Crisis information, communication strategies and customer complaint behaviours: the case of COVID-19

Xinyi Liu, Xiao Fu, Chang Hua and Zhiyong Li

Abstract
Purpose – The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic plunged global tourism into a huge crisis in 2020. China was confronted with a wave of cancellations by tourism consumers due to COVID-19 and tourist complaints rose dramatically during this period. Although tourism enterprises have quickly introduced measures in response, the effectiveness of targeted policies is expected to be evaluated. Concerned about this phenomenon, this study aims to provide insights into the dim prospects of the tourism industry and to bridge the gap between tourists and enterprises.

Design/methodology/approach – The current study adopts a two-step method that combines automatic and manual content analysis to contrastively analyse 647 complaints from the Sina platform and the measures of five online travel agencies (OTAs) taken to deal with COVID-19.

Findings – The results reveal that the COVID-19-related information and policies issued by official departments had a promoting effect on tourist complaints. OTAs were the main target of complainers, and three themes of complaints were identified, namely, cancellation barriers, refund barriers and customer relationship management. Although tourism enterprises’ policies covered most dimensions of the three themes, more detailed and mutually beneficial policies need to be formulated in the face of a new round of cancellations.

Originality/value – This research attempts to investigate tourism customer complaint behaviours in the case of COVID-19 and to provide tourism enterprises receiving different complaints with practical insights into crisis management. It contributes to simultaneously minimizing business losses and maintaining customer relationships in the service industry, improving the industry’s performance under potential crises in the future.

Keywords Tourism crisis, Online tourist complaint, Tourism enterprise measures, Comparative analysis, COVID-19

Paper type Research paper

危机信息公开、沟通策略和客户投诉行为：以COVID-19为例

研究目的：2020年，新冠肺炎大流行的爆发使全球旅游业陷入巨大危机。由于新肺肺炎疫情，中国面临了旅客投诉量的剧增浪潮。期间，投诉者对旅游消费的不满急剧上升，虽然旅游企业迅速采取了应对措施，但预期将评估有针对性的政策的有效性。考虑到这一现象，本研究旨在为旅游业的暗淡前景提供见解，并弥合游客和企业之间的差距。

设计/方法：本研究采用自动内容分析和人工编码相结合的两步法，对来自新浪平台的647起旅客投诉和5家在线旅行社应对COVID-19的措施进行对比分析。

结果：结果显示，官方发布的新冠肺炎疫情信息和政策对旅客投诉的数量起到了刺激作用。在线旅行社是投诉者的主要目标，并确定了旅客投诉的三个主题：取消障碍、退款障碍和客户关系管理。虽然旅游企业政策涵盖了这三个主题的大部分内容，但面对新一轮的取消，还需要制定更详细和互利的政策。

原创性/价值：本研究试图调查COVID-19疫情下旅游投诉行为，为收到不同投诉的旅游企业提供危机管理的实用见解。它有助于在服务行业同时减少业务损失和维护客户关系，提高行业在未来潜在危机下的绩效。

关键词：旅游危机，网络营销投诉；旅游企业政策，对比分析，新冠影响

文章类型：研究型论文
Información de crisis, estrategias de comunicación y medidas adoptadas ante las reclamaciones de los clientes: el caso de COVID-19

**Diseño/metodología/enfoque:** El presente estudio adopta un método en dos fases que combina el análisis de contenido automatizado y manual para analizar de forma contrastiva 647 reclamaciones de la plataforma Sina y las medidas de cinco agencias de viajes online (OTA) adoptadas para hacer frente a la COVID-19.

**Objetivo:** El estallido de la pandemia COVID-19 sumió al turismo mundial en una enorme crisis en 2020. China tuvo que hacer frente a una oleada de cancelaciones por parte de los consumidores turísticos debido a la COVID-19, y las quejas de los turistas aumentaron drásticamente durante este periodo. Aunque las empresas turísticas introdujeron rápidamente medidas de respuesta, se espera que se evalúe la eficacia de dichas políticas. Preocupado por este fenómeno, el presente estudio pretende aportar información sobre las sombrías perspectivas de la industria turística y tender un puente entre los turistas y las empresas.

