**Managing Cruise Lines' Reputation during Crisis Times:
A Review and Retrospective Analysis**

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Abstract

The cruise industry is one of the fastest growing sectors within the tourism and hospitality industry. Reputation serves as one of cruise lines' key assets, as it can affect customers' attitude, perceptions, and travel decisions. The onset of a crisis on cruise lines not only can negatively impact passengers and crew members, but also can damage the cruise lines' reputations, which can lead to bad publicity, distorted brand image, and revenue loss. To cope with these challenges, scholars have highlighted the importance of crisis management practices as well as effective crisis responses. Accordingly, the purpose of this book chapter is to examine cruise lines current crisis management/crisis response strategies. Guided by the Situational Crisis Communication Theory, a total of 14 responses from major cruise lines between 2013 to 2017 were collected and analyzed. The results of this study revealed mixed findings --most cruise lines have adopted the most appropriate reputational management strategies, while failing to provide enough public safety information. Based on the findings, further discussions on how to effectively respond to major incidents on cruise ships and to protect organizational reputation during crisis times were included.

Key Words: Crisis Communication, Cruise Lines, Situational Crisis Commutation Theory, Reputation Management

Introduction

Serving as both a luxury hotel and a traveling city, the cruise line industry acts as one of the fastest growing sectors within the tourism and hospitality industry. With a 62% growth in demand from 2005 to 2015, the cruise line industry expects to welcome 28 million global passengers on board (Cruise Line International Association [CLIA], 2018). According to CLIA (2018), the top five source markets of the global cruise industry are the United States (11.5 million passengers in 2016), China (2.1 million passengers in 2016), Germany (2 million passengers in 2016), United Kingdom (1.9 million passengers in 2016), and Australia (1.3 million passengers in 2016). Although the United States ranks as one of the most important markets for the cruise industry, the number of domestic cruise line companies remains relatively small, which is due to the necessity of obtaining substantial capital investment and the intense competition (Ryschka et al., 2016).

Within such a competitive market, reputation has become one of the key assets that cruise line companies cannot simply overlook (Weaver, 2005). Reputation refers to “the prestige or status of a product or service, as perceived by the purchaser, based on the image of the supplier” (Petrick, 2002 p. 125). Reputation helps distinguish a particular brand from others as well as affecting peoples’ attitude, perceptions, and purchasing intentions (Petrick 2002, 2011; Weaver, 2005). The strong relationship between reputation and consumer decisions and behaviors has been well reported by numerous empirical studies, including both the general marketing literature (e.g., Olshavsky and Granbois, 1979) and the cruise tourism literature (e.g., Perick 2002, 2011).

Notably, the onset of a crisis can pose a direct threat to an organization’s reputation (Coombs, 2007). This is especially true for the cruise industry. Cruise travel is considered one of

the safest travel modes and is regulated by multiple international authorities (e.g., U.S. Coast Guard, The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the Environmental Protection Agency, and European Maritime Safety Agency). However, there have been several high-profile crisis events on cruise ships in the past few years. Examples include (1) the 2012 sinking of the Costa Concordia, where the cruise ship ran aground and overturned after striking an underwater rock, resulting in 32 deaths; and (2) the norovirus outbreaks with Princess Cruises and Celebrity Cruises between 2010 to 2015, where a total of 30 gastroenteritis outbreaks took places on board and affected over 5300 passengers. These events not only threaten the safety of passengers and crew members, but also can be costly to affected cruise lines in terms of economic loss and reputational damage (Marti, 1995). Although reputational damage is normally intangible, it is the main cause of people's distrust in major cruise lines as well as hesitations of taking cruises in the future (Harris Poll 2013, 2014).

