

MANAGING SOCIAL MEDIA DURING A CRISIS: A CONUNDRUM FOR EVENT MANAGERS

ADRIAN DEVINE,* KARLA BOLUK,† AND FRANCES DEVINE*

*Department of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Ulster Business School,
Ulster University (Coleraine Campus), Coleraine, Northern Ireland

†Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies, Faculty of Applied Health Sciences,
University of Waterloo, Waterloo, Canada

In August 2013, Northern Ireland hosted the World Police and Fire Games. The official event evaluation found that the games projected Northern Ireland in a positive light; however, this survey does not tell the full story. Leading up to this event Northern Ireland experienced 4 months of civil unrest. Many consumers turned to social media to seek reassurance and guidance. However, the event organizers did not provide such support during this crisis. In fact, by mismanaging concerns regarding political stability and visitor safety, this event in effect reinforced the negative stereotypical images of Northern Ireland and because it happened online, it was ignored in the official event evaluation. The two key lessons event organizers can learn from this case study are do not underestimate the power of social media, especially in a time of crisis, and in this digital age an event must have a social media strategy that has the flexibility to deal with a crisis.

Key words: Social media; Crisis management; Place marketing; Northern Ireland

Introduction

A key driver in the growth of events in recent years has been their potential to deliver a series of economic development outcomes (Schuster, 2001). Dredge and Whitford (2010), for instance, discussed how an increasing number of destinations are using events to rebrand and reimage. Building on this Florek, Breithbarth, and Conejo (2008) discussed

how events have become part of an image-making process playing a critical role in positioning destinations against their competitors. This links into the argument of Ritchie (1984), Hall (1992), Foley, McGillivray, and McPherson (2012), and Smith (2012) that events were an effective enhancer of destination image. According to Gripsrud, Nes, and Olsson (2010), however, there was no guarantee that an event will improve the image of a destination;



in fact, an event could actually cause harm if not effectively managed.

An event organizer is not in control of the external environment, and as history has shown no country, region, or city is risk free. For instance, Avraham and Ketter (2008) discussed the devastation caused by terror attacks, the SARS epidemic, and natural disasters such as hurricanes in the first decade of the 21st century. Planned events during times of crisis may actually magnify image problems created for the host destination. Events attract media coverage consequently heightening public awareness on the host destination. Add social media and the open exchange of information to this mix then destination marketers could have a significant image problem on their hands if a crisis does occur and it is not properly handled. This article discusses the misuse of social media in the planning and advertising of the World Police and Fire Games (WPFG) in Northern Ireland in 2013. Northern Ireland experienced heightened civil unrest 4 months leading up to hosting what is now the third largest multisporting event in the world. Particular attention is paid to how the event organizers underestimated and consequently mismanaged social media during this crisis. This in turn had repercussions for the event and the international image of Northern Ireland, yet was not discussed in the formal event evaluation.

Literature Review

Place Image and Events

In an attempt to control their international image, an increasing number of countries are now bidding for and hosting events. Smith (2012) discussed how in the contemporary era events have become platforms to sell a variety of products, including the host destination itself. Horne (2007) put forward a similar argument when he stated events are seen as valuable promotional opportunities for cities and regions, showcasing their attractions to global audiences and helping to attract tourism and outside investment. According to Foyle et al. (2012), events have become one of the key strategic tools in repackaging a destination. They discuss how it focusses attention, kickstarts or showcases enhancement projects, galvanizes local political actors, and pressurizes governments to ensure the

watching world leaves with positive impressions of the locale. This links into Chalip's (2004) work on long-term leveraging and how countries use events and the media to enhance their image overseas in order to attract tourists.

It is important to note at this stage that the image that can be projected through events does go beyond tourism. Grix (2012), for instance, discussed how emerging economies use events to accelerate their entry into, and acceptance within, the world's mature economies. India's staging of the Commonwealth Games in 2010 and Brazil's hosting of both the 2014 FIFA Football World Cup and 2016 Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games are examples of emerging economies ready to announce they have finally arrived on the international stage. More recently, small Gulf States, such as Qatar and Bahrain, have become interested in staging mega-events with Qatar scheduled to host the 2022 FIFA Football World Cup. According to Grix (2012), the systematic and purposeful leveraging of a mega-event to alter a nation's image is easier for countries, which suffer, or have suffered from, a poor national image. Lepp and Gibson's (2011) study of South Africa lended support to this argument. They discussed how in the postapartheid era South Africa placed major sporting events at the center of its reimagining strategy. According to Lepp and Gibson (2011), this strategy was a success and the image of South Africa as a racist and corrupt nation has been replaced by the Rainbow nation, a nation recognized as modern and multicultural as demonstrated by the 2010 FIFA World Cup.

Following on from this discussion it is no surprise that the competition to host events has intensified in recent years. However, even the best planned event can go wrong, and Whitelegg (2000) warned that when problems do occur the event can have a negative impact on destination image. He refers to the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta, which was remembered for its logistical problems and traffic congestion. Gripsrud et al. (2010), in their study of the 2006 Winter Olympics in Turin, also concluded that there is no guarantee that the image of the host country will improve; it may conversely deteriorate. In this instance, the scandal and publicity surrounding the Italian Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi, overshadowed the Games and damaged Italy's image in overseas markets. A more recent

example of an event that has attracted negative publicity was the 2013 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia. In this case, even though the organizers went as far as sending the Olympic torch into space it was the Russian Government's antigay laws that made the headlines, resulting in violent protests and stories of athletes threatening to boycott the Games; this did not project Russia in a positive light.

In all of the examples provided above traditional media played a role in shaping the image of the event and the host destination. The written press and television in particular are very powerful and with the introduction of 24-hr TV news channels the public are bombarded with information. Avraham and Ketter (2010) discussed the intensive media coverage surrounding events and how journalists and their editors are well known for their preference for negative news. This is why authors such as Bladen, Kennell, Abson, and Wilde (2012) urged event organizers and destination marketers to try to manage their image by working closely with the media. However, in recent years, this task has become increasingly difficult with the way the internet and social media have been transforming the way information is communicated. Over 50% of world population is under 30 years old; of that group, 96% has joined at least one social network site (Xenos, Vromen, & Loader, 2014). Thus, social media has become a powerful hub of interconnected communities, which event organizers and destination marketers cannot afford to ignore. This was summed up by Bowman and Willis (2011) when they stated, "armed with easy to use web publishing tools, always on connections and increasingly powerful mobile devices, the online audience have become an active participant in the creation and dissemination of news and information" (p. 23).