**Conclusiones:** Los resultados revelan que la información y las políticas relacionadas con el COVID-19 emitidas por los departamentos oficiales tuvieron un efecto promotor de las quejas de los turistas. Las OTAs fueron el principal objetivo de los reclamantes, y se identificaron tres temas de reclamaciones: barreras de cancelación, barreras de reembolso y gestión de la relación con el cliente. Aunque las políticas de las empresas turísticas cubrieran la mayoría de las dimensiones de los tres temas, es necesario formular políticas más detalladas y mutuamente beneficiosas ante una nueva oleada de cancelaciones.

**Originalidad/valor:** Esta investigación trata de investigar el comportamiento de las reclamaciones de los clientes turísticos en el caso de COVID-19 y de proporcionar a las empresas turísticas que reciben diferentes reclamaciones una visión práctica de la gestión de crisis. Contribuye a minimizar simultáneamente las pérdidas comerciales y a mantener las relaciones con los clientes en el sector de los servicios, mejorando el rendimiento de la industria ante posibles crisis en el futuro.

**Palabras clave:** Crisis turística, reclamación turística online, medidas de la empresa turística, análisis comparativo, COVID-19

**Tipo de papel:** Trabajo de investigación

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**Introduction**

In 2020, the greatest challenge facing humanity must be COVID-19, which swept across more than 200 countries and territories around the world. It is reported that from 2020 to 2021, the cumulative loss of global economic output is expected to reach $8.5tn, essentially erasing the past four years of growth *(Xinhua News, 2020)*. National governments are struggling to strike a balance between maintaining their economies and preventing the collapse of their health systems in the face of mass deaths *(Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020)*. To prevent the spread of COVID-19, some specific steps, such as suspending visa-on-arrival policies, enacting strict travel bans and instituting national lockdowns, have been taken *(Wen et al., 2020)*. As a result of these measures, the COVID-19 pandemic led to a 22% drop in international tourist arrivals during the first quarter of 2020 and could lead to an annual decline of 60% to 80% compared with the 2019 figures *(UNWTO, 2020)*, indicating that there is an urgent and vital need to conduct crisis management and formulate recovery strategies from the perspectives of both tourists and operators.

The concern over health risks is an important factor in tourists’ decision-making process, and in recent years, the emphasis on safety has increased *(Çakar, 2020)*. One main reason is that more people are engaging in international tourism and are unfamiliar with the cultural environment and social networks *(Schroeder et al., 2013)*. In addition, the sensational media coverage of crisis events heightens tourists’ fear *(Pforr and Hosie, 2008)*. Specifically, infectious diseases such as COVID-19 have been verified to affect travel behaviour and destination choice *(Abraham et al., 2020)*, and complaints will proliferate if tourists’ demands are not met. The external shocks caused by the crisis have led to the most severe breakdown in the tourism service system. In addition, tourists sometimes face confusion over specific policies and the insurance offered by travel organizations during crisis periods.
(Hannigan, 1980), and this confusion and insurance both lead to tourist complaint behaviours. Although complaints indicate flaws in the products and services of tourist companies, they are also an opportunity to rebuild the image of such companies, as dissatisfied customers are more likely to spread positive word of mouth (WOM) if complaints are handled properly (Lewis, 1983; Sujithamrak and Lam, 2005). Recently, the prevalence of social media has prompted the rise in and the spread of grievances (Sparks and Browning, 2010), which are perceived as being more “credible, altruistic and influential than positive reviews” (Hu et al., 2019, p. 417).

Although attracting new customers costs more than retaining existing customers (Reichheld and Sasser, 1990), most tourism and hospitality companies fail to effectively respond to tourist complaints (Memarzadeh and Chang, 2015) and in crisis periods, complaints are scarcely understood. Furthermore, this kind of online participation behaviour will result in secondary crisis communication, dampen the confidence of potential visitors in the recovery of tourism or even induce them to boycott particular enterprises (Luo and Zhai, 2017). Thus, managerial responses to tourist complaints are essential. Regarding crises, most research generally focuses on their macro-socioeconomic impact on the tourism industry (Falk and Hagsten, 2020; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020) and constructs a recovery framework that accords with empiricism (McCartney, 2020), but it rarely listens to tourists’ voices and learns from previous lessons. Tourism disputes and solutions have been identified as an important topic based on the mass of Chinese news coverage related to COVID-19 and tourism. However, the news has mostly reported the crisis response and measures of the tourism industry from the perspective of tourism enterprises, ignoring the practical problems that tourists encounter in dealing with tourism disputes. The previous literature on crisis management and communication has shed light on the impacts of crises on tourism stakeholders, including governments (Collins-Kreiner and Ram, 2020), the industry (Li et al., 2021) and destination managers (Ghaderi et al., 2012) and what they should do to respond to crises. However, as important stakeholders, tourists receive academic attention that mostly focuses on their future travel decisions and behaviour (Luo and Zhai, 2017), ignoring what tourists are most concerned about and what they complain about during a crisis. Therefore, this study aims to provide insights into online complaints regarding COVID-19 and tourism from the tourist perspective. It presents a comparison between the attributes of tourists’ complaints and tourism enterprises’ response measures, and furthermore, it conducts a comparative discussion to improve tourism enterprises’ performance in the face of potential crises in the future.