The development of an organization's reputation relies on time and the information stakeholders receive about the organization (Fombrun and van Riel, 2004). Particularly, media reports serve as one of the most prominent information sources for stakeholders as well as for the general public, and thus, media coverage has become an important element in reputation management (Carroll and McCombs, 2003). History has demonstrated that crises have the ability to significantly harm an organization's reputations built over years or even decades. This is largely due to the fact that reputations are evaluative in essence and the public has a tendency to build their own reality based on the information they receive via media and personal networks (Champoux, Durgee, and McGlynn, 2012). Thus, without proper responses to the negative incidents on cruise ships, the audience may misjudge the situation and lose confidence in the cruise line company, which can lead to long-term reputational damages (Liu-Lastres, Schroeder,

and Pennington-Gray, 2018). Ineffective crisis responses can also cause ripple effects, whereby the incident not only affects one ship, but also generates company-wide and even industry-wide ramifications (Ryschka et al., 2016).

Although the importance of crisis responses has been stressed by cruise line professionals and scholars (Liu-Lastres et al., 2018), it is necessary to stay informed regarding the current measures adopted by cruise lines in response to major incidents. Very few articles, however, can provide a comprehensive understanding of this topic. Thus, the purpose of this chapter is to review and analyze cruise lines' responses to major incidents between 2013 and 2017. In doing so, it is expected that the findings of this chapter can provide important implications for both researchers and practitioners. Guided by the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), this chapter addresses the following research questions: (1) How did cruise lines respond to major incidents onboard? (2) How effective are these responses? (3) What lessons can be learnt to better handle future crises experienced by the cruising industry?

Theoretical Framework: Situational Crisis Communication Theory

This study is guided by the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). The SCCT is one of the most widely used theories within crisis communication research (Avery et al., 2010). Based on an attribution approach and a situational approach, the SCCT aims to provide instructions for organizations to establish effective crisis responses (Coombs 1995, 2007). More specifically, the attribution approach deals with how the information is perceived and gathered by individuals to form a casual judgement (Fiske and Taylor, 1991); while the situational approach suggests that contextual factors should be taken into account and a crisis response should always align with the actual crisis situation (Coombs, 1995). It is expected that

these messages can help organizations protect their reputational assets as well as achieve other desirable outcomes from the communication process following the outbreak of a crisis (Coombs 1995, 2007).

Furthermore, based on the attribution level (i.e., to what extent an organization is responsible for the crisis), the SCCT has grouped various crises into three types, which also known as crisis clusters. They are: 1) the victim cluster, 2) the accidental cluster, and 3) the preventable cluster. The victim cluster refers to a situation where the organization holds minimal responsibility for a crisis and there have been no similar crises in the past. The accidental cluster refers to a situation where the organization holds low responsibility for a crisis and a small number of similar crises have happened in the past. The preventable cluster refers to a situation where the organization is mostly responsible for the crisis. Different response strategies should be used to address the crisis situation accordingly.

In the same vein, the SCCT proposes several guidelines related to crisis responses. Firstly, a complete message should contain three types of information 1) instructing information, which deals with public safety information, 2) adjusting information, which involves corrective actions and sympathy, and 3) reputational management options, which aim at protecting an organization's reputational assets. Definitions and explanations of each type of information are provided in Table 1. Secondly, the reputational management options cover four types of strategies: 1) denial, which tries to remove the relationship between the organization and the crisis event, 2) diminishing, which tries to improve the image of the organization during the crisis communication process, 3) rebuilding, which tries to re-establish a positive image of the organization and 4) bolstering, which aims to remind the public of the organization's previous

positive performance and reduce the negative impacts of a crisis. Detailed information on each type of strategy can also be found in Table 1.

Thirdly, the SCCT recommends the specific choice of a reputational management strategy and the combinations of different information depending on the crisis situation. According to Coombs (2007, 2014), such strategic responses and combinations can reshape the attribution of the crisis, change the public's perception of the organization, protect the reputation of the organization, and reduce the negative effects associated with the crisis. When it comes to tourism research, the SCCT has been used in several studies to evaluate the effectiveness of tourism organizations' crisis responses. For example, Liu, Kim, and Pennington-Gray (2016) used SCCT to examine the effectiveness of hotels' responses to a bed bug issue on social media. Likewise, based on a case study approach, Liu and Pennington-Gray (2015) utilized the SCCT to analyze cruise lines' responses to norovirus outbreaks. A recent study has also used the SCCT to evaluate destinations' responses to terrorism attacks on Twitter (Barbe, Pennington-Gray, and Schroeder, 2018). Collectively, the findings of these studies have demonstrated the pragmatic utility of SCCT as a guiding framework to evaluate the effectiveness of organizations' crisis responses.

