Dynamics of Seeking Information from Local Tourism Offices in the Event of a Crisis Among African American Tourists

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ABSTRACT

The study examined African American tourists to determine the dynamics of turning to local tourism organizations in the event of a crisis. This study was framed by three interrelated research questions: the influence of the perception of risk occurring during a trip, the influence of age as well as the types of social media outlets and the user involvement level. The study found that there were significant relationships among physical accidents, weather, cultural barriers, age and the use of Facebook on the likelihood of turning to local tourism organizations in the event of a crisis. Further implications are discussed.

Keywords: *Risk perception, African American, crisis*

INTRODUCTION

With the increased crises globally, scholars have devoted considerable attention to deciphering key features of risk and emergency planning (West & Orr, 2007). Crisis is often defined as any situation that has the potential to affect long-term confidence in an organization or a product, or which may interfere with its ability to continue operating normally (Faulkner, 2001; Ritchie, 2004). Scholars have examined how publics perceive hazards and act accordingly (Comfort, 2006). Nonetheless, responses by at-risk populations such as minorities, people with disabilities and transient populations are still underrepresented within the crisis literature (Pennington-Gray et al, 2012; Phillips & Morrow, 2007). In the tourism arena, specifically, there is a paucity of studies that examine minorities such as African American tourists' responses to crises. Past studies have indicated that minorities assessed different sources of media to receive information than other subgroups of the population (Perry & Lindell, 1991). It is argued therefore that different minority groups have different information search behaviors during a crisis. Thus, it is pivotal that the tourism organizations comprehend such information seeking behaviors to safeguard this group through the creation of germane safety guidelines. Consequently, understanding the combination of a minority and at-risk population can shed more

light on the needs of this group during and after a crisis. This will help tourism organizations to incorporate minority tourists into their crisis response plans.

To date, response behaviors of at-risk groups have largely focused on information search behaviors and interpretations of media messages by minority groups. This is more problematical for minority tourists, as they may not know the local language, cultural barriers, and understands where to find appropriate information in the event of a crisis (World Tourism Organizations, 1998). Thus the local tourism organizations (CVBs) frequently serve as the main contact for tourists at the destination to provide accurate, timely and targeted information to tourists. Hence, this study expands the current research on both minorities and tourists as types of at-risk groups and their information seeking behavior in the event of a crisis. To achieve this purpose, a national sample of African American tourists was examined to determine dynamics of turning to local tourism organizations (CVBs) in the event of a crisis. Specifically, this study was framed by three interrelated research questions: 1) What is the influence of the perception of risk occurring during a trip on the likelihood of turning to a local tourism organization during a crisis among African American tourists? 2) What is the influence of age on the use of local tourism organization during a crisis among African American tourists? 3) Does the types of social media outlet and the user involvement level influence the likelihood of turning to local tourism organizations during a crisis among Africa Americans.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research in the tourism field has consistently found that tourists perceive safety and security as the primary concern while traveling (Poon & Adams, 2000). Tourism scholars have examined risk perceptions according to the type of risks, as either natural or man-made risks. Several types of risk factors have been extensively examined, including terrorism (Floyd et al. 2004; Sonmez and Graefe, 1998a,b; Sonmez et al, 1999), crimes (Brunt et al. 2000; Pizam, 1999; Dimanche & Leptic, 1999), war and political instability (Seddighi et al, 2001; Ioannides & Apostolopoulos, 1999), health concerns (Floyd et al, 2004; Carter, 1998), natural disasters (Faulkner, 2001; Mazzocchi & Montini, 2001). One important finding is that different tourists can have dissimilar levels of risk aversion and that such perceptions may affect their decision-making. Several studies have also examined the effects of perception of risk on decision making (Park & Reisinger, 2010; Kozak et al, 2007; Roehl & Fesenmaier, 1992), which consistently found a negative association between perception of risk and likelihood to travel.

Individual responses toward a crisis, particularly related to information search often depend on the social affiliations of an individual (Elliot & Pais, 2006). Research has shown that these social affiliations extend beyond local networks in the event of a crisis (Morrow, 1997). As African Americans represents the largest minority group in the United States, it is critical to understand how this group will search for information during a crisis when they are vacationing. Literature related to African American populations and communication needs in the event of a crisis is sparse (Baker, 2001; Spence et al, 2007). In particular, research has confirmed that African Americans are less likely to accept a warning message as credible without confirming the message from peers (Lindell & Perry, 2004).