Literature review

Tourism crises and COVID-19

The tourism industry, especially the demand for international tourism, is vulnerable to crises or disasters (Cró and Martins, 2017; Ritchie and Jiang, 2019), as tourism is influenced by many external factors, including terrorism, natural disasters, political unrest, health, crime and financial and social risks (Blackman et al., 2011; Ghoochani et al., 2020). When such unexpected catastrophes have occurred, hotels, restaurants, airlines and travel agencies have been negatively affected (Kim et al., 2005). Regarding crisis events, economic and financial crises have received the most research attention (Hall, 2010); terrorist attacks (Kılıçlar et al., 2018; Liu and Pratt, 2017; Walters et al., 2019) and natural disasters (Rosselló et al., 2020; Tsai et al., 2016) have also been broadly discussed, while health-related disasters or epidemics, such as severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) (Dombey, 2003), foot and mouth disease (Irvine and Anderson, 2004) and Mexican flu (Monterrubio, 2010), has received little attention from researchers.

Although the world has experienced several epidemics/pandemics in the past 20 years, including the 2002 SARS crisis and the 2009 swine flu crisis, from a global perspective, none of them have been as influential as COVID-19 (Gössling et al., 2020). During the
outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, national borders have been partially or completely closed, social distancing has been required and events and meetings have been restricted, affecting 93% of the global population (Connor, 2020), which indicates a much higher magnitude of an impact than past crises as the virus was rapidly evolving and infectious even in the early stage. Therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic has exerted a tremendous impact and has become an unprecedented impactful event in the twenty first century.

Worldwide travel restrictions and shelter-in-place orders have led to a sudden decline in tourists, causing the global travel and tourism industry to be among the hardest hit (Sönmez et al., 2020). International travel and domestic tourism have both declined dramatically (Gössling et al., 2020), and tourism and hospitality enterprises have thus, suffered devastating losses. Travel panic, cancellations and discussions on travel insurance issues have become increasingly focal (Melly and Hanrahan, 2020; Sönmez et al., 2020). Moreover, the chronic environment of fear, anxiety and insecurity has made people take extra time to return to their routine even after the pandemic has ended (Uğur and Akbiyik, 2020).

In this tough situation, measures have been taken to reset the tourism industry globally. Firstly, governments have introduced stimulus packages, including fiscal relief, lenient land-use rules and support for jobs to facilitate investment (Sharma et al., 2021). Secondly, countries have issued bailouts to large-scale travel enterprises (airlines, hotels and online travel agencies (OTAs)) to help them survive the crisis (Ioannides and Gyimothy, 2020). Thirdly, the industry has applied technology, such as robots, virtual reality and big data, to handle pandemic-specific problems (Sharma et al., 2021). Fourthly, society has turned to sustainable tourism with education, environmental friendliness and racial healing. Fifthly, tourism organizations have effectively mediated the interests of stakeholders. For instance, the Polish Tourism Organization called on tourists to use already purchased services on a convenient date instead of cancelling trips, and global tourism authorities in Latin America have introduced communication channels to disseminate best practices (Sharma et al., 2021).

Crisis management and customer complaint behaviours

Crisis management plays an important role in the tourism industry (Rittichainuwat, 2013). A written crisis management plan can be used in marketing to attract and retain tourists (Bach and Pizam, 1996), and organizations can recover better and faster than their counterparts by implementing such a plan (Israeli and Reichel, 2003). Therefore, a large number of scholars have devoted themselves to conducting crisis management research. In such research, several common themes include the impacts of a crisis on tourism (Jin et al., 2019; Si-Chong and So, 2020), the causes and consequences of previous crises and preparation for future crises (Paraskevas and Altinay, 2013) and the development of crisis management models and frameworks (Paraskevas et al., 2013). Even though people are becoming more aware of the importance of crisis management in tourism and have proposed an increasing number of countermeasures, Anderson’s (2006) research found that tourism organizations have not yet implemented crisis management plans; as a result, it is difficult for such organizations to avoid suffering negative impacts from crises, and they are highly vulnerable to complaints or even bankruptcy.