Table 1. An Overview of SCCT Guidelines

Strategy	Definition	Content
Instructing Information	Basic information about the crisis and how to protect individuals during the crisis	Basic information about the crisis What to do to protect oneself during the crisis
Adjusting Information	Information that aims to help the audience	Factual information about what happened

	to cope with the crisis psychologically	<p>Corrective actions: information that explains what measures have been undertaken to correct the situation and to prevent its occurrence in the future</p> <p>Controllability: information that addresses the fact that the situation is under control.</p> <p>Expressions of concern and sympathy.</p>
Reputation Management	Strategies for crisis responses	<p>Denial Posture: aims to remove the connection between the crisis and the organization</p> <p>Diminishment: aims to reduce the responsibility of the organization toward the crisis</p> <p>Rebuilding: aims to improve the organization's reputation and provide apology and compensation.</p> <p>Bolstering: aims to rebuild positive relations between the organization and the audiences.</p>

Adopted from Coombs, 2007, 2014

Method / Procedure

The major objective of this chapter is to examine the current crisis response practices of cruise lines and evaluate these practices using the SCCT guidelines featured above. Following the suggestions provided by Hsieh and Shannon (2005), a directed approach was used to analyze the content of 14 cruise line incidents that occurred between 2013 and 2017. A directed approach means that the authors first developed a coding scheme following the SCCT guideline and then used the coding scheme to guide the process of content analysis. When it comes to the timeframe, 2013 marks a year when a series of incidents occurred on cruise ships that impacted the cruise industry (Harris Poll 2013, 2014) and 2017 is the year when this study was conducted.

The sample was collected using a keyword search (e.g., “cruise”, “cruise line” “incident”) over the database EBSCOhost (Newswires section). Newswire services are commonly used by

companies and PR agencies to disseminate news stories to journalists, bloggers, and other online audiences. It is one of the major channels for researchers to capture timely news and organizations' statements related to incidents. Thus, examining the content of the newswire is meaningful and appropriate in the context of this study. The news articles were selected based on their relevance. All initial responses were examined in terms of relevance and a total of 14 specific statements/stories were included in the sample. Each statement/story served as a unit of analysis.

The data analysis procedure consisted of three steps. Firstly, based on the SCCT and related literature, a coding scheme was developed which outlined all the key concepts as initial coding categories (See Table 2). Secondly, according to the findings of previous studies (e.g., Liu and Pennington-Gray, 2015) and the literature, operational definitions are provided for each category (See Table 2). Thirdly, based on the coding scheme, the researchers examined and coded the appearance of each theme/category within the unit of analysis.

Table 2. Coding Scheme of Cruise Line's Crisis Responses

Themes		Definition	Example
<i>Instructing Information</i>		Public safety information related to the incident.	The illness was confirmed as norovirus, which is highly contagious and typically transmitted from person to person.
			Those affected by the short-lived illness were treated by our ship's doctors with over-the-counter medication.
<i>Adjusting Information</i>	Sympathy	The cruise line expressed sympathy toward the situation.	We extend our deepest sympathies to the family during this extremely difficult time and are providing full assistance and support

	Corrective Actions	Information related to how cruise lines manage the situation and prevent the occurrence of a similar event in the future.	Sanitation experts were flown in to perform enhanced sanitary procedures to supplement routine cleaning protocols and minimize the risk of a recurrence.
<i>Reputation Management</i>	Denial	The cruise line tries to remove the connection between the incident and the cruise line.	The company believes a passenger who brought it abroad exposed the 19 passengers to the virus.
	Diminish	The cruise line tries to lessen its responsibility of the incident through strategies such as excuses and justification.	These types of outbreaks and requests for medical assistance for passengers are "not uncommon" in big ships.
	Rebuilding	The cruise line tries to improve its image via strategies such as compensation and apology.	Passengers will receive refunds of their cruise fares, future cruise certificate, arranging chartered air travel home.
	Bolstering	The cruise line tries to re-build a positive connection between the company and the passengers.	At XXX Cruise Line, the safety of our guests is our highest priority