The key role of local DMOs in a crisis or disaster is related to two fundamental activities: crisis communication with key stakeholders or publics and the development and execution of crisis recovery marketing strategies (Faulkner, 2001; Ritchie, 2004; Blackman & Ritchie, 2008). Recent developments in the Internet and social media has prompted DMOs to incorporate these platforms in crisis communication in addition to their websites. Studies have shown that younger individuals are more likely to actively seek information about a crisis through social media outlets. This group is also a heavy user of social media in general (Hampton et al, 2011). Nonetheless, how user's behaviors translate to turning to local DMOs to seek information is relatively unknown.

METHODOLOGY

The data for this study were gathered from a larger study conducted by a private national research company. The larger study was conducted among 1,018 African American leisure tourists in the United States in December 2010. Data were collected online using Mandala Research's Travel Answer domestic leisure travel panel, hosted by Conduit Systems. To qualify for the survey, respondents must have taken at least one trip within the United States in the past 12 months for pleasure, vacation, or persona purposes that were more than fifty miles away or where the traveler spent at least one night and have shared or have had sole responsibility for travel planning. The overall response rate for the survey was 4.5%.

The dependent variable "likelihood of turning to local DMOs during a crisis" was measured by asking respondents "Suppose that you are currently in the middle of your trip and you hear that a crisis has just occurred within the immediate vicinity of your current location, please indicate the likelihood you would turn to the following sources of media to get information." (1= *very unlikely* to 5= *very likely*). One of ten options was CVB. Three sets of measures served as independent variables. First, age was measured as a continuous variable. Second, risk perceptions was measured using a 5-point Likert scale (1= *very much unlikely*, 5=*very much likely*) by asking respondents, please think about your next or upcoming leisure trip within the US and rate your perception of the likelihood that the following crises may occur".

Eleven responses measuring risk perception were adopted from Sonmez and Graefe (1998b) and Floyd et al (2004); crime, natural disaster, disease, food safety, financial, health, physical accident, equipment failure, weather, cultural barrier, and political coup. Finally, level and types of social media use were measured with the following question, "which of the following social network sites, if any do you use on a regular basis? Please indicate if you read this social this social network site, post on this social networking sites, or both. The responses were collapsed to binary options (*read only* and *read and post*) to reflect Nielson's coding (Nielson, 2006; Hampton et al, 2011). Facebook and Twitter were used in the analysis as these received the highest rates.

To answer the research questions, the Ordered Probit Model (McKelvey & Zavonia, 1975) was employed to relate independent variables to dependent variable. The Ordered-Probit Model recognized the inherent ordering in the outcome variables of interest and allowed for calculation of the probability of each level of outcome as a function of explanatory factors. PSAW 19.00 statistical software was used to estimate the model.

Table 1
Frequency of Travel Variables Among African American tourists

Variables	Frequency	Mean	SD
Thinking of all the trips you have taken away from home at least 50 miles one way or you have spent one night, approximately how many did you take last year?	1,014	3.20	4.06
Please think about your next or upcoming leisure travel within the US and rate your perception of the likelihood that the following crisis will occur during your trip…			
Crime	1,018	2.70	1.15
Natural disasters	1,018	2.48	1.10
Disease (e.g. SARS)	1,018	2.26	1.11
Food safety	1,018	2.39	1.13
Financial	1,018	2.81	1.14
Health (e.g. diarrhea)	1,018	2.47	1.11
Physical accidents	1,018	2.47	1.04
Equipment failure (e.g. airplane delay)	1,018	2.50	1.10
Weather (e.g. storms)	1,018	2.82	1.10
Cultural barriers	1,018	2.41	1.11
Political coups	1,018	2.22	1.14

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The demographic variables collected for each respondent indicated that respondents were slightly more females (59.3%). Age followed a normal distribution with 30% being in the age 50-49 group and either married (38.4%) or single (28.0%). Table 1 outlines the frequency of travel variables among African American tourists. Table 2 outlines the results of the Ordered Probit Model. In the model, a positive parameter indicated that the corresponding factor was associated with a higher likelihood of turning to CVBs in the event of a crisis and a negative parameter indicated the opposite effect. The parameters of the model were estimated using the maximum likelihood estimator. The -2 Log likelihood at convergence was 643.827 (χ^2 = 33.117, df=14, sig. = .043) indicating a significant improvement from the baseline model. The model with all independent variables accounted for 28 percent of the variance in the likelihood of turning to CVB in the event of a crisis.