Stakeholders are a key concern in the tourism area (Scherrer, 2020). Regarding crisis management, understanding the effects of crises and the responses of tourism stakeholders is relatively important (Carlsen and Liburd, 2008). Previous research has focused on governments (Collins-Kreiner and Ram, 2020), the industry (Li et al., 2021) and destination managers (Ghaderi et al., 2012) and tourists are usually overlooked. Tourists represent important stakeholders (Müller and Job, 2009), and it is necessary to understand their feeling during crisis management. Among tourists, the perceptions of travel risks are different (Sönmez et al., 1999; Sönmez and Graefe, 1998).
Concerning crisis events, the fear of danger urges tourists to change their travel plans (Florido-Benítez, 2016). Travel insurance, which may cover extra losses incurred as a result of theft, cancellation, misadventure and medical treatment (Leggat and Leggat, 2002), is generally regarded as an effective approach to risk reduction (Sarman et al., 2020). More importantly, travel insurance agents coordinate with destination operators and local organizations to ensure medical care and financial compensation for travellers, as well as timely notification of their relatives, which is especially vital when travellers suffer serious illness or injury (Leggat et al., 1999). By minimizing financial and functional risks (Mitchell and Vassos, 1998), travel insurance provides tourists with a sense of peace of mind, and therefore, it enhances their confidence in the tourism industry (Law, 2006). Nevertheless, most tourists fail to foresee risks and buy insurance in advance, and they may choose the most direct risk reduction strategy: changing or cancelling their travel plans. Law (2006) found that compared with Western tourists, Asian tourists are more likely to change their travel plans when the destination is facing a dangerous situation. Some change their travel plans, others delay them and still others directly cancel them (Hajibaba et al., 2015). Problems arise when customers wish to cancel their holidays because the tour operator does not intend to suspend the initial plans (Cavlek, 2002). When a conflict arises, customers may be dissatisfied with the cancellation process; most likely, they will complain about the enterprise (Hannigan, 1980). Therefore, given the needs of tourists in crisis events, suggestions on how tourism organizations should handle customer complaints will supplement the related literature.

Customer complaints are generally considered “a set of multiple responses, some or all of which are triggered by perceived dissatisfaction with a purchase episode” (Singh, 1988, p. 94), and they are regarded as the results of a service failure. Previous research has suggested that consumer reactions to service failures depend on consumers’ perception of successful redress (Andreasen, 2000). According to service recovery theory, the effective handling of customer complaints can result in recovery from a service failure and increase customer loyalty (Li et al., 2021). Day and Landon (1977) offered a preliminary typology of customer complaints based on two aspects. The first included behavioural and non-behavioural responses, while the second included private action and public action. Regarding behavioural responses, consumers usually express themselves verbally in search of compensation. Thus, complaint management provides companies with an opportunity to retain the customer relationship based on their appeal (Smith et al., 1999). To construct a framework that instructs companies on how to respond to complaints, knowledge of the factors that lead to dissatisfaction and their corresponding measures is of great importance (Ward and Ostrom, 2006). According to complaint management theory, the managerial practice of improving customer satisfaction and loyalty is very common (Davidow, 2003). Consequently, Singh (1988) proposed three possible responses: voice responses, private responses (such as negative WOM and exiting the current company) and third-party responses.

The tourism and hospitality industry involves multiple services and products, making it a target of customer complaints (Liu and Li, 2019). Tourist dissatisfaction is mainly due to problems with service providers, inconsistent quality, the uncertainty of the environment and changes in consumer demand and expectations (Hannigan, 1980). Accordingly, the targets of tourist complaints are varied and include travel agencies, tour guides, hotels, tourism information offices, etc. Travel practitioners need to pay more attention to tourist complaints and their possible consequences, such as decreasing revisit intentions and negative WOM (Kozak and Tasci, 2006). Especially when crisis events occur, the attention to and handling of complaints become the key to reinvigorating the confidence of tourists and promoting the recovery of the tourism industry.