Results and Discussion

To examine cruise lines' crisis response behaviors, this study analyzed the content of their press releases addressing various incidents. As shown in Figure 1, there are a total of 14 crisis responses/statements disseminated via newswires over the past five years (2013-2017), among which over one third (35.7%) of them were published in 2014 and around one fifth (21.4%) of them were published in 2013 and 2016. The average number of responses seems relatively stable over the years.

Figure 1. Number of Crisis Responses

As shown in Figure 2, the most commonly reported incidents were (1) passenger-related incidents (28.5%), such as passengers falling overboard as well as crimes and (2) norovirus outbreaks (28.5%). Other incidents include operational incidents (21.4%), such as engine failures and natural/weather issues (21.4%) (e.g., extreme weather/storm-related incidents).

Figure 2. Number of Responses by the Type of Incident

Overall, the results of the descriptive analyses suggest that the scope of cruise lines' crisis response behavior is wider than expected, which is reflected through the type of incident. In terms of the type of the incident, the CLIA identified two major types of risky issues related to cruise travel, namely, operational incidents and health-related outbreaks (e.g., norovirus

infections) (CLIA, 2014). The results of the descriptive analysis, interestingly, indicate that the typology of cruise travel incidents should be expanded to include passenger-related incidents and storm/weather-related incidents. The inconsistencies here suggest that more up-to-date research is in need to help practitioners and researchers to stay informed regarding the current status of crisis management in the cruise line industry.

To further explore cruise lines' response behaviors, the content of their statements was also analyzed (Table 3). Regarding instructing information, half (50%) of cruise lines provided information on how they managed the situation and specified their general safety policies. For example, following a norovirus incident, a cruise line provided specific information on how they managed the situation by stating that "sanitation experts were flown in to perform enhanced sanitary procedures to supplement routine cleaning protocols and minimize the risk of a recurrence." With respect to the adjusting information, more than one quarter (28.5%) of the responses in the sample displayed a sympathetic attitude toward the victims. For instance, after an incident involving two children on cruise ships, the spokesperson displayed a sympathetic attitude by addressing the fact that "we extend our deepest sympathies to the family during this extremely difficult time and are providing full assistance and support."

When it comes to the reputational management strategies, it is noted that multiple reputational management strategies have been employed. Rebuilding (71.4%) was the most popular strategy where information related to compensations and apologies were frequently mentioned. For instance, after a technical incident, one cruise line offered passengers a full refund of cruise fares, future cruise certificates, as well as assistance with airfares. Diminishing (64.3%) was another popular strategy where cruise lines tended to justify the situation and minimise its responsibility of the crisis. For example, one cruise line addressed the fact that

“(norovirus) is not a cruise ship disease, it happens elsewhere.” Furthermore, bolstering was used among 50% of the cruise line organizations in this study to remind the public of their previous good performance. For example, cruise lines would constantly stress the importance of shipboard safety by announcing that “the safety of our guests is our highest priority” in the responses. Lastly, the utilization of denial was found in a small number (14%) of responses, here the cruise line attempted to disassociate itself from the e crisis. For example, they would blame other passengers as the major cause of a norovirus outbreak on board or refuse to reveal details related to the incident.

