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DMOs and Social Media Crisis Communication in Low-Responsibility Crisis: #VisitPortugal Response Strategies During COVID-19

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Abstract: Guided by the situational crisis communication theory (SCCT), this study explores how a destination marketing organization (DMO) managed crisis communication during a prolonged low-responsibility crisis. It analyzes the production process of crisis communication, the crisis communication content shared on Facebook to protect the destination's image during COVID-19, and evaluates which crisis response strategies led to higher audience engagement. This study used a single instrumental case study with an exploratory sequential approach. A semi-structured interview was conducted with Visit Portugal's Communication and Digital Marketing Director. Then, Facebook content from Visit Portugal, posted between 1 January 2020 and 5 May 2023, was collected and analyzed. By analyzing the DMO's crisis communication workflow, decision-making processes, and content shared on social media, it was found that secondary response strategies effectively safeguarded and improved the destination's image, leading to higher audience engagement. This study provides DMOs with valuable insights into the development of effective crisis communication strategies when navigating low-responsibility crises.

Keywords: crisis communication; SCCT; destination marketing organization; COVID-19; social media; Facebook



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1. Introduction

A sudden occurrence that leads to an unfavorable situation is called a crisis (Laws & Prideaux, 2005). The tourism industry is highly vulnerable to crises (Ritchie, 2004). Just in the past few years, tourism destinations have faced different types of crises, including terrorism attacks, natural disasters like earthquakes, hurricanes, floods (Mansfeld & Pizam, 2006), and health-related crises such as the SARS outbreak, the Ebola virus, and the recent COVID-19 pandemic (Gössling et al., 2021; Novelli et al., 2018). These events frequently culminate in devastating and long-lasting impacts on destinations (Faulkner, 2001). Short-lived adverse incidents can trigger abrupt damage to the destination's image, while extensive and prolonged negative events can result in a more enduring impact on the destination's image (Avraham & Ketter, 2013). Destination marketing organizations (DMOs) are policy tools that assist the tourism industry by managing and coordinating destination activities, strengthening the industry's capabilities (Dredge, 2016), and playing a pivotal role in developing and promoting the destination's brand and image (Pike, 2006). DMO-generated communications are highly valuable in directly informing current and potential

tourists (Labanauskaitė et al., 2020), as it significantly influences tourist perceptions, notably destination awareness and image (Huerta-Álvarez et al., 2020).

Accordingly, crisis communication emerges as a critical component of destination recovery (Lehto et al., 2008). Crises are turbulent events that drive individuals to seek information to comprehend and rationalize the situation at hand (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013). Crisis communication covers the strategic processes of managing both the dissemination of crisis-related information and shaping people's perceptions about the crisis and the organization involved. These strategies aim to minimize adverse effects and restore trust and reputation (Coombs, 2010). During the crisis, communication focuses on mitigating the harm caused to an organization and its stakeholders, prioritizing public safety above all else (Coombs, 2019). Furthermore, post-crisis strategic communication seeks to reposition the organization as safe, thereby repairing its reputation (Coombs, 2007, 1999).

In destination-wide crises, the DMO should assume the role of tourism manager, disseminating crisis information to tourists and local tourism businesses, in coordination with official sources such as emergency responders and government authorities (Pennington-Gray et al., 2009). This top-down communication approach ensures consistency in the information provided, maximizes information reach, and enhances its credibility, which is crucial for tourists who may access information from various channels (Barbe & Pennington-Gray, 2020). Experimental research shows that media coverage of health crises directly impacts perceived risk and, subsequently, influences attitudes toward tourism experiences (Liu et al., 2016). Moreover, the marketing efforts undertaken by DMOs during health crises are especially vital for nurturing loyalty and fostering engagement among repeat visitors (Otoo & Kim, 2018).

A key theoretical framework in the domain of crisis communication research is the situational crisis communication theory (SCCT). SCCT employs an attribution-based approach to assist organizations in developing tailored crisis response strategies, based on the type of crisis and perceived responsibility by the public (Coombs & Tachkova, 2023). This approach underscores the need for appropriate responses to protect organizational reputation assets (Coombs, 2007) and to avoid undesirable behavioral intentions during times of crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). These response strategies should be chosen according to the type of crisis, its severity, and the organization's level of responsibility for the crisis (Coombs, 2015). Crises vary from simple, moderate to complex, or extreme, such as prolonged crises and scandals (Coombs et al., 2021). Depending on the perceived attribution of responsibility, SCCT recommends the use of specific response strategies, ranging from primary crisis response strategies—deny, diminishing, and rebuilding—to secondary response strategies—bolstering (Coombs, 2007). The use of deny strategies aim to distance the organization from the crisis by refuting its existence or its responsibility, while diminishing strategies seek to mitigate the organization's responsibility for the event or its adverse impacts (Coombs, 2007). Rebuilding strategies focus on restoring the organization's reputation through compensating victims and seeking forgiveness (Coombs, 2007). On the other hand, bolstering strategies involve portraying the organization as a victim of the event and reminding stakeholders of its past good works (Coombs, 2007, 2023). Kim and Liu (2012) augmented the SCCT with two supplementary secondary response strategies—enhancing and transferring—crafted to incorporate the organization's good deeds during a crisis, aligned with public interests. Natural disasters and health-related crises (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic), also known as low-responsibility crisis, are events where tourism organizations hold minimal responsibility (Faulkner, 2001).