Social Media

Although there is a lack of consensus on a formal definition of social media, it can generally be understood as internet-based applications that carry consumer-generated content. Such content encompasses "media impressions created by consumers, typically informed by relevant experience, and archived or shared online for easy access by other impressionable consumers" (Blackshaw & Nazzaro, 2006, p. 1). This includes a variety of applications

in the technical sense, which allows consumers to "post," "tag," "dig," or "blog," and so forth on the internet (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). In 2015 the most popular social sharing site was Facebook with one billion active users worldwide, while the second largest was the microblogging social site Twitter, generating 5,700 tweets per second (Leverage New Age Media, 2015). These sites and social media in general have fundamentally reshaped the way we communicate.

Increasingly, our everyday lives coalesce around social media sites, which are used to share comments, opinions, and personal experiences (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Kaplan and Haenlin (2010) discussed how participants on social media applications have the desire to actively engage and to become both producers and consumers of information, hence the term "prosumers." This information is not only shared among friends and relatives but also strangers, which makes social media a very powerful platform. Rong, Vu, Law, and Li (2012) referred to eWOM (electronic word of mouth) and the opportunities and challenges it creates for businesses. Indeed, many companies have tried to embrace social media because of its potential for engagement and collaboration with consumers. Hudson and Hudson (2013), for instance, discussed how through social media, marketers can gain rich, unmediated consumer insights, faster than ever before. Politicians have also recognized the power of social media with Xenos et al. (2014) attributing Barack Obama's initial and later reelection victories to his campaign's deft deployment of social media to mobilize the youth vote.

From a destination perspective, increased exposure is the number one benefit of social media (Stelzner, 2014). This is certainly the case when it comes to hosting major international events. For example, at the time writing the 2015 edition of the Tour de France had 1,566,824 followers on Facebook while the opening match of the 2014 FIFA World Cup between Brazil and Croatia recorded 58 million unique and 140 million interactions on Facebook (L'Equipe, 2015). A number of host destinations have used this online exposure to their advantage. Hudson and Hudson (2013) discussed how England made effective use of social media during the London Olympic Games 2012 to increase awareness and to build engagement with consumers.

They achieved this by having a strong social media strategy that integrated Facebook, Flickr, YouTube, and Twitter with more traditional marketing techniques, all of which were supported by new mobile technology. Scotland is another example of a destination that has effectively integrated social media into its events marketing strategy. One of Scotland's largest events, the Edinburgh Festival, not only has its own online television station (edinburghfestival.tv), it also broadcasts material about the event and the city on internet sites like YouTube and Myspace (Quinn, 2013).

However, social media can be both a blessing and a curse (O'Connor, 2010). On the one hand, it is an excellent way to create a "buzz" for an event and in doing so make people aware of the host destination (Davidson, 2011). On the other hand, event organizers and destination marketers are not in control of what is written and consumers can easily distribute damaging information via social media (Kim & Hardin, 2010). Although some of these posts/comments may lack credibility and are motivated by revenge (Kim & Hardin, 2010), Xue and Zhou (2011) found that negative reviews and comments are more likely to be trusted and shared within the online community. Of course, it is not just written comments that can be posted online. Munar and Jacobsen (2014) discussed how web-based platforms allow "real-time" recordings to be shared almost instantaneously with the online community. Images of the Boston Marathon bombings in 2013, for instance, were available online within minutes of the second explosion.

Above in this article, the authors discussed how countries such as India and South Africa were able to use events to improve their international image. They achieved this by working closely with the event organizer to strategically position and market the country alongside the event. However, today social media has made this more difficult as the event organizer and the host destination have less control over the information that is available about them. In fact, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) went as far as to state that businesses have been relegated to the sidelines as mere observers, having neither the knowledge nor the chance—or sometimes even the right—to alter publicly posted comments or images. Although Kaplan and Haenlein's (2010)

statement may have been a slight exaggeration, there is no denying that social media is an issue for those countries that have included events in their place marketing strategy and this is certainly the case if in the build up to, or during the event, there is some form of crisis.

Social Media and Crisis Communication

A crisis can take many forms. A natural disaster, terror attack, political revolt, currency collapse, and a health epidemic create specific problems but they share common traits, which include uncertainty, fear, pain, and suffering. Communication is vital during a crisis and, according to Schroeder and Pennington-Gray (2015), the trend in crisis communications has been towards the use of new media and technology. The results from an American Red Cross (2011) survey, for example, reveal that Americans are increasingly reliant on social media and mobile technologies to learn about ongoing disasters and seeking help and sharing information after emergencies. The latest figures from Facebook in 2015 would suggest that this is part of global trend with terrorism and the fight against ISIS, the Nepal earthquakes and the Greek financial crisis among the top 10 most talked about topics in 2015 (see Table 1). This helps to explain why an increasing number of organizations are incorporating social media into their crisis response strategies. According to Yates and Paquette (2011), the reason social media had become such an important part of crisis communication is because it enables the open exchange of information through conversation and

Table 1
Facebook 2015

Rank	Most Talked About Global Topics
1	US Presidential election
2	November 13 attacks in Paris
3	Syrian civil war & refugee crisis
4	Nepal earthquakes
5	Greek debt crisis
6	Marriage equality
7	Fight against ISIS
8	Charlie Hebdo attack
9	Baltimore protests
10	Charleston shooting & flag debate

interaction. Building on this argument, Kingsley (2010) discussed how social media enable rapid information exchange to mass audiences and may be an even more credible information source than traditional mass media. This ties in with Freberg's (2011) argument that during a crisis social media offers "unbeatable immediacy." From a practical perspective, social media can also be a more efficient way of releasing information in terms of time and cost (Kuzma, 2010).

Social media can be used during all three phases of the crisis life cycle: the precrisis stage, the crisis stage, and the postcrisis stage (Coombs, 2014). For instance, social media use was central to the crisis response during the 2010 Haiti earthquake (Preston & Stetler, 2012) while the city of Boston utilized social media heavily to communicate with the public in the aftermath of the Boston Marathon Bombings in 2013 (Stewart & Wilson, 2016). Despite the many positive attributes, there is also a dark side to social media during a crisis. As an unfiltered communication channel, social media can be a source of rumor and misinformation (Keim & Noji, 2011). Bello (2012) discussed how in 2012 rumors, hoaxes, and misinformation plagued Hurricane Sandy's social media footprint, with suspicious photos and stories surfacing almost immediately. This links into another problem with social media—the lack of accountability when false and unsubstantiated information is posted online (Freberg, 2011). Thus, in a time of crisis social media can be both a gift and a curse (Freberg, 2011). This point is reiterated by Stewart and Wilson (2016), who went on to discuss how social media present unique challenges during a crisis and must be strategically managed.

