

The Reputation Crisis at the Tourism Destination: Connotation, Types and Management Strategies

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Abstract

The reputation at the tourism destination is the public's general feeling, impression and cognition of it. A good reputation is an intangible asset to the tourism destination and the guarantee of sustainable development of it. With the development of new online media, the social environment of the tourism destination is becoming increasingly complex. This change brings opportunities for tourism development. However, some uncertainties multiply rapidly and the tourism destination is facing reputation crisis more and more frequently. Reputation and crisis management at tourism destinations has become an important part of destination management. This paper analyzes the connotation, types and impacts of the reputation crisis at the tourism destination and puts forward management strategies according to different types of reputation crises with a view to providing a reference for reputation management in tourism destination.

Key words: *tourism destination, reputation crisis, management strategy*

1. Introduction

The tourism industry has the characteristics like comprehensiveness, relevance, dependence and allopatry etc. It is thus the most vulnerable sector of the national economy when there are political, economic, social or natural crises. With the development of China's tourism into the full stage of popularity, the scale of domestic tourism has quickly expanded, and inbound and outbound tourism has sharply grown, the tourist's structure has become more diverse, and the interests demand has gradually varied. Moreover, fuelled by the supervision reports of new online media and traditional media, the probability and the degree of damage of the incidents causing reputation crisis in the tourism destination such as natural disasters, traffic accidents, facility accidents, physical fights, criminal cases, food security, price fraud, forced consumption, trading disputes, and uncivilized behaviors have been even greater. This not only affects the tourist's personal safety, the operation and image of tourism enterprises, but also to some extent jeopardizes the security of the whole tourism industry. In the process of crisis management, improper measures are likely to harm the tourist reputation greatly, while the appropriate response can minimize the damage of the crisis on the tourist reputation, and even enhance the tourist reputation. Numerous real-world cases show that effective crisis management plays a key role in maintaining and upgrading the tourist reputation. However, as for effective crisis management of the reputation in tourism destinations, the first thing should be a clear distinction of the types and degrees of the tourist reputation crisis and then targeted management strategies can be employed. Based on this and the theories of reputation management and crisis management, this paper studies the connotation, types, impacts and management strategies of tourist reputation crisis, and provides theoretical basis for the tourism reputation crisis management.

2. The Connotation of Reputation Crisis in the Tourism Destination

The connotation of tourist reputation crisis should be first clarified before the types of reputation crisis and management strategy at the tourism destination are studied. The reputation of an organization is the credit and reputation it has gained in the community. The public's subjective evaluations of a tourism destination constitute its reputation, characterized by the public's general feeling, impression and cognition of it. There are many ways to define crisis. Laurence Barton, the master of crisis management, thinks that a crisis is a big event with potential negative impacts and uncertainties. This and its consequences may cause massive damage on an organization and its employees, products, services, assets and reputation. Li Yunhong and Lv Hongbing define a crisis as posing a threat to organizational goals and interests and resulting in tension due to mutations in its external and internal conditions in any organized system and its subsystems. Based on the above definitions, the author holds the opinion that tourist reputation crisis refers to the tension causing tremendous damage to the public's feeling, impression and cognition of the tourist destination due to the potential negative effects and the uncertainties possibly caused by the internal and external environment changes.

3. Types of Tourist Reputation Crisis

Classification is a process of grouping and categorization according to things' similarities or heterogeneities, and is the basic approach to understanding things and the basic method of scientific research. To understand the types of tourist reputation crisis plays a fundamental role in the design of tourist reputation and crisis management strategy. The Trigger of the tourist reputation crisis was the crisis events affecting the tourist reputation. The cause of the crises, to some extent, determines the type, intensity, and countermeasures of the tourist reputation crisis.

The attribution theory of social psychology theories points out that when the public suffer from a crisis, they will look for the root cause of it; when the crisis is caused by the relevant subject's own negligence or purpose, the public will become angry and take negative actions; when it results from external factors beyond control, the public will show sympathy with relatively positive attitudes and behaviors. On the basis of the public perception of attribution of responsibility to the crisis, crisis events, in Coombs's opinion, can be divided into 3 types: Victim crisis, Accidental crisis and Preventable crisis. Different crisis communications and public relation strategies should be adopted according to different types of crises.

Based on the classification of the crisis events by Coombs, this paper will correspondingly divide the crisis events of tourist reputation into 3 types: Victim reputation crisis, Accidental reputation crisis, and Preventable reputation crisis.