The use of crisis response strategies that prioritize public well-being over organizational interests has the potential to lead to more positive outcomes, particularly in crises where the organization holds low responsibility (Kim et al., 2011), as in the case of a prolonged pandemic. This aligns with the principles of SCCT, which underscore the significance of proactive and open communication in mitigating the propagation of negative word-of-mouth (Coombs, 2007). When stakeholders perceive an organization's response as genuine and comprehensive, they are less inclined to engage in negative word of mouth, thereby enhancing trust and mitigating reputational damage (Chung & Lee., 2021). Despite the findings of previous studies reveal limited effectiveness of primary response strategies in mitigating threats to organizational reputation (Ma & Zhan, 2016), research has frequently neglected to consider the relevance of secondary crisis response strategies (Leung et al., 2022).

The SCCT has been a commonly used framework in tourism and hospitality research (Liu-Lastres, 2022). For instance, the SCCT has been employed to study the communication strategies used by multiple destination management organizations over Twitter during terrorist attacks (Barbe et al., 2018). In the context of health-related crises, Liu-Lastres (2022) underlined the importance of employing SCCT to assess the crisis response strategies of hotels during health emergencies. In a study of hotels facing a bed bug health crisis, bolstering and enhancing emerged as the two most prevalent crisis response strategies (Liu et al., 2015). More recently, an empirical study explored how airlines might employ appropriate crisis response strategies on Twitter to restore their reputations and recover from COVID-19. The study investigated the impact of these strategies on travelers' behavioral intentions, such as booking intentions and Twitter likes (Leung et al., 2022). Analyzing the types of crisis response strategies used by a national DMO on social media during COVID-19 is essential for understanding which strategies triggered the highest levels of public engagement, thereby contributing to the broader discourse on effective crisis communication in the tourism sector.

The rise of social media has revolutionized the crisis communication environment (Eriksson, 2018), making it more challenging for destinations to manage health-related crises, as these events are more exposed to negative media scrutiny (Schroeder & Pennington-Gray, 2015). Additionally, research has demonstrated that social media influences public reactions to crises (Dong et al., 2021). Social media platforms such as Facebook focus on current happenings, enabling DMOs to disseminate real-time information (Hays et al., 2013), restore the destination's image, and re-start tourism (Beirman, 2006). Regularly being the primary source of news and information during crises (Westerman et al., 2014), social media has revolutionized the landscape of crisis communication by enabling immediate interaction between organizations and their audience (Sigala, 2011). Additionally, the interactive and open nature of social media fosters secondary crisis communication, which encompasses the user's online behaviors of sharing, forwarding, or commenting on crisis-related content (Utz et al., 2013; Schultz et al., 2011). Consequently, social media platforms have become a predominant communication tool for marketers seeking to rebuild a positive image of organizations, including destinations, in the post-crisis phase (Avraham & Ketter, 2016; Avraham, 2015). The extant literature on social media and crisis communication in tourism has been exploring four dimensions: the use of social media by tourists during a crisis, the industry's adoption of social media for crisis communication, the impact of social media on risk perceptions and reputation, and the role played by social media during crises (Barbe & Pennington-Gray, 2020).

Tourist-specific studies have investigated tourists' use of social media to obtain crisis information during their travels (Schroeder et al., 2013) and to communicate in the event of natural disasters (Park et al., 2019), destination attacks (Zhai et al., 2019), hotel assaults

(Su et al., 2019), and the COVID-19 pandemic (Liu-Lastres et al., 2022). Additionally, Liu et al. (2015) analyzed how social media discourse during crises (i.e., the New York bed bug crisis) impacted tourist perceptions. A study by Filieri et al. (2021) demonstrated how Instagram users with an emotional connection to a destination express empathy and call for unity during crises (i.e., terrorist attacks). Furthermore, scholars have also employed web analytics to identify crisis communication influencers and opinion leaders (Park et al., 2019).

Industry-specific studies have examined crisis communication practices in hotels (Zizka et al., 2021; Möller et al., 2018; Barbe & Pennington-Gray, 2018), DMOs (Barbe et al., 2019; Oliveira & Huertas, 2019; Barbe et al., 2018), airlines (Leung et al., 2022; Ou & Wong, 2021), and cruise lines (Liu et al., 2016; Ryschka et al., 2016). Specifically, prior research explored the strategic use of social media by hotels to communicate during health-related crises (Liu et al., 2015). Ketter and Avraham (2021) explored the adaptation of digital marketing strategies by DMOs, involving digital ads and YouTube content, while Mele et al. (2023) investigated DMOs' strategic use of Instagram for effective communication during COVID-19.

Despite these contributions, research on social media and crisis communication is still in its early stages (Filieri et al., 2021; Spence et al., 2016). Research in the field of social media crisis communication in tourism has primarily focused on the general use of social media. When focusing on specific platforms, scholars most frequently analyze TripAdvisor and Twitter (Barbe & Pennington-Gray, 2020). Studies on Facebook—the world's most popular social media platform with more than three billion monthly active users worldwide (Statista, 2024)—remain limited, underscoring the importance of analyzing DMOs' use of this platform during a global health crisis. This study focuses on Facebook, offering a broader understanding of social media crisis communication strategies and complementing existing research, which has largely prioritized other platforms.

