, & Childers, 2012). Despite the growing literature encouraging the tourism industry to pay more attention to disaster preparedness and prevention, no significant progress is found (Brown et al., 2017; Hystad & Keller, 2008). Within tourism studies, most literature investigates resilience as it is applied to communities. Organizational resilience only began emerging in 2010 (Hall, 2017; Orchiston, Prayag, & Brown, 2016). Furthermore, researchers do not agree about how to define *organizational resilience*. It refers firstly to the capacity to withstand and recover normality after a harmful event happens (Annarelli & Nonino, 2016). Resilience comprises three elements: the ability to adjust (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2008), recover (Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003), and adapt (Gittell, Cameron, Lim, & Rivas, 2006) when dealing with unanticipated challenges. Hotel resilience is defined as “a dynamic condition describing the capacity of a hotel, together with its stakeholders, to assess, innovate, adapt, and overcome possible disruptions that may be triggered by a disaster” (Brown et al., 2017, p. 365, p. 365). A number of papers have focused on the survival of organizations under the premise that resilient organizations will result in a resilient community or destination (McManus, Seville, Vargo, & Brunson, 2008; Orchiston et al., 2016). The measurement of organizational resilience, nevertheless, is still under way with a dearth of works investigating transferable or direct factors (Linnenluecke, 2015).

From the CSR perspective, hotels are often required to care for communities located at their sites, their social development, the surrounding environment, and their own guests and staff (Brown et al., 2017; Henderson, 2007; Lee & Park, 2009). In Fiji and other Pacific island countries, CSR activities by hotels have assisted with local communities with school projects, scholarships and business mentoring, as well as patronizing local food suppliers and improving employment conditions and policies (Bradly, 2015; Scheyvens & Hughes, 2015). Notably, hotels themselves can be viewed as small communities that link to the local communities at large. When a natural disaster occurs, hotels assist by communicating the condition of the destination and its

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