Table 3. Results of Content Analysis

Theme	Frequency	Percentage
Instructing Information	7	50.0%
Adjusting Information	4	28.5%
Reputation Management Strategies		
Denial	2	14.3%
Diminishing	9	64.3%
Rebuilding	10	71.4%
Bolstering	7	50.0%

Conclusions

Guided by the Situational Crisis Communication Theory, this chapter reports the findings of a critical evaluation of how cruise lines respond to crises or major incidents in a bid to protect

their reputation. Interestingly, this analysis noted that not all cruise lines act in the best interests of the image and reputation of their organisations when responding to crises, though the majority of those in our sample did adopt appropriate reputational management strategies such as rebuilding (i.e., offering compensation and apology) and diminishing (i.e., using excuses or justification to minimize organizations responsibility to a crisis). Such response strategies imply that the organization is taking responsibility for the incident (Coombs, 2007). When compared with the results of a previous study by Liu and Pennington-Gray (2015) that also explored the crisis response efforts of cruise line management, our findings demonstrate a significant improvement. For example, this former study revealed that denial was the most frequent crisis response strategy among cruise line, which according to the SCCT approach is an inappropriate response for the kinds of crises experienced by cruise lines.

Additionally, it is noted that not all responses in the sample featured instructing and adjusting information. Although reputational management strategies can assist in protecting an organization's reputation during the crisis communication process, instructing and adjusting information are essential elements that should not be ignored. Coombs (2007) argues that both instructing and adjusting information can help contextualize the crisis, reduce public uncertainties, and comfort the stakeholder during the difficult time. The lack of a sympathetic attitude, particularly, can be problematic as most audiences are searching for emotional solidarity during crisis times, thus, emotional responses tend to be more effective than informative-factual type statements on some occasions (Kim and Cameron, 2011). It is apparent in our evaluation that generally, cruise lines are not aware of the necessity of having all these elements in their messages.

Important insights generated from our findings speak to the necessity for cruise companies to be proactive and prepared for crises likely to impact their industry. Figure 2 indicates that Norovirus for example is likely to be the most common type of crises experienced by cruise passengers – it is not unreasonable to expect cruise lines to have a tested and tried pre-prepared communications strategy to minimize reputational damage and ensure the company is shown in a favourable light. It seems that most cruise lines are not prepared and are unlikely to release announcements until after the news media have picked up the story. This is reflected by the fact that not all incidents were addressed in a timely manner and that sometimes the affected cruise lines tended to be non-responsive to media inquiries and/or reveal detailed information in the statements. Such a reactive approach may not be able to satisfy the public's needs of information, which in turn, could place cruise lines' reputations at risk.

Recommendations

Reputation plays a vital role in determining consumers' choices and decisions. Consumers who rely on reputation are more likely to align themselves with companies with positive publicity and possess stronger desires to purchase these products rather than the competitors (Fombrun and Van Riel, 2004). This also applies to the cruise travel context where passengers have the tendency to stay with cruise lines with good reputations (Petrick, 2011). Crisis events are unexpected by nature and can threaten organizations' reputational assets (Coombs, 2014). More specifically, the outbreak of a crisis event can lead to public doubts in an organization's ability as well as bad impressions and evaluation of the organization, both of which can result in damages in the organization's reputation (Coombs, 2007). Post-crisis communication utilizes effective strategies to amend the reputation and even prevent reputational damages (Coombs and Holladay, 2008). Accordingly, this study analyzed major cruise lines'

crises responses via newswires over the past five years and aimed at providing insights for tourism professionals and researchers.

The following section provides recommendations regarding how to create effective crisis communication messages and how to manage cruise lines' reputations in crisis times:

- **Assume a proactive attitude in tourism crisis communication and management.**

One of the most notable shortcomings in current cruise lines' practices revealed in this study involves the lack of comprehensiveness and responsiveness. This is reflected through the fact that not all incidents have been well managed and that very few sample statements have incorporated all three recommended information elements. In fact, most cruise lines tend to be reactive in nature and wouldn't respond to an incident openly and clearly until a news report is released. Being unable to provide timely and appropriate updates may be one of the biggest challenges for practitioners in the cruise line industry. The lack of information not only can cause public panic, but also will lead to public distrust, which would eventually, does harm to the reputation of an organization.