In addition to serious public health implications, pandemics typically instigate devastating socioeconomic and political crises in affected destinations (Chakraborty & Maity, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic was one of the most profound health crises in recent history, significantly affecting the global tourism industry (Fauci et al., 2020). Just in 2020, the tourism industry experienced a dramatic 74% decline in international tourist numbers and an unprecedented loss of one trillion US dollars in export revenues, highlighting the extensive damage inflicted by the pandemic on the tourism sector worldwide (UNWTO, 2020). Given the scale of this impact, scholars have studied the crisis communication messages sent by tourism stakeholders during the prolonged COVID-19 pandemic (Mele et al., 2023; Kwok et al., 2022; Salem et al., 2022; Scheiwiller & Zizka, 2021). DMOs are pivotal in the tourism industry, as they are responsible for the promotion and management of destinations (Pike & Page, 2014). Understanding how DMOs communicate during a pandemic can provide best practices for managing future health-related crises and reducing the impacts on the tourism industry (Mele et al., 2023; Ketter & Avraham, 2021; Sigala, 2020). Recent studies underscore the need for further research into how DMOs leverage social media marketing and communication during the prolonged COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting its critical role in navigating and recovering from the crisis (Li et al., 2022; Ketter & Avraham, 2021). This study provides a practical, case-based examination of how DMOs leverage social media to navigate a prolonged pandemic crisis, offering empirical insights to help destination managers in developing more effective communication strategies for future recovery (Leung et al., 2022). Moreover, while previous studies have examined how social media is used for crisis communication, there has been limited attention on understanding the production process of crisis communication and the marketing strategies implemented during crisis events (Mele et al., 2023; Ketter, 2016). In this regard, this study provides

a novel contribution by being the first to examine the crisis communication production process, offering new insights into how DMOs formulate, disseminate, and adapt their messaging strategies during prolonged crises. In addition, research must prioritize testing theory-based messages to optimize the usefulness of crisis communication strategies across different platforms (Liu-Lastres, 2022). In line with this call, this study explores which crisis response strategies generate the highest levels of audience engagement during a prolonged low-responsibility crisis, offering valuable insights for optimizing crisis communication.

To address these gaps, the purpose of this paper is threefold and aims to address the following research questions:

RQ1: How does a DMO outline its crisis communication decision-making process on social media during a prolonged low-responsibility crisis such as COVID-19?

RQ2: How can a DMO use Facebook to safeguard the destination's image during a prolonged low-responsibility crisis such as COVID-19?

RQ3: What type of response strategy leads to a greater impact on audience engagement?

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 presents the methodology used in this study, followed by an explanation of the study findings in Section 3. Finally, Section 4 discusses the findings and outlines the study's conclusions and limitations, suggesting directions for future research.

2. Materials and Methods

This study employed a single instrumental case study with an exploratory sequential approach to critically examine the crisis communication dynamics on social media during a low-responsibility crisis affecting a destination. Case study research is a method designed to investigate and analyze either a single or a collective case to explore the complexity of the object of study (Stake, 1995). In the context of crisis management research, case studies are a preferred methodological approach, frequently adopted to examine single-crisis events, tourism destinations, or tourism sectors (Ritchie & Jiang, 2019). Moreover, qualitative methodologies dominate crisis management studies, mainly with semi-structured interviews and secondary data analysis being among the most used methods (Ritchie & Jiang, 2019). To ensure a more comprehensive methodological approach, an exploratory sequential approach was adopted. This approach is a mixed-method design that combines the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis in sequential phases (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), enriching the study's methodological rigor and validity. Therefore, this study was conducted in two stages to address the research questions.

The first stage entailed a semi-structured interview with the Visit Portugal's Communication and Digital Marketing Director, conducted in May 2022. Semi-structured interviews are a qualitative technique that uses open-ended questions, enabling follow-ups and discussions to gain deeper insights (Patton et al., 2015). This stage adopted a single-interviewer approach in accordance with Whiting's (2008) suggestion and supported by her detailed interview guidelines. The semi-structured interview protocol was developed based on a thorough review of existing literature on crisis communication in tourism, ensuring alignment with the study's research questions and the specific context of the case under study. Prior to the interview, the participant was provided with a detailed overview of the study, including its main objectives, methodology, and potential contributions. Following this, formal consent was obtained for both participation and the audio recording of the interview. The interview lasted for 48 min, during which the interviewee was asked about the organization's crisis communication processes and workflows during the pandemic, as well as the digital communication campaigns that were created to respond to COVID-19 and help restore the destination's image. The interview was audio-recorded and subsequently

transcribed. Two researchers, each bringing a different academic perspective, carefully examined the transcript using content analysis.

The second stage of this study involved data collection from the official Visit Portugal Facebook page. All posts shared in English or Portuguese between 1 January 2020 and 5 May 2023 were manually collected in chronological order to capture crisis communication in the period immediately preceding the spread of COVID-19 in Europe and during and up to the time the WHO declared the end of COVID-19 as a global health emergency. Hashtags are often used in tourism-related crisis communication, as they serve as a centralized repository of information for users seeking relevant updates and news during crises (Barbe & Pennington-Gray, 2018). The metadata collected included the entire post content, including the hashtags used, the number of likes or other reactions, the number of shares, and comments. Table 1 displays the descriptive information for the collected posts.

Table 1. Total Facebook posts collected (n = 1285).

