



# Tourism crisis management: Can the Extended Parallel Process Model be used to understand crisis responses in the cruise industry?



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Conducted an experiment to test the utility of the Extended Parallel Process Model (EPPM) in a cruise travel context.
- Applied moderated mediation analyses to investigate the effects of perceived threat and efficacy beliefs.
- Suggested new theoretical approaches to understand crisis communication in tourism and travel.
- Offered insights on how to craft effective crisis responses.

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper was to understand the effect of crisis communication on people's risk perception attitude, perceived safety, and cruise travel intentions. Specifically, this study was concerned with the emerging health issues of Norovirus outbreaks on cruise ships. A between-subjects experiment was conducted. Responses were collected from 169 participants after presenting them with different crisis communication messages. Drawing on the Extended Parallel Process Model, the findings revealed that perceived threat directly affected respondents' attitude towards the involved cruise line, while perceived efficacy moderated the relationship between perceived threat and perceived safety of cruising. Additionally, the results of this study indicated that perceived safety mediated the relationship between perceived threat and cruise travel intentions, and this mediating relationship was moderated by perceived efficacy. This study's findings suggest new theoretical approaches for understanding tourism crisis communication and recommend an audience-centered paradigm in communicating health crisis issues in tourism and travel.

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## 1. Introduction

Cruise tourism as an evolving research domain has received an increasing amount of scholarly attention in recent years. This is due to the industry's strong economic performance, the global expansion of cruise lines, and the increasing popularity of cruising among tourists' choices (Papathanassis & Beckmann, 2011). Contemporary cruise ships serve as more than a mode of transportation. Instead, these "floating resorts" now offer various amenities (e.g., deluxe accommodations, fine dining restaurants, and gym and spa centers) and leisure activities (e.g., live shows, and water sports), as well as

satisfy modern tourists' inquiries of exploration, entertainment, and relaxation. However, traveling by sea is associated with increased exposure to various types of health risks, ranging from sea sickness (e.g., nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea), respiratory diseases (e.g., coughing and sneezing), stressors (e.g., changes in diet and variation in climate), to exposure to viruses (e.g., noroviruses) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014).

Particularly, the World Health Organization [WHO] and researchers have identified Noroviruses (NoVs), the leading cause of human acute viral gastroenteritis, as one of the most publicized health concerns associated with cruise travel (Bert et al., 2014; World Health Organization, 2015). The cruise industry's vulnerability to NoVs outbreaks could be attributed to the virus's microbiological characteristics, the cruise ship's physical environment as a closed community, and the expansion of global passengers (Bert

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et al., 2014). The CDC report that NoVs cause 19–21 million illnesses every year and are responsible for over 90% of the diarrheal disease outbreaks on cruise ships (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015). Although the actual occurrence of a large-scale NoVs outbreak on cruise ships may not be that often, an outbreak caused by NoVs could generate profound impacts, such as threats to passengers' well-being, economic loss, potential litigation, and negative publicity associated with the cruise line and the entire industry (Marti, 1995).

Ensuring passengers' safety and security has become one of the cruise industry's main initiatives. The goal to prevent and contain outbreaks caused by NoVs and/or other infectious agents on cruise ships has taken a high priority in recent years. For example, major cruise lines now have employed a variety of enhanced sanitation practices, established outbreak prevention and response plans, and provided specific instructions for crew members and passengers on proper hygiene practices (Cruise Line International Association, 2015). However, managing a health-related crisis like NoVs outbreaks is more challenging and sophisticated on cruise ships, because: 1) the cruise ship's environment appears to be an ideal condition for the emergence and the rapid spread of NoVs outbreaks (Bert et al., 2014); 2) the age profile of cruise passengers has remained largely consistent over these years, with the majority being at least 55 years old, who appear to be more susceptible to NoVs infections (Bert et al., 2014; Cruise Line International Association, 2015); 3) most passengers are not aware of the severity of NoVs infections, refusing to practice preventive actions (i.e., washing hands and using hand sanitizers) and/or report their illness (Neri, Cramer, Vaughan, Vinjé, & Mainzer, 2008); and 4) the increasing amount of news coverage directed to this issue may have amplified the crisis situation and increased the public's risk perception, which in turn manifests into individuals' fears, distrust, and reluctances in purchasing cruise products (Crimson Hexagon, 2013).