The model yielded interesting results. For research question 1, the model indicated positive associations between physical accidents (β = .157, p= .021) and cultural barriers (β = .354, p= .038) with the likelihood of turning to CVB to seek information in the event of crisis. It suggests that African American tourists perceived those physical accidents and cultural barriers more highly than other groups and are more likely to seek information to CVB in the destination. This is understandable as cultural barriers and the threat of physical risk tends to be more personal and is more likely to affect the individual in the new environment, and therefore the individual is more likely to seek information from local offices that they deem credible under such circumstances. Local CVBs in this case, were viewed to be credible. Interestingly, weather indicated a negative association (β= -.286, p= .033). One possible explanation is that African American may use other "credible" source to seek more information regarding weather or that they may use interpersonal networks to obtain more information (Lindell & Perry, 2004).

Table 2
Results of the Ordered Probit Model

Variable	Parameter estimate	Sig.
Risks		
Crime	-.015	.863
Natural disasters	.045	.684
Disease	-.006	.965
Food safety	.068	.557
Financial	-.024	.784
Health	-.077	.537
Physical accidents	.157	.021*
Equipment failure	.041	.679
Weather	-.286	.033*
Cultural barriers	.354	.038*
Political coups	-.039	.744
Age	-.029	.001*
Social Media		
Facebook (baseline = read & post)	.435	.022*
Twitter (baseline = read & post)	-.158	.313
Thresholds		
CVB = 1	-1.458	.001
CVB = 2	-.805	.013
CVB = 3	-.008	.980
CVB = 4	1.119	.001

-2 Log Likelihood at convergence (n= 1,018) = 643.827   (χ^2 = 33.117, df=14, sig.= .043)
Pseudo R^2 Negelkarke = .28

With regard to the second research question, the model indicated that age had a negative association with the likelihood of seeking information from CVBs (β=-.029, p= .001). This is consistent with the findings of West & Orr (2007) that younger groups tend to be more active information seekers in the event of a crisis. Thus, it is believed that younger generations will use other sources to seek more information. Pennington-Gray et al (2012) found that younger generations of African-Americans tend to turn to social media during a crisis, which may help to explain the negative association between our respondents with seeking information from CVBs in the event of a crisis.

For the third research question, the model revealed an interesting significant influence of social media involvement in the likelihood of seeking information from CVBs in the event of a crisis, with those who read only Facebook were more likely to seek information from CVBs than those who read and post (β = .435, p= .022). One possible explanation is that those who read and post on Facebook might use the platform to seek information from other sources as well as to engage with their interpersonal networks that translated to the lower probability of seeking information from CVBs in the event of a crisis.

CONCLUSION

This study shed light on the risk information seeking behavior of African American tourists, specifically the likelihood of turning to CVBs to get information in time of crisis. The

study found positive influences of risk perception regarding cultural barriers and physical risks and the likelihood turning to CVBs. The finding also indicated a negative association regarding risks associated with weather and age. These differences suggest that officials need to better understand how the aforesaid factors affect the likelihood of turning to CVBs in the event of a crisis. Therefore, unless officials build nuances into their crisis communication and emergency planning they will not be successful with all varieties of tourists. Thus it is recommended to include the information in their crisis plan to be better prepared to effectively communicate information. This study however, did not ask whether or not the respondents specifically turn to CVBs' multiple communication platforms (i.e. websites, hotlines, social media). As Facebook represented a significant influence, thus, future study needs to be conducted to examine the role of the different CVB's communication platforms to fully understand the complex interaction between African American tourists (and other minority group tourists) and their risk information seeking behavior.

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