Month	2020	2021	2022	2023
January	40	16	40	20
February	39	19	40	27
March	37	18	2	25
April	18	24	27	28
May	22	33	36	5
June	39	23	35	---
July	43	22	35	---
August	51	27	33	---
September	39	30	47	---
October	42	38	46	---
November	44	40	38	---
December	35	36	26	---
Total	449	326	405	105

The posts were then coded based on two main criteria. Firstly, it was classified whether the message was related to the COVID-19 crisis or other theme. Secondly, all COVID-related posts were systematically classified based on the type and sub-category of crisis communication strategies employed (Coombs, 2007; Kim & Liu, 2012). User engagement is defined as the cognitive, affective, or emotional responses users have towards media content or brands (Broersma, 2019). Social media engagement is commonly quantified through engagement metrics, which measure user interactions such as likes and other reactions (e.g., love and care), shares, and comments on a post (Le, 2018). These behavioral interactions are considered key indicators of how audiences engage with content on social media platforms (Barklamb et al., 2020). In line with this approach, engagement levels in this study were assessed based on the count of likes or other reactions, shares and comments. To ensure ethical integrity, the analysis was conducted using only aggregated metrics, without identifying users or private information. By doing so, this study complies with ethical guidelines for social media research, which consider the analysis of publicly available, aggregated data as permissible without requiring user consent (Stommel & Rijk, 2021).

Two researchers independently coded an entire set of 1285 Facebook posts, and Cohen's κ was employed to test inter-coder reliability. There was a 100 percent agreement on the assessment of COVID-related vs. non-COVID messages, as well as on the assessment of the crisis response strategy used in each message. Furthermore, it also achieved a high level of agreement when coding the employed sub-categories of crisis response strategy ($\kappa = 0.95$) (only 3 of 58 messages were coded differently by the two coders). Lastly, content analysis was conducted using Atlas.ti, followed by a sequential exploratory strategy where

quantitative analysis assisted in explaining and complementing the qualitative results (Creswell, 2014).

3. Results

3.1. The Decision-Making Process Behind the Implemented Crisis Communication

Confronted with the unprecedented severity and scale of the pandemic, the DMO established a dedicated committee in late November 2019 to strategize and implement the destination's crisis communication efforts. This committee comprised key officials, including the organization's president, the coordinating director of destination promotion, the communication and digital marketing director, and the territorial marketing director. The committee members were selected not only for their technical knowledge in communication and marketing, as well as in their ability to make and execute decisions in real time, enabling them to respond to the crisis challenges as they arose and streamline processes.

The committee first incorporated existing documentation and action plans from the organization's crisis department, which was originally created to address a large-scale wildfire event in the central region of the country. They then developed an internal crisis management document outlining key contacts, operational procedures, and decision-making authorities. In the initial phases of the pandemic lockdown, weekly committee briefings were held to align the response strategy. The committee's primary challenge included the management of air travel and accessibility issues, as well as addressing concerns related to passports and vaccinations. To tackle these complex matters, close interaction with SEF (Foreigners and Borders Service), DGS (Portuguese Health Authority), and the Council of Ministers was crucial to access the latest information and ensure accurate interpretation of laws.

The committee's primary goal was to define and align a communication strategy with a focus on tourists and the business sector, while ensuring public awareness regarding safety measures and mitigation efforts. These guidelines were then handed over to the communication and digital marketing department, which worked alongside a multidisciplinary team including copywriters, videographers, photographers, advertising and communication agencies, public relations (PR) agencies, creative agencies, and digital ecosystem consultants. This collaborative team was entrusted with the responsibility of conceptualizing and developing all crisis communication content and marketing campaigns, to be shared on social media platforms. The collaborative and multidisciplinary workflow enabled the creation of targeted and differentiated content for these social media platforms. Facebook played a central role in the dissemination of this information due to its capacity to accommodate longer and more descriptive posts. The Visit Portugal's Communication and Digital Marketing Director explained the following during the interview:

All our social media platforms are managed differently. Facebook, in particular, is used in a more descriptive manner in our communications, specifically during COVID-19. We provide detailed explanations, share longer and more elaborate texts, use a lot of video content, and share many stories. This approach is crucial for giving people a glimpse into daily happenings and experiencing the life of the tourist destination.

Figure 1 illustrates the DMO's crisis communication decision-making process workflow during the pandemic.

future, unity, and resilience in facing the pandemic (Ketter & Avraham, 2021). Some examples of these posts include:

It's time to stop.

Time to reset, time to recenter, time to switch off so we can move on.

The best part of it all? We are in this together. ❤️

#CantSkipHope [Post shared on 21 March 2020]

Ready for a Lisbon travel escape from the comfort of your couch? Yep, you can do it with our video on board Tram 28. Tour the city from Martim Moniz to Campo de Ourique and get to know all the important sites along this route. Learn more:

<https://bit.ly/2Jtm9UE>

#CantSkipHope #Living #LisboaRegion [Post shared on 15 April 2020]

As in the rest of the world, the Azores is taking a break. Let's dream about these 9 breathtaking islands.