Although it is apparent that social media has increasingly played an important role in crisis communication in recent years this area remains under-researched. In fact, Jin and Lui (2010) and Stewart and Wilson (2016) were the only authors that have grappled with the area of social media and crisis communication and in both cases their work stems from Coombs' (2007) situational crisis communication theory (SCCT). Coombs' (2007) theory is undoubtedly the most commonly used theory to examine crisis communication and management. In sum, SCCT suggests that an organization's crisis response should correspond to the extent of its

responsibility for the crisis and the reputational threat posed by the crisis (Coombs, 2007). Jin and Liu (2010) proposed a modification of the SCCT that incorporates social media, the social-mediated crisis communication model (SMCC), to guide crisis managers in their social media efforts and activities following a crisis. In particular, SMCC outlines the interactions between an organization involved in a crisis and the different types of publics who produce and consume information about the crisis via social media. According to Jin and Liu (2010), by identifying different publics using SMCC, crisis managers, through monitoring social media, can know how and when to respond online.

Stewart and Wilson (2016) also used SCCT as theoretical framework to develop their STREMI model of social media crisis communication. According to Stewart and Wilson (2016), the STREMI model was created to help managers strategically manage social media during all three phases of a crisis: the precrisis stage, the crisis stage, and the postcrisis stage. The STREMI model is a cyclical process that consists of six stages: (1) surveillance and social listening, (2) targeting the appropriate audience, (3) responding to the crisis and conversation, (4) monitoring the landscape and evaluating outcomes, (5) interacting with consumers and publics, and (6) implementing necessary changes. The authors will return to the STREMI model later in this article when they will apply it to an event context.

In relation to events, social media and crisis communication should be an important part of event management. Problems can and do occur during the planning and implementation stages of an event. Yet, there is a significant gap in the literature when it comes to analyzing how a crisis, which is viewed and discussed on social media, can be managed, and the impact this can have on the event and the image of the host destination. Against this backdrop, this study examines how the organizers of the WPFG responded to social media during 4 months of civil unrest in Northern Ireland, the host destination. In the following section, the authors set the scene by discussing Northern Ireland's troubled political past and why it has targeted major international events such as the WPFG. This is followed by the methodology and a discussion of the key findings. The final section of the article discusses the lessons

other countries can learn from this case study when faced with a crisis.

Context

From 1968 to 1998 Northern Ireland was a war zone with an ongoing cycle of protest and violence fueled by sectarian division and hatred. During this period, which is often referred to as the “Troubles,” over 3,600 people were killed and over 30,000 injured. In 1998, the Good Friday Agreement was signed and this provided a historic opportunity for the people of Northern Ireland to put aside the divisions and violence of the past and to move forward and build a stable future together. In the “posttroubles” era events have emerged as a major policy instrument in Northern Ireland. Major events in particular are being used to help remove stereotypical images of Northern Ireland’s troubled past and showcase the country as a safe and attractive place to visit, live, study, and invest.

In recent years, Northern Ireland has hosted prestigious international events such as the 39th G8 Summit and the 2011 MTV Music Awards. In August 2013, Northern Ireland organized the WPFPG, which is a biennial event for serving and retired police, fire, prison, and border security officers comprising a wide range of individual and team sports. Winning the right to stage the Games was an achievement for Northern Ireland, as it is the third largest international multisporting event in the world. However, even in the “posttroubles” era political tension and sectarian strife are never far from the surface in Northern Ireland, and in the build up to the WPFPG a dispute over the flying of “national” flags in public buildings resulted in 4 months of civil unrest on the streets of Northern Ireland. The “flag protests” as it became known resulted in 140 police officers being injured and over 200 people were arrested for a broad range of offences including serious rioting, hijacking of vehicles, and attacks on politicians’ offices. For the organizers of the WPFPG 2013 it was unfortunate that at a time when they were trying to encourage athletes and their families to register for their event Northern Ireland was once again making headlines for all the wrong reasons. The “flag protests” quickly became a topic of conversation on social media and given the level of international coverage

it had the potential to ruin the 2013 edition of the WPFPG before it had even started. The organizers of the WPFPG needed to react and what was required was a social media strategy that was flexible and robust enough to handle this crisis. The article will now move on to discuss the methodological approach adopted for this study.

Methodology

The epistemological view adopted by the authors for this article perceives knowledge as an attainable goal. This study is grounded in the worldviews of international athletes who either attended the WPFPG in 2013 or were considering attending the Games but were deterred by the civil unrest in Northern Ireland in the build up to this major event. An interpretivist approach was adopted and mixed empirical methods used. The data collected resulted in a comprehensive case study, which will be presented in the results and discussion section of this article.

Netnography: Data Collection Before and During the WPFPG

Netnography is a sphere of research based on the analysis of user-generated content on the internet. According to Kozinets (2010), such online interactions were esteemed as a cultural reflection acquiescent of deep human understanding, similar to in-person ethnography, although not as intrusive. The nature of this study was to focus on the perceptions of athletes before, during, and after the WPFPG in Northern Ireland, as well as exploring how the event organizers mediated the flow of information to athletes at the various stages. As such, various online interfaces were consulted to explore international athlete’s interactions with each other, as well as the event organizers. The researchers reviewed daily online commentary from the events official Facebook page (468 posts), Twitter account (3697 tweets), and YouTube channel (241 videos) from September 2012 to September 2013 (when the WPFPG Facebook page was shut down). Additionally, website commentary generated by 15 international newspapers/TV news channels including the BBC, *Sydney Morning Herald*, CNN, and *Le Monde* were followed to gain an insight into how the “flag protests” in Northern

Ireland were reported by the international media and how such reporting informed the discussions on social media.

