



Predicting information seeking regarding hurricane evacuation in the destination



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Risk belief positively affects information seeking regarding hurricane evacuation.
- Hurricane knowledge negatively affects information seeking regarding hurricane evacuation.
- Past experience with hurricane impacts negatively affects information seeking regarding hurricane evacuation.

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ABSTRACT

The study examined the roles of tourists' risk beliefs, connectedness, hurricane knowledge, and their past experiences with hurricane impacts in relation to their information seeking behavior regarding hurricane evacuation while in the destination. Surveys were collected from tourists who were visiting Florida in September 2011, during the Atlantic hurricane season. Findings from this study reveal and confirm the existence of the critical relationship among tourist information seeking, past experience with hurricanes, individual risk beliefs, and level of knowledge. It is recommended that destination managers make investments in hurricane communication messages, which target a wide array of tourists. The effectiveness of hurricane evacuation information is linked to the receptiveness of the content of the message by differing groups.

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1. Introduction

Information is frequently defined as stimuli from an individual's environment that contributes to that individual's knowledge of beliefs (Brashers, Goldsmith, & Hsieh, 2002). Moreover, information management includes communicative and cognitive activities such as seeking, avoiding, providing, appraising and interpreting the aforesaid stimuli. For example, useful information can decrease

distress associated with uncertainty and can contribute to optimistic reappraisals of uncertainty. Conversely, information can also increase stress-producing certainty, while avoiding information may allow some people to maintain their current state of knowledge or beliefs (Brashers et al., 2000).

In hazardous situations, people often wait to act while interpreting messages (Mileti, 1999). Over the past two decades, studies have found that various population groups employ different sources to seek confirmation information, citing several factors that influence risk information search behaviors. These include risk

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beliefs (Lee & Rodriquez, 2008; Sriramesh, Moghan, & Wei, 2007), past experiences with the hazards (Gladwin & Peacock, 1997; Johnson & Meischke, 1993; Lenz, 1984), individual connectedness with the hazards (Hallahan, 2000; Havitz & Dimanche, 1999), and knowledge (Mayhorn, 2005; Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998).

Griffin, Dunwoody, and Neuwirth (1999) argued that individual risk information seeking behaviors dictate how individuals manage a specific risk. Individuals utilize the information they gathered to assess the risk they face and ultimately decide to utilize preventive behaviors in order to cope with the impending risks (Alexander, 1993; Burton, Kates, & White, 1993; Egelhoff & Sen, 1992; Rohrmann, 1999). Further, Griffin et al. (1999) suggest that the nature of information search that individuals employ be explored to include a focus on uncertain and risky situations due to the complicated nature of risks. Additionally, there is an emerging body of theory in both psychology and communication which should be utilized to better facilitate further study in this area. In the context of risk information, Griffin, Neuwirth, and Dunwoody (1995) found that under riskier situations, individuals tend to employ systematic processing to a greater degree than they do during less risky situations. Nonetheless, there is a scarcity of empirical research to support how specific groups seek and process information and adopt preventive behaviors relative to a specific hazard (Rohrmann, 2000). Consequently, the findings in this study help to elucidate the understanding of tourists as a transient population and their information seeking behavior under a given hazard. The other main contribution of the study is to explore the nature of predictive behaviors as an output of information seeking behaviors related to evacuation. While numerous tourism studies examine various forms of tourist information search behaviors (e.g. Baloglu, 1999; Chen & Gursoy, 2000; Fodness & Murray, 1997, 1998, 1999; Luo, Feng, & Cai, 2004; Snepenger, Megeed, Snelling, & Worrall, 1990; Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998), there are virtually no empirical studies to date that examine information seeking behaviors of tourists while in the destination under risky situations (Ritchie, 2009), specifically how information seeking behavior may evoke their reactionary behavior, such as evacuation decision making.