Learn more: <https://bit.ly/2Sm7ijv>

#CantSkipHope #Nature #Azores [Post shared on 14 May 2020]

As tourism sites were starting to reopen and airlines resumed flights in the first reopening phase (May–November 2020), Visit Portugal used rebuilding response strategies to provide tourists with safety information. Additionally, they mainly employed bolstering and enhancing response strategies to reassure and attract visitors. Marketers can capitalize on citizens' feelings of patriotism and local pride during crises to effectively promote products and destinations (Avraham, 2020). The #CantSkipOpening campaign marked the reopening of tourism. Meanwhile, the "You can" campaign (#TuPodes) encouraged locals to explore and rediscover their own country, celebrated as the best destination in the world, fostering national pride and solidarity until foreign tourists return. Marketers can also turn a crisis into an opportunity by highlighting the DMO's positive actions during the event, transforming the negative situation into a positive narrative (Avraham & Ketter, 2008). Visit Portugal launched the collaborative "Unwanted Shape" campaign with MEO (a leading telecommunications provider in Portugal) and World Surf League, which involved creating surfboards from recycled plastic, including COVID-19 waste, to be used in the Portuguese competition in 2021 and with the ambitious goal of using only recycled surfboards in competitions by 2028. Some examples of these posts include the following:

#Portugal is the first European country to receive the World Travel & Tourism Council's Safe Travels Certification.

This seal aims to recognize destinations that comply with health and hygiene protocols in line with the Safe Travel Protocols issued by the WTTC.

More info: <https://bit.ly/2XJQEO7>/<https://bit.ly/3cNGC2w>

#SafeTravels [Post shared on 9 June 2020]

With the spirit and strength that characterize us, we gradually turned things around. And Portugal is back. Now you can come back, you can visit and travel around our country. The time has come to set out to rediscover yourself and return to the Best Destination in the World.

You can. #Tupodes [Post shared on 15 June 2020]

Can't Skip Opening

We've hoped for better days and today Portugal is ready to welcome everyone in a safe and relaxed atmosphere. We're waiting for you. #CantSkipOpening

+ Info: <https://bit.ly/3hBB3rB> [Post shared on 16 June 2020]

CALLING ALL SHAPERS AND OCEAN LOVERS

We care about our world and we know you care too. Our oceans are suffering

the impact of waste that results from COVID-19. So we are raising our voices to create awareness for this problem.

We officially challenge every shaper out there to create surfboards with the COVID-19 related waste you can find in the ocean. The winning boards will be chosen by five of the world's best shapers and will be used by the best surfers at MEO Peniche Pro 2021. [Post shared on 19 October 2020]

Transitioning from the first reopening phase, Portugal soon faced a second lockdown (November 2020–April 2021), which implied further adjustments and responses to address the ongoing crisis. Despite the fluctuating circumstances, Visit Portugal maintained a consistent communication strategy, using rebuilding strategies to keep the public informed about sanitation measures and using secondary response strategies to keep them engaged and connected. The DMO's creativity shone through in their crisis communication. For instance, recognizing that physical travel was not feasible, they pivoted a campaign to promote literary tourism. This was exemplified by encouraging the public to "travel" through reading, tapping into the rich cultural and literary heritage of Portugal. Some examples of these posts include the following:

Yes, we can travel through books. They're real treasures that take us to places far away and so much different than those of our daily lives. This is the ideal moment to read and explore Portugal through literature. We bet you'll feel more inspired for your future travels.

Learn more: <https://bit.ly/3mrGOdr>

#Culture #Portugal [Post shared on 3 December 2020]

4 #Portuguese regions in the list of "#Safest #Destinations to #visit in 2021" by European Best Destinations:

☞ #madeira

☞ #Azores

☞ #Lagoa, #Algarve

☞ #Alentejo

#Portugal #Visitportugal #dreamnowtravellater [Post shared on 12 January 2021]

The last time I saw Lisbon | via Budget Traveller

"It is tough to predict the future but one thing I do know for sure, that when it is safe for us to travel again, I definitely will be returning to Lisbon.

While I am missing my annual January pilgrimage, I am happy to wait for Lisbon. All I have to do is close my ears and eyes and I am back there, walking the streets again. I can hear the passionate voices from the local tascas, the warm roasted smell of freshly brewed bicas and the vexed voices of silvery haired ladies rise, float into the seven hills above as they put their clothes out to dry on their rusty iron balconies. I hear those sounds and like magic, I can see Lisbon again. I am running towards the golden light and the familiar embrace of an old friend".

#DreamNowTravelLater #Visitportugal #Portugal #lisbonregion [Post shared on 5 February 2021]

Who doesn't like a pastel de nata in the morning?

Actually, you can enjoy this typical Portuguese pastry at any time of the day, especially if accompanied by a good espresso. Right now, it's not easy to go and buy a pastel de nata whenever you feel like it, but the good news is that you can recreate this recipe in the comfort of your home . . . and delight the whole family:

<http://bit.ly/39nyPKA>.

Give it a try and share the photos of your masterpiece with us 😊
 #FoodandWine #LisbonRegion [Post shared on 24 February 2021]

The second reopening phase (May 2021–May 2023) permitted the re-stabilization and long-term recovery of international tourism. During this period, Visit Portugal utilized rebuilding response strategies to inform the public about the low risk of traveling and to provide clear information on the reopening rules in place. Additionally, secondary response strategies were implemented to welcome back tourists and aid in the recovery from the crisis, emphasizing the destination's safety and readiness. Some examples of these posts include the following:

If you're planning to travel or to move safely this year, the EU Digital Covid Certificate is a must-have tool.