*Asynchronous Online Focus Groups:
Data Collection Following the WPFPG*

Lee, Kim, and Kim (2014) discussed how difficult it is to estimate the intention–behavior gap at major events (i.e., what proportion of visit intentions are actually realized). This was a particular problem in this study because of the “lurker,” a person who reads views online but never posts (Baym, 2010, p. 48). The “lurker” made it very difficult for the authors to gauge exactly how many people were deterred from traveling to Northern Ireland because of the “flag protests.” In attempt to work around this, the authors designed a postevent online questionnaire that they intended to send to all athletes who had registered an interest in participating in the WPFPGs 2013. Initially the event organizers agreed to facilitate this survey but they later rejected the idea, citing “survey overload.” In response, the authors organized two asynchronous online focus groups (AOFGs) subsequent to the games with 12 international participants. The aim was to try to encourage them to discuss colleagues/peers who were put off from going to Northern Ireland because of the flag protests. Informants were first e-mailed and, upon consent to participate, they were invited to Yahoo’s free discussion group service in July 2014. The participants were split into two groups of six; Table 2 illustrates the details of

the informants participating in the AOFGs, as well as identifying which informants were in a dialogue together (A and B).

Survey: Data Collected During the WPFPGs

The authors were involved in the formal event evaluation survey that was carried out during the full 12 days of the WPFPGs event from July 30 to August 10, 2013. Questionnaires were distributed at the 43 venues. A total of 2,707 surveys were collected and analyzed using a descriptive analysis in SPSS. It should be noted that although the authors helped design the questionnaire they were encouraged not to include questions relating directly to the “flag protests” in this survey.

*In-Depth Interview: Communications and
Marketing Manager WPFPG 2013*

An in-depth interview was conducted with the Communications and Marketing Manager for the WPFPG in March 2013. The authors combined the general interview guide approach with an open-ended approach, which allowed them the flexibility to probe and ask questions about the event’s formal marketing strategy, and in particular, how it managed social media during the “flag protests.”

Results and Discussion

Gripsrud et al. (2010) discussed how cities around the world—backed by governments at the state and country level—compete fiercely to host major international events. One reason for this is that hosting such events is regarded as a means to promote the image of the country and/or city acting as host. This was certainly the case with Northern Ireland’s bid to host the 2013 WPFPG. The Games received £6.04 million from central government and one of the strategic aims outlined in its business case was “to enhance the image and profile of Northern Ireland nationally and internationally through the successful delivery of the Games.” According to the postevent evaluation report, the feedback from the 2,707 people surveyed during the games would suggest this aim was achieved. Thirty-one percent of attendees stated that the event had exceeded their expectations, with a further 68% saying the event

Table 2
Informant Details

Informant	Gender	Country of Origin	Focus Group
1	Male	Germany	A
2	Female	Germany	A
3	Female	France	A
4	Female	UK	A
5	Male	US	B
6	Female	Spain	A
7	Male	US	B
8	Female	Canada	B
9	Female	Canada	B
10	Male	Spain	A
11	Female	US	B
12	Male	US	B

met their expectations. From a marketing perspective, 99% of participants either strongly agreed or agreed that the event would improve Northern Ireland's reputation as a destination for tourists. An impressive 87% indicated that the event would make them more likely to visit Northern Ireland again for a holiday or short break while 97% would recommend friends and family visit Northern Ireland.

In their bid document Northern Ireland promised to host the "friendliest Games" and according to the President of the WPFGs Federation, Mike Graham, they achieved this:

The 2013 World Police and Fire Games have been the friendliest and best games ever. The organisation and professionalism of the WPFG delivery team has been exemplary, the warmth and welcome of the many thousand volunteers has been outstanding, the support of the local people has been second to none and even the weather has been fabulous.

The publication of the event organizer's postevent evaluation report was followed by a government report entitled "The Legacy of the Games," which also heralded the Games a success. In this document the Minister for Culture, Arts, and Leisure stated that "the Games cemented the profile of Northern Ireland as a tourist destination and an event destination." However, neither report tells the full story as they are based on the official postevaluation survey, which only focused on athletes who attended the event. In the business case, which was presented to the Northern Ireland Assembly the event organizers estimated the Games would attract 10,000 athletes. This figure was based on the average attendance from the last five WPFG, which amounted to 10,500. However, Northern Ireland only attracted 6,700 athletes. It could be argued that the economic downturn was responsible for this shortfall but it did not deter athletes traveling to Vancouver and New York in 2009 and 2011. The following quote from the Communication and Marketing Manager WPF 2013 would suggest the more likely cause of this shortfall was the civil unrest Northern Ireland experienced between December 2012 and March 2013 as a result of the "flag protests": "There is no denying that registration has been very quiet since the start of the flag protests."

Violent clashes occurred during street protests over the flying of flags and these were broadcasted around the world at a time when the majority of international competitors and their families were finalizing travel arrangements to visit Northern Ireland. For example, on December 18, 2012 the violent clashes between the police and flag protestors were the top story on Sky News Australia while 4 weeks later the French publication *Le Monde* had an article about the rioting underneath a picture of burning debris on a Belfast street (Northern Ireland's capital city). The seriousness of the situation is summed up in the following quote from the Communication and Marketing Manager WPF 2013: "If we [Northern Ireland] had submitted our bid to host the World Police and Fire Games in the current climate (civil unrest) we would not have been successful."

Unsurprisingly, such coverage projected a very negative image of Northern Ireland and raised doubts in the minds of potential competitors, many of which turned to social media to express their concerns and seek reassurance. The following was posted on the official Facebook event page during the Flag Protests and sum up the mood of athletes:

Those videos were very disturbing!! More evidence to convince us to not take a chance to go to Belfast. (Canadian female, December 22, 2012)

Why in the world would the World Police and Fire Games Federation pick a place that has history of violence i.e. Northern Ireland? (Australian male, January 21, 2013)

I'm sure it's beautiful and we were so excited about coming—but what we see over here (USA) tells a different story. I can see why your tourism is hurting. Just not willing to take a chance. But we pray everything is safe for all who choose to go! (American female, January 12, 2013)

Athletes who go to the World Police and Fire Games in a place like Northern Ireland have to fear for their safety. (Spanish male, February 12, 2013)

These posts are just a snapshot of what was being discussed on the official event Facebook page leading up to the games during the "flag protests" and the negative images that were being projected of Northern Ireland. A number of athletes openly stated

they were not willing to risk traveling to Northern Ireland but many others were likely to have been put off from traveling simply by reading such posts. Baym (2010) discussed how not all people are willing to share their views online. In fact, she went on to state that the most common role in online communities is that of “the lurker”: a person who reads but never posts. The lurker makes it very difficult to gauge exactly how many people were deterred from traveling to Northern Ireland because of the flag protests. To try to circumvent this problem the authors conducted two online focus groups subsequent to the games with 12 international participants to establish if they were aware of colleagues/peers who were put off from going to Northern Ireland because of the flag protests. Indeed, four participants were able to discuss peers/colleagues who perceived the risks to be too high:

As a representative of the German Police Service Athletics Federation I received a lot of phone calls and [e]mails [from Germans] asking me about the situation in Northern Ireland and in the end many of these athletes decided not to travel for safety reasons. (German female, July 18, 2014)

I am aware of a female from the Met police [England] who didn't attend because of the bad press Northern Ireland had received and I also know a female from New Zealand who always attends the WPFs who didn't attend because of potential trouble. (English female, July 10, 2014)

I know of a whole woman's golf team in Colorado that opted out of attending/competing in the games in Northern Ireland. They had already registered but later asked for their event fees to be returned because they had safety concerns. (American male, July 22, 2014)

There was quite a lot of talk about various people not attending due to the protests. Personally, I know a number of athletes who travelled without their families because of safety concerns. (Canadian female, July 24, 2014)

Richter (2003) defined risk as “an individual's perception towards uncertainty and exposure to the possibility of loss or injury” (p. 341). Risk creates anxiety and, according to Lepp and Gibson (2011), perceived risk is a major factor for travelers when selecting a destination. Understandably the pictures

that were beamed around the world of the “flag protests” raised doubts in the minds of potential competitors as they gave the impression that Northern Ireland had not moved on from its troubled past and was still an unsafe place to visit. For instance, during the interview with the Communication and Marketing Manager WPF 2013 he discussed how a number of the Sport Associations had warned their athletes about the danger of traveling to Northern Ireland at this time:

At the end of January (2013) the English Prison Services Sport Association told their members that they were not sending an official team to the Games in Northern Ireland because they could not guarantee their safety.

George and Swart (2012) discussed how making tourists feel safe and secure before and during a holiday is becoming increasingly important for international destination competitiveness because tourists usually consider several alternatives. In this study, it was obvious from some of the posts on Facebook that those contemplating visiting Northern Ireland for the WPFs were worried. They wanted reassurance that it would be safe and that measures were in place if they withdrew from the event due to safety concerns:

Been watching the rioting on the news . . . is it still safe to bring my family to the Games in Belfast? (Canadian female, December 19, 2013)

What measures are in place for security due to the recent events? (UK male, January 16, 2013)

Dozens of policemen have been injured—water cannons and plastic baton rounds used very close to the city centre. This does not sound like a place I want to visit for the 10–12 days of the games. I think u should advise that money will be refunded to people who have already paid for their games and do not feel safe going to them. (American female January 23, 2013)

Regrettably, the response from the event organizers to the flag protests was poor. The event did have an official Facebook page, Twitter account, YouTube channel, and e-newsletter but the organizers did not use them adequately to reassure registered or potential competitors. In fact, the organizers ignored or downplayed the threat and

the concerns of potential competitors and their families. The event had 23,070 followers on Facebook yet they did not respond to questions or enter any of the discussions on the flag protests. The below post encapsulates the lack of information provided by the event organizers:

I am watching the BBC News from here in the United States and am VERY concerned about the safety aspect of being in Belfast. There have been 40 days of rioting mostly going on in the City Centre where we are scheduled to stay. I see no mention of it here on your Facebook page, which I feel, is wrong! (American male, January 16, 2013)

Almost 2 months after the “flag protests” had started a formal message of reassurance from the Deputy Chief Constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland (and Chair of the 2013 WPFGB Board) was posted on the event’s Facebook page. However, according to Kaplan and Haenlelin (2010) a social media site such as Facebook “is not the place to post prefabricated press announcements” (p. 66). They went on to discuss how “interaction and feedback are critical elements of all social media” (p. 66). This was something the organizers of WPFGBs failed to grasp and because they did not try to explain the situation and reassure the athletes the online chatter increased exasperating the images problem created by the “flag protests.” The haphazard response to the “flag protests” by the event organizers is synthesized in the following quote from the Communication and Marketing Manager WPFGB 2013: “At first we tried to sit on it, as we felt the unrest would blow over but when that didn’t happen we issued a reassuring statement to the athletes.”

As part of their marketing campaign the event, organizers in conjunction with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board did organize a familiarization trip for five international athletes 8 months before the event. By chance, this coincided with the “flag protests.” Footage from the trip was used to make a promotional video, which was posted on the Games’ official YouTube channel. This was good publicity for the Games and Northern Ireland as the athletes discussed how much they enjoyed their visit and were looking forward to the Games. It also showcased Northern Ireland’s top visitor attractions but there was no mention of the “flag protests” and the riots,

which these five international athletes actually did witness during their stay in Belfast. This was another missed opportunity to explain to potential visitors that the violence was confined to small pockets of Northern Ireland and that it was “open for business.” The event organizers made the same mistake with Twitter as they merely used this platform to send out promotional messages advertising local visitor attractions.

Perhaps even more damaging to Northern Ireland’s international image was the decision to remove Facebook posts, which the event organizers deemed to be too controversial. In fact, during the interview with the Communication and Marketing Manager WPFGB 2013 he openly admitted that his team removed posts that they deemed unsuitable: “You get the odd rouge person popping up on our Facebook page stating don’t go to Northern Ireland as it is still a war-zone but we just wipe these messages out.”

According to one participant in the athletes focus group (in July 2014), when her post was removed she was told her comment “didn’t meet their [Belfast’s WPFGBs event organizers] policy.” Kaplan and Haenlelin (2010) warn against interfering with posts and online discussions as this will be noticed because “you are dealing with technologically sophisticated people” (p. 67). In this case, by removing posts from the official WPFGB 2013 Facebook event page suggested that the event organizers and, of course, Northern Ireland had something to hide. This is summed up in the following post:

Why was my question regarding the violence that is going on in Belfast removed from your comments? As potential visitors to your country, we have a reason to be concerned about our safety. We want to know what is going on. Please answer. (American female)

Tussydiah and Fesenmaier (2009) and Cox, Sellitto, Sellitto, and Buultjens (2009) discussed how increasingly people are turning to social media for support and guidance during the purchase decision-making process. Therefore, removing posts of potential visitors only added to their anxiety and made them less likely to visit Northern Ireland—thus contributing to the disappointing numbers that attended the Games in August 2013.