To become proactive in tourism crisis management, practitioners need to pay attention to two aspects. The first one is **risk reduction**. There is a constant need of monitoring emerging risk issues (Paraskevas, 2006). Identifying potential risk elements and employing risk-reduction plans beforehand is one of the best strategies in tourism crisis management. Also, having an appropriate interpretation of the environment and accurate assessment of risks can help cruise lines better position themselves during a crisis and adjust their strategies to cope with the evolving environment. Once an incident occurs, the best strategy is to **stay engaged**. Actively participating in conversations with stakeholders and the general public not only can deliver the most accurate information, but also can maintain a positive image in public by displaying a

concerning and sympathetic attitude. This emotional connection can be one of the most powerful weapons in protecting the cruise line's reputation during crisis times.

- **Create the most effective crisis communication message.**

According to the findings of previous studies (e.g., Liu et al., 2016; Liu-Lastres et al., 2018), most incidents that occurred on cruise ships are perceived as preventable clusters. Coombs (2014) suggested that the most appropriate strategies to use to address this situation should involve the postures of rebuilding and diminishing. The goal of utilizing these strategies is to (1) lessen the connection between the organization and the crisis and (2) switch public focus off the crisis by taking positive actions.

To create an effective crisis response, practitioners need to incorporate three types of information elements in the message: (1) instructing information, (2) adjusting information, and (3) the postures of rebuilding and diminishing. In terms of instructing information, the cruise line should clarify the situation by stating what happened and what they have done to manage the situation (e.g., emergency measures). Safety information on how to protect oneself should also be included. Regarding the adjusting information, cruise lines need to (1) display a sympathetic attitude (e.g., showing concerns over the victims) and (2) specify the corrective actions by stating what changes will be made in the future to avoid the re-occurrence of a similar event. Lastly, with respect to the reputation management strategies, the cruise line should make sure (1) that they apologize for the situation and that (2) they offer compensations (e.g., refund, credit for future cruises, and other special arrangements). Cruise lines can also remind the public of their previous positive performance and address the fact that shipboard safety is one of their most important priorities.

There is also a need to devote efforts to *testing the effects of different crisis communication messages*. Considering that most studies in tourism crisis communication are descriptive in nature and that the findings of the current study have revealed differences between theoretical guidelines and industry practices, empirical studies testing the effects of messages have become especially important.

- **Have a strategic, coordinated and rehearsed crisis communication plan.**

As important as it is to have a proactive attitude and an effective message template, cruise line companies should always have a strategic, coordinated, and rehearsed crisis communication plan in place. One of the advantages of having such a plan is that it helps the major decision-makers to interpret the underlying dynamics beforehand and therefore, have enough time to come up with strategies to address any arising crisis situation. The abovementioned aspects (i.e., a proactive attitude and an effective crisis communication message) are essential parts of this plan. The ultimate goal of the plan is to minimize the negative consequences brought by an unexpected crisis event as well as to call attention to the positive steps taken to ensure shipboard safety.

The function of organizational learning should also be acknowledged in tourism crisis management and communication. This is an element that has long been neglected by mainstream research (Blackmam and Ritchie, 2008). When it comes to the current case, it is apparent that most cruise lines have learned from their previous lessons, as they started to use multiple reputational management strategies in their crisis response instead of simply denying everything. However, the findings of this study noted that most crisis responses are missing the elements of instructing information and adjusting information. The discrepancies between the theoretical

guidelines and practice not only provide directions for future research, but also signify the importance of organizational learning during the crisis management process.

- **Pay attention to the loyal market**

Walters, Mair and Ritchie (2015) suggest that tourism organizations can rely on their loyal customers in crisis time. Similarly, cruise travel research (e.g., Petrik, 2011; Liu-Lastres et al., 2018) found that an important element that should be featured during the crisis communication process involves customer loyalty. Repeated and loyal customers are one of the most valuable assets for cruise lines. Major cruise lines have established VIP programs and loyalty programs to attract and retain this market segment. Similarly, some studies (e.g., Liu-Lastres et al., 2018) found that this group of customers are more likely to stay aligned with the cruise line during crisis times. Thus, this segment should be seen as one of the most valuable resources for cruise lines to restore/protect their reputation assets during crisis times. Future studies should take this into account and establish crisis communication messages corresponding to different segments.

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