Follow our tips and get all the necessary information to request yours 😊
 Happy travels! [Post shared on 12 July 2021]

After an open call to shapers worldwide to create a surfboard made from COVID-19 waste, this is the final result and closure everyone's been looking for: 8 surfboards chosen by a prestigious jury.

Come and see them at MEO Vissla Pro Ericeira from 2–10 October 2021.

More information: <https://unwantedshapes.pt> [Post shared on 1 October 2021]

Today we celebrate World Tourism Day 2022 and the theme for this year is "Rethinking Tourism". Now more than ever, this is the time to redress the balance. Tomorrow is today. Let's change today so we can guarantee tomorrow. For a better planet, a better tourism.

#WorldTourismDay [Post shared on 27 September 2022]

DMOs strive to improve their destination's image while simultaneously managing and mitigating the impact of negative coverage, including actual crisis situations like virus outbreaks (Che, 2008). In this context, Visit Portugal took a step further by integrating sustainability into their strategic response to the pandemic. As explained by the Communication and Digital Marketing Director, the goal of this transition was as follows:

From now on, we have a brand purpose which is to welcome everyone, but we think that is no longer enough. From now on we are sustainability. And this new condition will be dimmed in all of our campaigns.

Starting from late 2022 and beyond, sustainability has evolved from being merely a buzzword into a comprehensive strategy deeply ingrained within Visit Portugal's organizational structure, as described in the Portugal Tourism Plan +Sustainable 20–23 (Casal-Ribeiro & Boavida-Portugal, 2024). This core principle was integrated across all aspects of their communication efforts. Non-COVID-19-related content shared on Facebook include new campaigns as the #SaveOurOcean, the #Rout_E to promote the use of electric or hybrid vehicles for press trips and tourists, or the #PortugalFieldGuide, a campaign that shared regular content that highlighted endangered local species of fauna and flora, raising awareness about environmental conservation. By implementing a multifaceted communication strategy that addressed both short-term recovery needs and long-term sustainability goals, the DMO ensured that the destination remained appealing and resilient during the prolonged low-responsibility crisis and reinforced an online sustainable image.

Figure 3 displays the main hashtags used in the analyzed crisis communication posts. Among these, #CantSkipHope stands out as the most frequently used hashtag (24 percent) and a key element in the crisis communication strategy, with relevant significance in the overall messaging, as the DMO had used the hashtag #CantSkipPortugal in their posts before the crisis. In addition, other hashtags were created to tag specific COVID-19 re-

sponse content, such as #DreamNowTravelLater (5 percent), #CantSkipOpening (3 percent), #SafeTravels (3 percent), #ReadPortugal (3 percent), #Vaccinated (2 percent), and #DreamNowVisitLater (2 percent). Although used less frequently, these hashtags played a role in targeting specific messages related to the crisis.



Figure 3. Analyzed crisis communication hashtags in a word cloud ($n = 27$). Source: created by the authors.

3.3. Impact on Audience Engagement

Of the 1285 posts analyzed, Visit Portugal shared a total of 58 crisis-related posts, interspersed among other content promoting the destination. First, the ratio of posts using secondary crisis response strategies (i.e., bolstering and enhancing) to those using primary response strategies (i.e., rebuilding) was 2.9, indicating that Visit Portugal placed a significantly greater emphasis on secondary strategies to address COVID-19.

When comparing user engagement metrics, the analysis also revealed significant differences between posts using primary response strategies with those using secondary response strategies. Secondary response posts outperformed primary response posts in the number of likes and shares, with both categories receiving identical numbers of comments (Table 2). The primary response post with the most substantial impact on audience engagement obtained 782 likes and 880 shares. In contrast, the secondary response post “It’s time to stop. Time to reset, time to recenter, time to switch off so we can move on. The best part of it all? We are in this together. ❤️ #CantSkipHope” gathered a significantly higher engagement with 2167 likes and 3170 shares—the highest number of interactions among all analyzed posts. Therefore, these results indicate that secondary response strategies had a superior impact on audience engagement during COVID-19, especially leading to higher levels of likes and shares.

Table 2. Engagement metrics.

	Crisis Communication on Facebook					
	Primary Response Strategies (n = 15)			Secondary Response Strategies (n = 43)		
	ni	M	SD	ni	M	SD
Likes/Reactions	15	188.27	211.2	43	249.19	394.19
Shares	9	80.33	224.10	30	176.84	601.89
Comments	13	15.40	27.8	42	14.67	28.34

4. Discussion and Conclusions

4.1. Overview

The current study was designed in a threefold way to understand Visit Portugal’s online crisis communication decision-making process during the COVID-19 pandemic, examine the crisis communication content shared on Facebook to mitigate the pandemic’s impact and safeguard the destination’s image, as well as to evaluate which type of crisis

response strategies resulted in higher audience engagement. This study contributes to the growing body of research on crisis communication by DMOs during low-responsibility crises, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

RQ1: How does a DMO outline its crisis communication decision-making process on social media during a prolonged low-responsibility crisis?

The findings of this study align with previous literature highlighting the role of DMOs in managing and coordinating crisis communication (Dredge, 2016; Pike, 2006). However, this study provides novel insights into the internal decision-making processes and the operationalization of social media strategies during an extended crisis.