Conclusion and Implications

One of the potential benefits of organizing a major event is that it can be used to improve the “image” of the host destination (Chalip, 2004; Getz, 2013; Jago, Chalip, Brown, Mules, & Shameem, 2003). However, as this study has shown events can be a double-edged sword. One of the reasons why the Government in Northern Ireland supported the WPFG was because it would help remove stereotypical images of its troubled past, yet for some this event actually helped reinforce existing negative images. The Games were hailed as a great success by the Government and were described by the WPFG Federation as the friendliest Games ever. Indeed, the results from the official event evaluation survey were very positive with almost 90% of out of state visitors stating that the event would make them more likely to return to or recommend Northern Ireland as place to visit. However, this survey does not tell the full story because it only focused on those who attended the Games.

In the build up to the Games, many people were put off from traveling to Northern Ireland because of civil disorder. Violent clashes over the flying of flags occurred at a time when the majority of international competitors and their families were finalizing travel arrangements to visit Northern Ireland. Accordingly, they were more likely to be tuned into what was happening in Northern Ireland. For some, the stories and images of rioters rampaging the streets of Belfast were simply too much while others turned to social media for reassurance and guidance. The event organizers did not provide such support; in fact, the way they handled the comments on their Facebook event page actually created more doubts, specifically for those who had their comments removed and/or those who witnessed the removal of concerned posts. In this case, the event organizers underestimated the power of social media and consequently mismanaged this crisis.

Event organizers and destination marketers from around the world can learn valuable lessons from this case study. Admittedly, Northern Ireland does have a troubled political past but every country will at some time have to deal with issues, not necessarily political, that may affect their international image. For instance, Hurricane Katrina (USA), the

Fukushima nuclear leak (Japan), and the Ebola epidemic (Western Africa) were all unexpected but would have created doubts in the minds of those contemplating attending an event in these countries/regions. Increasingly the public are going online to research both the event and the host destination and if there is a crisis, seek reassurance before finalizing travel plans. This links into Court, Elzinga, Mulder, and Vetvik’s (2009) work on consumer decision making in which they found that consumers are now spending longer at the evaluation stage conducting background research before purchasing and much of this is done online.

According to Hudson and Hudson (2013), because online discussions and reviews have such a major bearing on consumer behavior, especially during a crisis, it is imperative that event managers integrate social media into their marketing and communication strategy. During the early stages of planning for an event, the event organizers and his/her team must therefore agree on a social media strategy that is current and would allow the team to respond to a crisis. However, social media is an active and fast-moving domain. What may be up to date one minute could have disappeared from the virtual landscape the next. Add to the mix the fact that a crisis by its very nature is unpredictable and can take many forms then the task of designing a strategy is complex. In such a fast moving and unpredictable environment, the authors recommend that event organizers use Stewart and Wilson’s (2016) SERMII model as a guide when devising their social media strategy. This model, which was introduced above in this article, is a cyclical process and consists of six key stages (see Fig. 1). To help explain how event organizers could use the SERMII model the authors now apply the SERMII model to the WPFG in Northern Ireland and discuss what action the organizers of this event should have taken during each of the six stages to limit the impact of the “flag protests.”

The first stage of the STREMII module is surveillance and social listening. Also, commonly referred to as social media monitoring, this is the process of identifying and assessing what is being said about the event online precrisis. The second stage is to target the appropriate audiences to ensure that social media messages are reaching the desired

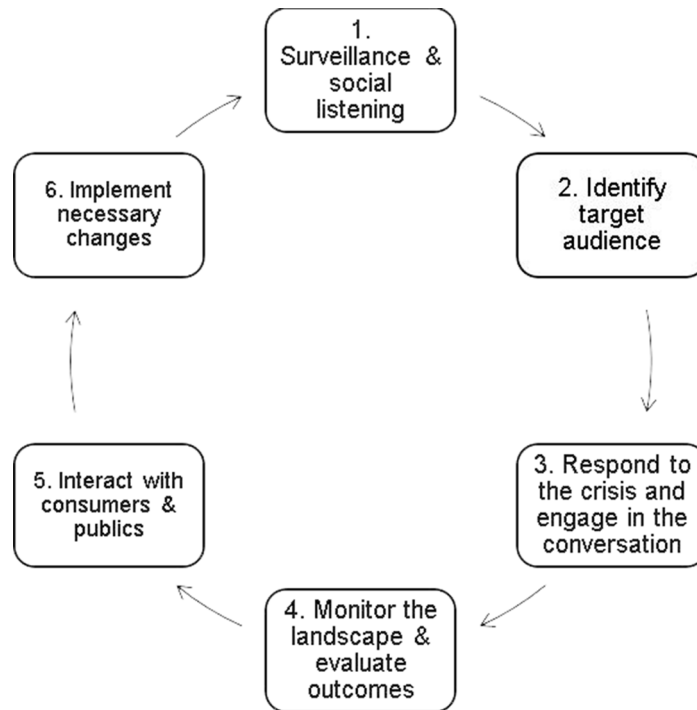


Figure 1. The STERMI model of social media crisis communication (Stewart & Wilson, 2016).

populations. In this digital age, both of these stages should be covered automatically when conducting market research for an event. However, it seems the market data gathered by the organizers of the WPFG were incomplete in that they did not really understand how their customers used social media. They underestimated the reach and power of social media and, as a result, they made the mistake of not allocating sufficient resources to this important platform of communication. In fact, it was only after the debacle of the “flag protests” that the organizers of WPFG realized they needed a dedicated team to deal with social media and recruited four new members of staff in March 2013 (4 months after the “flag protests” started). Budgets are often tight when planning large-scale events but event organizers need to prioritize and understand that allocating resources towards social media is an investment and not a cost. Social media is now part of an event’s personality and how it conducts itself online, especially during a crisis, reflects directly on the host destination and how it is perceived at a local, national, and international level.

The third stage of the STERMI module is responding to the crisis and online conversation. According to Jin and Liu (2010) social media use will increase during a crisis. Because social media sites are public by nature there is always the chance that in a time of crisis users will intentionally or unintentionally post comments that may harm the image of the event and/or the host destination. In either case, the event team must be proactive and respond. This is an opportunity for the event organizers to deliver their side of the story and if there is a crisis then take control of the situation. In this article the organizers of the WPFGs adopted the “ostrich approach” (i.e., stuck their head in the sand and pretended nothing untoward was going on). This was rather naive considering that in the age of the internet and social media the modern audience is immediately aware of any crisis, its course, and its results, regardless of its physical location. According to Avraham and Ketter (2008), in a time of crisis it is important to provide as much information as possible otherwise people start speculating. This is particularly the case when dealing with a mode

of communication such as social media, which is all about participation and the sharing of information. To that end, if there is a crisis the event organizers must act quickly and set up a discussion thread. This proactive approach will give the event team a head start by setting the tone of the conversation; it will also help reassure potential customers that there is nothing to hide.