3.1 Victim Reputation Crisis

Victim reputation crisis is caused by Force Majeure. Force majeure is non-human and human risk factors that are unforeseeable, unavoidable, uncontrollable, and unable to overcome such as natural disasters, acts of the government (policies, laws and administrative measures) and the social exception events (wars, armed conflicts, strikes, labor shortages, riots, insurrection, etc.). Tourism destination, like its tourists, is the victim of victim reputation crisis triggered by force majeure, but due to the seriousness and destructive effects of the incident itself, it becomes a public hot spot. This leads to the public's high degree of cognition of risks in the tourism destination and the changes in the potential tourists' perception of the image and reputation of the tourism destination, greatly affecting the elevation of their willingness to tour and further the result of the recovery of the tourism destination. Take "Wenchuan earthquake" in Sichuan in 2008 for example, the safe tourist image and reputation of Sichuan had experienced a severe shock. The recovery of tourism in different parts had experienced difficulties and taken a long time.

3.2 Accident Reputation Crisis

Accident reputation crisis is caused by the fault of tourism organizations or individuals themselves. Contributory fault is that the organization or individuals should foresee what negative consequences their own behaviors may produce, or they fail to do so due to their negligence, or they have foreseen it but are too credulous to avoid it so as to cause such a result. Such incidents occur, though not intentionally, but after all tourism-related subjects should take the responsibility, so they are vulnerable to public opinion and criticism, and thus exert an adverse impact on the tourist reputation. This type of reputation crisis is

characterized by the negligence of tourism enterprises or the government, causing accidents such as malfunction of equipment, explosion, fire, food poisoning and collision etc.

3.3 Preventable Reputation Crisis

Preventable reputation crisis is intentionally caused by tourism organizations or individuals themselves. Self-intention is that the crisis-related organizations or individuals know their act will produce negative results and still wish or allow such things to happen. In tourism destinations, the main crisis event is tourism enterprises' violation of visitors' interests, such as customer discrimination, forced consumption, customers ripped off with high prices, and quality problems, involving tour guides from travel agencies, hotels, catering, and scenic spots etc. It will become a hot spot more easily if such things happen in a vicious manner at a famous tourist site, just as "the event of ripping customers off" in Sanya in 2012 caused wide public concern about Sanya's tourism credit, greatly damaging the image and reputation of Sanya as a tourism destination.

4. Impacts of Tourist Reputation Crisis

4.1 Impacts on Tourists' Decision

According to the standard theory of reputation, reputation as a cognitive organization may influence the consumer's decision behavior. The occurrence and spread of the crisis event of tourist reputation will have an impact on tourists' cognition and affect their decisions. In this new media age, the experience of others is more likely to become the "precursor" of self-experience, which dramatically changes the "posteriority" characteristic of the tourism consumption and the decision pattern of it. Potential visitors' cognition and evaluation of the destination's reputation are formed in crisis through the information such as images and texts, or the tourists' visual thinking activities. The crisis event of tourist reputation touches people's most sensitive nerve – whether to tour is safe, and affects their perception of the environment at the tourism destination. A psychological map that the tourism destination is "unsafe" is thus formed in the mind of the potential tourists, which affects the result of tourists' risk decisions and leads tourists to cancel or change their tourist plans. Therefore, the number of visitors to the destination sharply drops.

4.2 Impacts on the Image of the Tourism Destination

The reputation crisis at the tourism destination results in the spread of the negative information, causing damage to the image of the destination. The crisis event's impact on the tourism destination is causing damage to tourists' expectations of the destination and their behavior patterns, directly resulting in tourism market fluctuations and generating new tourism decision-making and action. Through feedback and dissemination, a new image of the tourism destination is formed. A series of activities such as destination damage, information dissemination, tourists' cognition, tourism destination marketing and tourism crisis management will affect to various degrees tourists' perception of the destination's image, and a new tourism image thus comes into being. However, this perception of the new tourism image is always negative, which is not conducive to the establishment of a tourism brand and the sustainable development of tourism.

5. Management Strategies of the Tourist Reputation Crisis

5.1 Management Strategy of Victim Tourist Reputation Crisis

Victim reputation crisis events at the tourism destination caused by force majeure will soon calm down if tourism enterprises and government departments do not evade responsibilities and respond actively, take positive and effective measures, make information public to tourists, local residents, and the news media. The negative impacts will be minimized so as to avoid the transformation of victim crisis to accidental crisis and even to preventable crisis.

5.2 Management Strategy of Accidental Tourist Reputation Crisis

As for accidental tourist reputation crisis caused by their own negligence, in addition to the above measures, the responsible party shall be held accountable, and some amendments shall be made to improve the flawed organizational system and management system.

5.3 Management Strategy of Preventable Tourist Reputation Crisis

As for the preventable tourist reputation crisis caused intentionally by their own purposes, in addition to the measures mentioned above, the responsible party shall be severely punished and those breaking the law shall be investigated for criminal liability in accordance with the law. A profound rethinking of the environment and systems emboldening the perpetrators to show disregard for everything should be carried out and radical changes should be made to them correspondingly.

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