One of the most significant contributions of this research is the detailed examination of how a DMO structured its crisis communication framework during an extended crisis, by establishing a dedicated committee. The selection of key officials with expertise in communication, marketing, and decision-making authority underscores the necessity of an agile and knowledgeable crisis response team (Pennington-Gray et al., 2009). The committee's capacity to integrate pre-existing crisis management documentation, originally designed for wildfire events, shows the importance of organizational adaptability and pre-crisis preparedness (Coombs, 2010). This supports prior studies that highlight the value of leveraging past crisis management experiences to respond to novel threats (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013).

Furthermore, this research underscores the critical role of top-down communication strategies in ensuring message consistency and credibility. The necessity for close collaboration with official institutions, such as the Portuguese Health Authority and the Council of Ministers, illustrates the reliance on authoritative sources to enhance public trust and information accuracy (Barbe & Pennington-Gray, 2020). This study supports previous evidence that crisis communication must prioritize public safety, while simultaneously mitigating stakeholder harm (Coombs, 2019). This supports the argument that crisis communication must extend beyond the mere dissemination of information to include reassurance and engagement of key audiences (Corrêa et al., 2024; Lehto et al., 2008).

RQ2: How can a DMO use social media to safeguard the destination's image during a prolonged low-responsibility crisis?

Different crisis communication strategies were employed throughout the pandemic, with a notable emphasis on secondary response strategies (bolstering and enhancing) to safeguard public image and to lead to higher audience engagement. Through effective crisis communication, Visit Portugal managed to maintain its public image and audience engagement. These strategies were essential to Visit Portugal's communication, as evidenced by the examples presented in the previous section. Bolstering response strategies were used to reinforce the destination's reputation by portraying Portugal as a victim of the crisis and promoting messages of hope and unity (Coombs, 2007), as seen in campaigns like #CantSkipHope and #CantSkipOpening. In parallel, enhancing response strategies, which aimed to not only maintain but also improve the image, were evident in campaigns such as #Tupodes, which encouraged patriotism and the rediscovery of the country by locals, and the collaborative "Unwanted Shape" campaign, which accentuated sustainability as a key value in the recovery process. These findings corroborate findings from previous studies that emphasize the critical role of crisis marketing communication campaigns in the recovery of destination image (Ketter & Avraham, 2021; Mair et al., 2016), further demonstrating their strategic importance in tourism crisis management. The findings highlight the crucial role of strategic crisis communication in mitigating the negative impacts of prolonged crises (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2012; Coombs, 2007; Veil et al., 2011), emphasizing the importance of responsive and adaptive communication practices. Bolstering strategies helped maintain

the destination's image by highlighting positive aspects and the hope for a better future, while enhancing strategies were crucial in reinforcing Portugal's position as a safe and attractive destination for tourists, especially as the situation began to stabilize. As stated by the Visit Portugal's Communication and Digital Marketing Director during the interview,

Our concern over these two years was clear and transparent communication and trying to share as much information about what was the situation throughout the different stages of the pandemic.

These communication practices not only protected Portugal's image during COVID-19 but also helped to enhance it, particularly by successfully integrating sustainability as a key pillar in its long-term image recovery. The shift towards a more sustainability-centered communication approach, seen in posts like #SaveOurOceaon or #Route_E, aligned with emerging post-pandemic marketing communication paradigms, placing sustainability at the forefront of tourism marketing and the destination's identity. Thus, this study contributes to the research agenda on the emerging post-pandemic marketing communication model, highlighting the increasing significance of sustainability in crisis communication strategies and its potential to reshape destination management practices in future crises (Pascual-Fraile et al., 2024).

Moreover, the findings of this study align with broader literature on crisis management in tourism, which emphasizes the importance of proactive planning, reactive measures, and adaptive strategies to foster resilience and adapt to unpredictable events, such as low-responsibility crises (Månsson & Eksell, 2024; Casal-Ribeiro et al., 2023; Raki et al., 2021). Specifically, this study expands the understanding of how secondary response strategies can be effectively applied not only to react to prolonged adversity but also to reposition and strengthen the destination's image, creating a narrative that engages the audience.

RQ3: What type of crisis response strategy leads to a greater impact on audience engagement?

The findings indicate that secondary response strategies were more effective in fostering audience engagement compared to primary response strategies. Posts employing secondary response strategies generated a greater number of likes and shares, while both categories received an equal number of comments. Incorporating secondary response strategies, such as including messages of unity, past achievements, resilience during COVID-19, or positive information about the destination, appears to engage more strongly with the audience (Coombs, 2007).

These findings suggest that audiences respond more positively to crisis communication incorporating secondary response strategies in low-responsibility crises, contributing to a deeper understanding of crisis communication in destination management contexts.

Further details on these findings, along with their limitations and suggestions for future research, are discussed below.

4.2. Theoretical Contribution

This study contributes to the existing literature on tourism crisis communication by expanding on previous research and advancing theoretical understanding in several ways. First, it directly addresses the call for research on the production process of crisis communication implemented during crisis events (Mele et al., 2023; Ketter, 2016). By conducting, for the first time, an in-depth analysis of the DMO's formation of a crisis communication committee, its decision-making processes, and the strategic use of social media, this research provides a comprehensive understanding of how crisis communication strategies were developed and executed. This insight into the production process enriches the theoretical landscape of crisis communication within the context of extended, real-world crises. This aligns with recent findings that underscore the significance of structured

crisis communication frameworks and stakeholder collaboration in enhancing destination resilience (Pascual-Fraile et al., 2024; García González et al., 2022).