Although the team should be proactive, it must also humble and accept that they are not in complete control of the conversation. Social media is about engaging in open and active conversation so it is important for staff to be honest, respectful, and transparent. Event staff with responsibility for social media must be prepared to answer difficult questions and only remove posts if they are libelous, defamatory, or offensive. For instance, in a politically charged location such as Northern Ireland it is acceptable for the event organizers to remove and discourage hostile and extreme posts. This way the event and the event organizers remain apolitical. Unfortunately, the posts that were removed from the WPFPG's Facebook page could not be classified as hostile or extreme—the senders merely wanted advice. In a time of crisis, customers seek the truth and reassurance. It is also important that they do not receive confusing or contradictory messages, which can be an issue if there is a lack of communication between the senior management and the social media staff. To make sure they are not sending contradictory messages event staff will also need to liaise with other stakeholders such as the local/national tourism departments who may be communicating with potential customers in the build up to an event.

The fourth step of STREMI model involves monitoring the social media landscape and evaluating outcomes, which is an ongoing extension of social listening and surveillance (stage one and two). As the crisis is under way, the team must remain vigilant to stay on top of the ongoing online narrative as it develops. Concurrently, they must assess the quality of their immediate responses from step three to determine the need for any additional or time sensitive actions and to make considerations for future measures based on observations from the present and continuing situation. This then led into stage five, which is continuing to interact with the public. In the case of the WPFPG the flag

protests lasted 4 months and throughout this period the response from the event organizers was belated, ad hoc, and in some cases (such as the removal of posts) their actions were actually inflammatory—yet no corrective action was taken. According to Stewart and Wilson (2016), during stage four and five managers should avoid attempts to carry on in a “business as usual,” yet this is exactly what the organizers of the WPFPG did. Instead, they should have been more mindful of the customers' needs at this worrying time by being honest, reassuring, authentic, and transparent.

The sixth and final stage of the STREMI model is evaluating the response to the crisis and implementing any changes to the organization's social media strategy. During this stage, an event team must not only consider the lessons they learned about using social media platforms during the crisis but they must also consider how they can include online content/discussion in the event evaluation. The evidence from this study of the WPFPG would suggest that event organizers are relying on traditional methods to collect primary data when conducting their postevent evaluation and by ignoring social media the “real” impact of the event might not be revealed. This is a pressing issue given the growing involvement of public agencies in organizing and supporting events at local, regional, and national levels. One of the main reasons why public agencies support events is to improve the “image” of the host destination; therefore, a comprehensive and accurate event evaluation should consider comments made on social media in relation to both the event and the host destination.

In summary, events focus attention on a particular location, allowing the host destination to promote itself in a positive light. However, in the age of the internet and social media if something goes wrong in the build up to or during an event the host destination can become the topic of online conversations for all the wrong reasons. According to Avraham and Ketter (2008), the best way to handle a crisis is to be ready for it, which in the modern world includes having a social media strategy. If this is overlooked, as was the case in Northern Ireland when it hosted the WPFPG, then both the event and the host destination will pay the price; something that can go unnoticed because social media content is often overlooked in the official event evaluation.

In this article, the authors recommend event organizers use Stewart and Wilson's (2016) SERMII model as a guide when developing a social media strategy to help manage a crisis. However, it is important to stress that every event is unique and every crisis will create its own challenges. Moreover, social media is constantly evolving so although the SERMII model is a useful guide a social media strategy must be bespoke and flexible. Moving forward more research is needed into how event organizers are using social media in a crisis and what exactly is good and bad practice. Given the reach of social media, researchers must also examine if and how the comments made on social media are included as part of the formal event evaluation and explore the best ways to analyze this material.

References

- American Red Cross. (2011). *Social media in disasters and emergencies*. Retrieved from <http://redcrosschat.org/2011/08/24/how-do-you-use-social-media-in-emergencies/>
- Avraham, E., & Ketter, E. (2008). *Media strategies for marketing places in crisis: Improving the image of cities, countries and tourist destinations*. London, UK: Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Baym, N. (2010). *Personal connections in the digital age*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.
- Bello, M. (2012). Hurricane Sandy shows dark side of social media. *USA Today*, p. 5. Retrieved from <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2012/10/30/hurricane-sandy-social-media-errors/1668911/>
- Blackshaw, P., & Nazzaro, M. (2006). *Consumer generated media (CGM) 101: Word-of-mouth in the age of the web-fortified consumer*. New York, NY: Nielsen BuzzMetrics.
- Bladen, C., Kennell, J., Abson, E., & Wilde, N. (2012). *Events management: An introduction*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Bowman, S., & Willis, C. (2011). *We media—how audience are shaping the future of news and information*. Retrieved from http://www.flickertracks.com/blog/images/we_media.pdf
- Chalip, L. (2004). Beyond impact: A general model for event leverage. In B. Ritchie & D. Adair (Eds.), *Sport tourism-interrelationships, impacts and issues* (pp. 54–69). Bristol, UK: Channel View.
- Coombs W. (2007). Protecting organization reputations during a crisis: The development and application of situational crisis communication theory. *Corporate Reputation Review*, 10(3), 163–176.
- Coombs, W. (2014). *Ongoing crisis communication: Planning, managing, and responding* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Inc.
- Cox, C., Selitto, S., Sellitto, C., & Bultjens, J. (2009). The role of user-generated content in tourist's' travel planning behaviour. *Journal of Hospitality Marketing & Management*, 18(8), 743–764.
- Court, D., Elzinga, D., Mulder, S., & Vetvik, O. (2009). *The consumer decision journey*. Retrieved from <http://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/marketing-and-sales/our-insights/the-consumer-decision-journey>
- Davidson, R. (2011). Web 2.0 as a marketing tool for conference centres. *International Journal of Event and Festival Management*, 2(2), 117–129.
- Dredge, D., & Whitford, M. (2010). Policy for sustainable and responsible festivals and events: Institutionalisation of a new paradigm—a response. *Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events*, 2(1), 1–13.
- Florek, M., Breithbarth, T., & Conejo, F. (2008). Mega event = Mega impact? Travelling fans' experience and perceptions of the 2006 FIFA World Cup host nation. *Journal of Sport & Tourism*, 13(3), 199–219.
- Foley, M., McGillivray, D., & McPherson, G. (2012). *Event policy: From theory to strategy*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Freberg, K. (2011). Intention to comply with crisis messages communicated via social media. *Public Relations Review*, 38(3), 416–442.
- George, R., & Swart, K. (2012). International tourist's perceptions of crime-risk and their future travel intentions during the 2010 FIFA World Cup. *Journal of Sport and Tourism*, 17(3), 201–223.
- Getz, D. (2013). *Event tourism—concepts, international case studies and research*. Putnam Valley, NY: Cognizant Communication Corporation.
- Gripsrud, G., Nes, E., & Olsson, U. (2010). Effects of hosting a mega-sport event on country image. *Event Management*, 14, 193–204.
- Grix, J. (2012). Image leveraging and sports mega events: Germany and the 2006 FIFA World Cup. *Journal of Sport & Tourism*, 17(4), 289–312.
- Hall, M. (1992). *Hallmark tourist event: Impacts, management and planning*. London, UK: Belhaven Press.
- Horne, J. (2007). The four “knowns” of sports mega-events. *Leisure Studies*, 26(1), 81–96.
- Hudson, S., & Hudson, R. (2013). Engaging with consumers using social media: A case study of music festivals. *International Journal of Event and Festival Management*, 4(3), 206–223.
- Jago, L., Chalip, L., Brown, G., Mules, T., & Shameem, A. (2003). Building events into destination branding: Insights from experts. *Event Management*, 8(1), 3–14.
- Jin, Y., & Liu, B. (2010). The blog-mediated crisis communication model: Recommendations for responding to influential external blogs. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 22(4), 429–455.
- Kaplan, A., & Haenlein, M. (2010). Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of social media. *Business Horizons*, 53, 59–68.
- Keim, M., & Noji, E. (2011). Emergent use of social media: A new age of opportunity for disaster resilience. *American Journal of Disaster Medicine*, 6, 47–54.
- Kim, J., & Hardin, A. (2010). The impact of virtual worlds on word-of-mouth: Improving social networking and servicescape in the hospitality industry. *Journal of Hospitality Marketing & Management*, 19(7), 735–753.

