

**Using Theories of Stigma Management and Impression Management to
Understand and Repair Destination Image Following Tourism Crises**

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Researchers have noted that impression management is key to tourism crisis management planning and recovery (Ritchie et al., 2003:201); indeed, some have suggested that “crisis management is as much about dealing with human perceptions about the crisis as it is about physically resolving the crisis situation” (Heath 1998:26). Yet few studies have examined remedial strategies from a sociological perspective. The tourism literature is crowded with case studies describing responses to different types of tourism crises and disasters¹. But these writings seldom explain how specific strategies manage—or fail to manage—external audiences’² impressions of a destination’s image. When the effectiveness of strategies is evaluated (and it often is not) researchers rely on changes in indirect measures such as tourism arrivals, occupancy rates, or employment statistics for tourism employees—an approach that draws attention from how strategies work at the perceptual and affective level. This practice obviously assumes that strategies are effective, but the basis for this assumption remains implicit.

The sociological literature on stigma, stigma management and impression management in identity-threatening predicaments provides a useful framework for examining the remedial tactics used by presenters³ following a tourism crisis. These writings examine how identity-threatening events damage the socially desirable images actors claim or wish to claim, with an eye towards understanding how these events are managed (see Goffman 1963; Schlenker 1980; Page 1984; Jones et al. 1984; Sutton and Callahan 1987). Explicit focus is given to the impression management strategies used to protect images following a predicament. This perspective encompasses a wide range of remedial strategies, including those that are verbal and non-verbal, planned and unplanned, rational and (seemingly) irrational.

The present research draws on this literature to present a framework that systematically describes, categorizes and explains how remedial strategies manage the negative impressions created by tourism crises. This framework rests on the premise that the damage inflicted by tourism crises and disasters on destination image is analogous to a stigma⁴. It is argued that, although all crises and disasters are potentially damaging, stigmatization occurs only when three conditions are met: (1) audience members actually perceive and take note of the discrediting condition, (2) audiences consider the condition to be threatening or unpleasant, and (3) audiences deem the destination and/or its presenters to be at least somewhat responsible for the condition. These conditions are influenced by several factors, including the degree of exposure to potentially discrediting messages or images, the nature of the crisis or disaster, the behavior and reputation of presenters before, during, and after the crisis, and audiences’ tolerance of risk. The effectiveness of an impression management strategy is linked to its ability to influence the conditions contributing to stigmatization.

This framework is used to identify and explain the strengths and weaknesses of specific stigma management strategies used by presenters as they attempt to avert or mitigate damage to destination image following a tourism crisis. I propose a hierarchy of strategies used to manage stigma that is based on the extent to which presenters acknowledge the existence of a crisis. Specifically, six strategies are examined: concealment, denial, disconfirmation, acknowledgement, assurance, and withdrawal.

- **Concealment:** This strategy involves concealing the existence of a crisis from audiences. In essence, concealment is an attempt to “pass” (Goffman 1963) or present a destination as something it is not. Concealment may be passive, as when presenters do nothing to change the audiences’ ignorance of a crisis, or active, as when presenters cover up facts, make deceptive statements, or exclude tourists, journalists and other audiences from affected locations. This strategy is premised on the assumption that audiences will not negatively evaluate a destination or its presenters if they fail to perceive the crisis.
- **Denial:** The strategy of denial attempts to convince audiences that negative evaluations are unwarranted because a crisis did not occur. While this approach implicitly or explicitly acknowledges that something has happened, presenters deny that a condition or event does, in fact, constitute a crisis. Presenters may dispute evidence suggesting that a crisis has occurred, or discount parties who bring such evidence to light. In any case, this approach maintains that the alleged crisis did not take place and, if deemed credible, the parties presumed responsible are exonerated.
- **Disconfirmation:** The strategy of disconfirmation allows presenters to acknowledge that a crisis has occurred without admitting that the condition is discrediting. In effect, destination leaders attempt to reduce the severity of the predicament by persuading audiences that an event which appears threatening or unpleasant is actually misunderstood (see Goffman 1963). Presenters may try to convince audiences that the threat posed by the crisis has been exaggerated. This is the intent behind crisis communication strategies such as information hotlines, press briefings, and fact-finding tours of afflicted areas. Or they may disconfirm negative impressions by offering positive images of the destination and its attributes. Post-crisis advertising, travel product seminars, and other promotional activity is aimed at offering audiences a positive alternative image.
- **Acknowledgement:** This strategy allows presenters to acknowledge that a discrediting condition exists but deny or minimize responsibility for its occurrence. Presenters avoid or minimize blameworthiness by claiming that they could not foresee a discrediting event or that they did foresee the

event but were powerless to avoid it. For example, presenters may claim that the tourism crisis was caused by forces of nature, political turmoil in other countries, or broader economic forces beyond their control. This strategy rests on the premise that presenters cannot be held responsible if they have no reasonable way to foresee or avert the consequences of an event.

- **Assurance:** This strategy attempts to regain trust and confidence by assuring audiences that the crisis was an isolated event that will not reoccur. Presenters use various tactics to persuade audiences that they no longer have to be concerned about the undesirable condition or the factors that caused it. For example, tourist police patrols are stepped up in areas frequented by tourists after crime-related events, armed soldiers are stationed in transportation centers and tourist areas following acts of terrorism, and medical personnel screen arriving passengers at airports following outbreaks of disease (for example, see Henderson 2003; Bloom 1996; Wahab 1996). From an impression management perspective, these displays have two interrelated functions: they try to redress the past and extend a promise of a more desirable state in the future (see Schlenker 1980).
- **Withdrawal:** This strategy involves withdrawing from audiences whose members know of the crisis. Withdrawal differs from concealment by the fact that presenters do not deny that a crisis has occurred. By retreating from audiences and refusing to participate in activity that might reduce the stain of crisis, presenters can escape from the immediate consequences of the crisis and obtain time needed to marshal their forces and formulate a plan of attack. While withdrawal may reduce unpleasant interactions with audiences, it does not eliminate the predicament. In fact, it may cause a situation to worsen (Schlenker 1980).

Examples from published case studies of tourism crises and disasters are used to illustrate how these impression management strategies are employed by presenters in identity-threatening predicaments. This analysis will describe the strengths and weaknesses of strategies but will offer no predictions regarding the relative effectiveness of those strategies. In other words, I describe a set of strategies that presenters could use, rather than strategies they should use. It is hoped that this study will serve as a springboard for building grounded theory and generating testable hypotheses regarding the contingencies under which each strategy is most and least effective.

Footnotes

1. For an overview of the types of crises and disasters that potentially threaten destination image, see Faulkner (2001).
2. External audiences include, but are not limited to, tourists, tour operators, insurers, journalists, travel writers, investors, developers, and foreign officials.
3. As used here, “presenters” is a generic term used to describe actors charged with protecting the image of a destination. This group includes parties such as local and national tourism officials, employees of destination marketing organizations, and owners and/or managers of attractions and properties at the afflicted destination.
4. The term stigma can refer to any attribute that is “deeply discrediting” and incongruous with stereotypes of what an entity is like (Page 1984, Sutton and Callahan 1987). Although more commonly associated with tainted individuals and groups, stigmas are also attached to places, activities, events, organizations, and occupations (Page 1984). Regardless of their host, stigmas have the effect of spoiling the image of entities which bear them (Page 1984; Jones et al., 1984). This reduces “whole and usual” entities to the status of “tainted, discounted” ones (Goffman 1963: 3).

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