Furthermore, Coombs (2021) has advocated for more advancements in crisis communication research, recommending testing the applicability and effectiveness of relevant theories, such as the SCCT, in the social media landscape. However, the SCCT has mainly been used to descriptively categorize crisis response strategies in tourism studies, without providing substantial causal evidence (Wut et al., 2021). This study makes a significant contribution to the theoretical discourse of the SCCT by providing empirical evidence on the effectiveness of crisis response strategies employed on Facebook during prolonged crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The study's findings align with those of previous literature (Liu et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2011), demonstrating that secondary response strategies often generate superior results in engaging the audience and maintaining a positive destination image, particularly when the DMO's responsibility is perceived as minimal. By leveraging social media, DMOs can implement crisis response strategies effectively, not only providing real-time information but also fostering a sense of community and resilience among their audience. This adaptability and responsiveness are crucial in the management of the destination's image and public engagement as the crisis evolves.

Lastly, criticism concerning single case study research often concerns the constraints associated with generalizing findings and establishing statistical conclusion validity (Yin, 2014; Horn & Heerboth, 1982). To address these limitations, this study employed an exploratory sequential approach, integrating qualitative and quantitative analyses to strengthen the robustness and the validity of the study results (Heesen et al., 2019). This methodological framework provides a more comprehensive understanding of crisis communication strategies, offering significant theoretical and practical implications.

4.3. Managerial Contribution

From a managerial perspective, this study offers valuable insights into DMOs and other tourism stakeholders involved in crisis communication. The findings underscore the importance for DMOs to adopt a structured and strategic crisis communication workflow to ensure both efficiency and credibility in crisis responses. One of the key managerial implications is the establishment of a dedicated crisis communication committee. The study's findings indicate that the presence of a committee, comprising members with both technical expertise and decision-making authority, is essential for facilitating a well-coordinated and effective response. Research supports this approach, indicating that well-structured crisis management teams have the capacity to expedite real-time decision-making, while ensuring that communication remains aligned with the evolving nature of crises and align with official stakeholder requirements (Barbe & Pennington-Gray, 2020). Additionally, the implementation of a top-down communication approach allows upper-level management to efficiently allocate resources and prioritize communication efforts based on the severity and extent of the crisis (Department of Tourism, Innovation and Sport, 2019). This top-down approach has been shown to facilitate streamlined decision-making and rapid implementation of communication strategies, ensuring consistent messaging and the prevention of misinformation, thereby reinforcing stakeholder trust (Barbe & Pennington-Gray, 2020). Such consistency in communicating is crucial, as research shows that stakeholder trust is heavily dependent on the perceived reliability of the information provided by DMOs during a crisis (Barbe & Pennington-Gray, 2020).

Furthermore, DMOs should prioritize the development of crisis communication plans that integrate secondary response strategies to effectively manage future low-responsibility crises. Empirical findings demonstrate that during low-responsibility crises, secondary response strategies are more effective in maintaining a positive destination image and

fostering audience interaction. Therefore, DMOs and other tourism organizations should proactively develop pre-crisis response frameworks that incorporate these strategies to increase preparedness and ensure smooth implementation in times of crisis.

Regular training of staff on crisis communication best practices, particularly in message framing and social media engagement, has been demonstrated to significantly improve crisis response effectiveness. Given the increasing role of social media as a primary communication channel, especially in health-related crises, DMOs may also invest in advanced digital tools for crisis communication and analysis of real-time insights into public perceptions.

Furthermore, collaboration with relevant external stakeholders, including governmental agencies and private sector partners, is important for a holistic and comprehensive crisis response. The establishment of predefined communication protocols with key stakeholders safeguards the effectiveness of crisis response efforts. Research consistently demonstrates that inter-organizational coordination enhances crisis management efficiency by mitigating inconsistencies that could otherwise undermine public trust (Ritchie & Jiang, 2019). These protocols ensure that messages are aligned across different organizations, ultimately reinforcing the destination's resilience.

4.4. Limitations and Further Research

While this study provides valuable insights into tourism crisis communication research, it is not without limitations. First, the study focused on a single case study of the destination Portugal and analyzed content shared exclusively via Facebook. This limits the generalizability of the findings. Future studies should consider a broader comparative analysis across multiple DMOs or other tourism organizations in different countries and regions to assess how cultural and political factors shape crisis communication. Additionally, investigating a wider range of social media platforms (e.g., Instagram and TikTok) could offer a deeper understanding of platform-specific engagement dynamics and the effectiveness of messages. Moreover, examining different prolonged low-responsibility crisis scenarios (e.g., climate change) could provide valuable insights into how DMOs adapt their strategies to different crises. Such research could provide a more holistic understanding of effective crisis communication practices across diverse geographical contexts and in different low-responsibility crises.

Second, while the study highlights the efficacy of secondary response strategies during low-responsibility crises, future studies may examine the varying effectiveness between bolstering and enhancing response strategies and attempt to measure their impact on tourists' behavioral intentions, particularly future visitation and recommendation. Methodologically, experimental designs or longitudinal studies could provide a deeper understanding of how these strategies influence tourists' behavioral intentions and destination recovery over time. This would provide deeper insights into the optimal application of these strategies and their influence on destination choice and tourism recovery during prolonged low-responsibility crises.

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