- Kingsley, C. (2010). *Making the most of social media: 7 lessons from successful cities*. Retrieved from <http://docplayer.net/396398-Social-media-7-lessons-from-successful-cities-making-the-most-of-3814-walnut-street-phila-delphia-pa-19104-www-fels-upenn-edu.html>
- Kozinets, R. (2010). *Netnography: The marketer's secret weapon. How social media understanding drives innovation*. Santa Clara, CA: NETBASE Insight Delivered.
- Kuzma, J. (2010). Asian government usage of web 2.0 social media. *European Journal ePractice*, 9, 1–13.
- Lee, D., Kim, H., & Kim, J. (2014). The impact of online brand community type on consumer's community engagement behaviours: Consumer-created vs marketer-created online brand community in online social networking web sites. *CyberPsychology, Behaviour & Social Networking*, 14(1/2), 59–63.
- Lepp, A., & Gibson, H. (2011). Reimagining a nation: South Africa and the 2010 FIFA World Cup. *Journal of Sport & Tourism*, 16(3), 211–230.
- L'Equipe. (2015). *Tour de France statistics*. Retrieved from www.letour.fr/le-tour/2015/fr/equipes.html
- Leverage New Age Media. (2015). *Social media comparison infographic*. Retrieved from <https://leverage.newage-media.com/blog/social-media-infographic/>
- Munar, A., & Jacobsen, J. (2014). Motivations for sharing tourism experiences through social media. *Tourism Management*, 43, 46–54.
- O'Connor, P. (2010). Managing a hotel's image on Trip Advisor. *Journal of Hospitality Marketing & Management*, 19, 754–772.
- Preston, J., & Stetler, B. (2012). How government officials are using Twitter for Hurricane Sandy. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/11/02/how-government-officials-used-twitter-for-hurricane-sandy/>
- Quinn, B. (2013). *Key concepts in event management*. London, UK: Sage.
- Richter, L. (2003). International tourism and its global public health consequences. *Journal of Travel Research*, 41(4), 340–347.
- Ritchie, J. (1984) Assessing the impact of hallmark events: Conceptual and research issues. *Journal of Travel Research*, 23(1), 2–11.
- Rong, J., Vu, H., Law, R., & Li, G. (2012). A behavioral analysis of web sharers and borrowers in Hon Kong using targeted association rule mining. *Tourism Management*, 33, 731–740.
- Schroeder, A., & Pennington-Gray, L. (2015). The role of social media in international tourist's decision making. *Journal of Travel Research*, 54(5), 584–595.
- Schuster, J. (2001). Ephemerism, a temporary urbanism and imaging. In L. Vale & S. Warner (Eds.), *Imaging the city—continuing struggles and new directions* (pp. 361–396). New Brunswick, NJ: CUPR Books.
- Smith, A. (2012). *Events and urban regeneration. The strategic use of events to revitalise cities*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Stelzner, M. (2014). *Social media marketing industry report*. New York, NY: Social Media Examiner.
- Stewart, M., & Wilson, G. (2016). The dynamic role of social media during Hurricane Sandy: An introduction of the STREMI model to weather the storm of the crisis lifecycle. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 54, 639–646.
- Tussyadiah, I., & Fesenmaier, D. (2009). Mediating tourist experiences: Access to places via shared videos. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 35(1), 24–40.
- Whitelegg, D. (2000). Going for gold: Atlanta's bid for fame. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 24(4), 801–817.
- Xenos, M., Vromen, A., & Loader, D. (2014). The great equaliser? Patterns of social media use and youth political engagement in three advanced democracies. *Information, Communication & Society*, 17(2), 151–167.
- Xiang, Z., & Gretzel, U. (2010). Role of social media in online travel information search. *Tourism Management*, 31, 179–188.
- Xue, E., & Zhou, P. (2011). The effects of product involvement and prior experience on Chinese consumers' response to online word-of-mouth. *Journal of International Consumer Marketing*, 23(1), 45–58.
- Yates, D., & Paquette, S. (2011). Emergency knowledge management and social media technologies: A case study of the 2010 Haitian earthquake. *International Journal of Information Management*, 31(1) 6–13.

Copyright of Event Management is the property of Cognizant, LLC and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.