**Customer complaint behaviour on social media**

Boring or frustrating experiences lead to dissatisfaction (Bichler and Peters, 2020), and numerous studies have identified the direct effect of satisfaction on complaint behaviour, indicating that a decrease in satisfaction leads to an increase in such behaviour (Deng et al., 2013). However, because the actual behaviour is complex (Wang and Wong, 2020)
and may be affected by the cultural context (Jahandideh et al., 2014). Chinese guests, who are characterized by a reserved culture, are generally afraid of expressing their dissatisfaction or lodging complaints in public. Instead of hurting others’ feelings by complaining, they are more likely to tolerate losses and develop guanxi (a relationship) with the service provider (Jahandideh et al., 2014).

However, internet technology reduces consumer switching costs (Morton, 2006) and makes complaints more public (Vilpponen et al., 2006) in an anonymous way. Compared with traditional methods of lodging complaints, complaints on social media work differently, as social media achieve direct communication among customers and indirect feedback between consumers and companies (Fernandes and Fernandes, 2017). When customers share their unpleasant experiences on websites or social media, this negative WOM can not only reach thousands of people immediately but also have a long-lasting effect on the potential market (Berry et al., 2018). Thus, social media have recently developed as an effective channel enabling consumers to easily spread their views, especially when they encounter service failures (Manika et al., 2017).

In this vein, social media induce Chinese customers’ complaint behaviour to some extent. Moreover, due to the concern over the face in traditional Chinese social networks, losing face results in demoralization, and thus, increases Chinese customers’ intentions to complain (Fan et al., 2015).

Methodology

Online complaints have been increasingly used in tourism and marketing research (Hu et al., 2019; Dolan et al., 2019; Xu et al., 2016) because consumers can communicate their service failures and opinions publicly with others and because the amount and intensity of public complaints may be increased by social media (Pfeffer et al., 2014). Chinese tourist complaint data related to COVID-19 were collected from Black Cat (tousu.sina.com), which is a consumer service platform owned by Sina and that cooperates with the China National Tourism Administration. Not only is Black Cat a tool for resolving consumer disputes, but it has also developed into an integrated consumer service platform that integrates the release of industry big data, consumer alerts, consumer safety education and crime tip reporting. According to Sina, the Black Cat complaints platform had received more than 3.3 million valid customer complaints by the end of December 2020. In the tourism industry, Black Cat has convinced several large-scale OTAs, airlines, hotels and short-term rental platforms to join the platform so that the consumers of these companies can file a complaint publicly against them and the complaints can be responded to and resolved publicly within 24 h. Considering that the number of complaints that a company receives and its processing performance can impact the evaluation of the enterprise, many tourist consumers with urgent and complicated problems may seek to use Black Cat.

Only online complaints with the keywords “COVID-19” and “travel” in Chinese were selected to filter out irrelevant topics. A total of 647 online complaints posted from 23 January to 30 April 2020 were saved. In May, the first May Day holiday after the outbreak in China was approaching, and the domestic tourism market was also gradually recovering, indicating that new conventional complaints may appear, which would weaken the nature of complaints during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, 30 April was chosen as the ending time for data collection. As the first country to suspend tourism activities, China was confronted with a wave of cancellations by tourism consumers caused by COVID-19. Although tourism enterprises instantly introduced measures in response, tourist complaints still rose dramatically during this period. “Tourism disputes and solutions” was identified as a key theme in Chinese news coverage regarding COVID-19 and tourism (Chen et al., 2020). Meanwhile, the tourism industry in China experienced a relatively complete process from the outbreak to recovery; thus, choosing China as a case offers a significant reference for other countries.
On the other hand, because the tourism companies on Black Cat can choose to not disclose their specific response to a complaint and many of them do just that, we captured the policies introduced by five major OTAs in China (Ctrip, Fliggy, Tuniu, Qunar and Tongcheng-Elong) in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which served as our approach to exploring the responses of tourism enterprises. Ctrip (http://www.ctrip.com), Tuniu (http://www.tuniu.com) and Tongcheng-Elong (http://www.ly.com) are the top three Chinese OTAs, leading new trends in business-to-customer tourism e-commerce websites (Hou et al., 2019). Qunar (https://www.qunar.com) is the largest Chinese-language online travel search engine, and it provides booking services (Weaver et al., 2015). Fliggy (https://www.fliggy.com) is a comprehensive travel service platform owned by Alibaba. Overall, these five OTAs are leading and representative OTA websites in China.