This study focuses on hurricanes, which in the United States are currently considered to be the most expensive natural disaster, predominantly in coastal areas (Blake, Kimberlain, Berg, Cangialosi, & Beven, 2013; Ewing, Kruse, & Sutter, 2007; NSB, 2007). According to the 2012 National Hurricane Center report, Hurricane Sandy was the deadliest hurricane to hit the northeastern U.S. in 40 years and the second costliest in the nation's history. While Sandy's most significant devastation was concentrated in the coastal areas of New Jersey and New York, it formed wind gusts as far west as Wisconsin and as far north as Canada and triggered the rise of water levels from Florida to Maine. The report also estimated damage caused by Sandy at \$50 billion, greater than any U.S. hurricane except Katrina, which in 2005 caused \$108 billion in damage. Hurricane Andrew in 1992 caused \$26.5 billion in damage in Florida, or equal to \$44 billion today (Blake et al., 2013). The economic losses associated with hurricanes to industries such as fishing, agricultural, and tourism has been extensive, and forecasts suggest it will often take decades to recover (Myles & Allen, 2007).

In the event of a hurricane, as a transient population, tourists are vulnerable (Phillips & Morrow, 2007) primarily due to a lack of understanding of the risks posed by hurricanes. Moreover, tourists are often in unfamiliar surroundings and are without the everyday support systems of their home community (Burby & Wagner, 1996; World Tourism Organization, 1998). Accordingly, the impact to the tourist in a risky situation may be greater than to those in the general resident population. Furthermore, various characteristics of tourists, past experiences, and knowledge of hurricanes may affect their information seeking and reactionary behaviors during the risk

communication process. Specifically, tourists who are not from areas exposed to hurricanes may lack knowledge about technical terms associated with hurricane messages (i.e. cone of uncertainty, hurricane watches and warnings). International tourists face additional challenges related to having difficulty in communicating in the local language of the tourist destination.

As an act of evacuation is an individual response to a perceived danger in their environment in which the individuals act in an affirmative way to alleviate the perceived risk by leaving the dangerous location, media and officials are often the first source used by the public to help them in making evacuation decisions. Thus, having sufficient information is pivotal in the decision making process when the person is faced with a threatening situation (Burnside, Miller, & Rivera, 2007).

Most studies of the impacts of information on evacuation decision-making have focused on residents (Burnside et al., 2007), with most finding that television was the main source of evacuation information (Solis, Thomas, & Letson, 2010). Transient populations such as tourists have received minimal attention (Cahyanto & Pennington-Gray, 2014; Cahyanto et al., 2014; Matyas et al., 2011; Villegas et al., 2013). The few noteworthy contributions to tourist behavior during hurricanes were published in the early and mid-1990s and largely by one author (Drabek, 1994; 1995; 1996; 1996b; 1999; 2000) with a focus on evacuation strategies and policies. Only recently has research been conducted which explores the viewpoints of tourists (Cahyanto & Pennington-Gray, 2014; Cahyanto et al., 2014; Matyas et al., 2011; Villegas et al., 2013).

Transient populations may have a unique way of accessing available information in the location because of their limited understanding of the location as well as the eminent hazard. Focusing on the population of transient tourists will shed light on crafting a more effective way to disseminate hurricane risk information to tourists. Thus, it is essential to identify types of tourists and factors that influence their risk information seeking in order to craft effective hurricane risk communication messages and to select the most effective channels to deliver these messages to tourists. Unfortunately, there remains a paucity of academic research in this area (Cahyanto & Pennington-Gray, 2014; Cahyanto et al., 2014; Phillips & Morrow, 2007). To that end, the objective of this study is to examine the relationship among several tourist characteristics: hurricane risk belief, connectedness with hurricanes, current knowledge about hurricanes, and past experience with hurricanes in predicting information seeking regarding hurricane evacuation in the destination.

2. Guiding framework

Because we are interested in understanding how people seek and process information about a given risk, in this case hurricane evacuations, we adopted Eagly and Chaiken's (1993) Heuristic-Systemic Model of Information Processing (HSM) as well as Griffin, Dunwoody, and Neuwirth's (1999) model of risk information seeking and processing as our guiding framework. HSM helps to understand how individuals process information about a given risk, while Griffin et al.'s (1999) model links information processing to information seeking behavior in the context of risk communication.

HSM describes dual forms of human processing of information as heuristic and systematic, with heuristic being more superficial than systematic (Chaiken, 1980; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Eagly and Chaiken (1993) define heuristic processing as "a limited mode of information processing that requires less cognitive resources" (p. 327), while systematic processing is defined as a more elaborate, complete effort to analyze and understand information. According to HSM, individuals process messages based on their capacity to understand the information as well as their motivation to go

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