Scholars have called for additional efforts in preventing, responding to, and controlling NoVs outbreaks on cruise ships (Bert et al., 2014; Neri et al., 2008). Crisis communication is a critical and essential component in successful crisis management practices, especially for the tourism industry, which relies on solid strategic communication campaigns to bridge the communication gap between industry and the traveling public during times of crisis (Fall, 2004). As for the cruising industry, it has become essential to manage health-related crises like NoVs outbreaks before they translate into lost business.

The growing scholarship in cruise tourism has covered a variety of research topics, including staff management, cruise operation, ports/destination management, and passenger management (Papathanassis & Beckmann, 2011), while crisis communication and management are still relatively new areas that remain underdeveloped. Therefore, with specific consideration of cruise tourism and health-related crises, the main purpose of this study was to examine the crisis communication mechanism, investigating how individuals process crisis communication messages and generate different types of outcomes. In doing so, this study also aimed to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by offering theoretical and practical implications in regard to managing emerging health crisis issues within cruise tourism.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. *Tourism crisis management and crisis communication in the cruise industry: what is missing?*

Outbreaks of health-related crises can significantly impact both cruise tourists and cruise companies in various ways. Directly,

occurrences of health epidemics on cruise ships can interrupt the normal operation of cruise lines, as well as pose threats to the personal health and well-being of passengers, crew members, and even local residents of cruise ports (Bert et al., 2014). Tourists' risk perceptions may also therefore be increased. An increased level of perceived risk not merely affects people's travel intentions, but also may in turn have an impact on the cruise revenue. Indirectly, infected passengers may suffer emotional stress from the crisis and those involved cruise lines may face challenges of reputational damage and bad publicity (Klein, 2008). Additionally, continuous outbreaks of health-related crises, such as the NoVs epidemics, can generate cumulative effects that are likely to be more profound and complex. An example of these chaotic situations is the recent outbreak of H1N1 in Mexico, which culminated in a loss of one million international visitor arrivals and a loss of nearly three billion dollars in tourism income (Rassy & Smith, 2013).

Considering the seriousness of a health crisis, the cruise industry has become more responsive and reactive towards managing NoVs outbreaks. In 2002, when the cruise industry first saw an increased number of NoVs outbreaks, it adopted an offensive PR campaign, which (1) denied the responsibility of the NoVs outbreaks, (2) victimized the industry as affected by a national epidemic, and (3) blamed passengers as the major source of the outbreak (Klein, 2008). However, the "passengers bring it with them" mantra proved to be a failure. This is mainly because it did not address the situation adequately and could not eliminate NoVs outbreaks on cruise ships. In the last five years, interestingly, cruise lines have changed the way they respond to NoVs outbreaks. A recent study reported that the Princess Cruise Line, which has experienced a series of NoVs outbreak in the past decade, has begun responding to the NoVs incidents directly and strategically (Liu & Pennington-Gray, 2015a). These responses employed different types of reputational management strategies (i.e., apology and compensation), which is consistent with the crisis communication literature (Liu & Pennington-Gray, 2015a). Recent media reports also indicated that a growing number of cruise line companies, such as Royal Caribbean and Fred Olsen Cruise line, used similar strategies in their responses regarding NoV outbreaks (Daily Mail News, 2015; Royal Caribbean Blog, 2014).

Nevertheless, the public's reactions are unexpected. A national survey found that recent NoVs outbreaks on cruise ships have resulted in the public's declining attitude towards cruising, along with their distrust and disappointment of cruise products, and hesitations to cruise in the future (Harris Poll, 2014). Even for passengers who have already begun their voyage, very few of them have proper knowledge about NoVs infections. Several studies examining cruise passengers' behaviors during NoVs outbreaks on cruise ships have revealed that most passengers were not fully aware of the severity of the issue, nor did they have adequate knowledge to identify symptoms, enact preventive behaviors, and/or properly handle their own illness resulting from NoVs infections (Neri et al., 2008; Wikswow et al., 2011).

The discrepancies between cruise lines' crisis management efforts and the public's response highlight the significance of crisis communication (Bert et al., 2014; Neri et al., 2008). Crisis communication lies at the center of strategic crisis management practices for the tourism industry (Fall, 2004; Ritchie, 2008). This also applies to the cruise tourism sector, one of the fastest-growing sectors within the industry (Goeldner & Ritchie, 2011). The benefits of effective crisis communication include delivering crucial and time-sensitive information, assuring the public's confidence, protecting organizational reputation, and decreasing long-term negative impacts (Coombs & Holladay, 2011). When it comes to a health context, effective crisis communication strategies can also educate the public, encouraging passengers to engage in preventive

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