We used a method that combines automatic and manual content analysis to identify the attributes of Chinese tourists’ complaints and OTAs’ policy responses to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. On the one hand, the visual graphs and thematic words obtained from automatic text mining guided our manual content analysis, while this word frequency-based approach prevented us from systematically and objectively determining the antecedents of customer dissatisfaction (Buschken and Allenby, 2016). On the other hand, manual coding was able to expand the inner connections of each keyword and extract the underlying context hidden in the complaints (Hayes and Krippendorff, 2007). This two-step method of content analysis made the research results fairly reliable. Figure 1 illustrates the overall procedure of data collection and analysis.

After data collection, an automated content analysis approach was taken. Firstly, online complaints and the policies issued by OTA websites were tokenized using ROST CM 6.0. Secondly, we selected the top 300 keywords in online complaints and policies, merged some keywords that were close in meaning and translated them into English. In this way, 231 and 218 keywords were extracted. Thirdly, we constructed a co-occurrence matrix using the Gensim package and transformed the keywords into visualized networks composed of nodes and lines using Gephi software (Liu et al., 2019).

At the same time, NVivo 11.0 was adopted for three-stage manual coding. Firstly, we carefully read the contents of the tourist complaints and extracted initial codes that captured fundamental elements of the raw texts that appeared relevant to tourist complaints. Secondly, we re-evaluated, sorted and combined the codes to obtain clearer
categories. Thirdly, we performed additional classifications and evaluations to identify themes and the potential relationships among them. Two researchers conducted the coding steps separately, and when differences arose, a third researcher joined the discussion until a consensus on all items was reached.

Results and discussion
Tourism disputes and solutions are one of the key themes emerging from the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic (Chen et al., 2020). This study aims to provide insights into tourists’ complaints and tourism organizations’ responses during this specific time. To achieve this goal, we first analysed tourists’ complaints posted online. Figure 2 displays the number of complaints in different time frames and confirms that the COVID-19-related information and policies issued by official departments had a promoting effect on tourist complaints (Nanni and Ulqinaku, 2020).

Objects of the complaints
Table 1 shows six tourism-related organizations that Chinese tourists complained about. Among the six categories, OTAs (62.42%) were the leading object of complaints. In addition, travel agencies (18.17%), short-term rental platforms (9.16%), airlines (9.16%), hotels (0.78%) and official WeChat accounts (0.31%) accounted for the rest. Interestingly, some consumers blamed OTAs even though the cause of their dissatisfaction lied with third-party merchants. This finding aligns with Tekin Bilbil’s (2019) proposition that OTAs are blamed more often by tourists, as they serve as comprehensive platforms and take full responsibility for every segment. Traditionally, group package tours have been the preferred travel mode of Chinese tourists, especially when travelling abroad (Wang et al., 2007). In recent years, new types of group packages relying on travel agencies, such as private groups, high-end small groups, destination groups and customized groups, have become more popular (China Daily, 2019). Therefore, as the whole tourism market has been hit, travel agencies have also become a major object of complaints. In terms of the accommodation market, in recent years, online short-term rental platforms have occupied a large share of the Chinese market (Dong et al., 2017). When the pandemic hit, short-term rental platforms led by Airbnb and Agoda also suffered a huge impact.

Figure 2 The frequency of complaints regarding COVID-19 and tourism from 23 January to 30 April 2020

![Figure 2](image-url)
Attributes of tourism complaints during the COVID-19 pandemic

Based on the principle of transforming complex and verbose information into a visual network graph (Reina et al., 2020), visualization is widely accepted as a technique for analysing a wide variety of data. As illustrated in Figure 3, the three core nodes in the complaint network are “refund”, “epidemic” and “tour” and the thematic word “refund” appeared 1,190 times in 647 complaints, i.e. an average of 1.84 times per complaint. Further observation showed that all nodes could be divided into three communities, i.e. refund, refuse and give back, which reflect actions engaged in or encountered by tourists. The refuse community is smaller than the other two communities in scale. To further mine and analyse the textual content of the tourist complaints and because the result of the software analysis showed only a few keywords without details, we coded the complaints manually to supplement the automated content analysis approach. To better understand what tourists complained about during the COVID-19 outbreak, this research elaborates on the three themes and their sub-categories in Table 2.

Cancellation barriers

Cancellation barriers (6.66%) reflect a series of difficulties faced by travel consumers in the process of cancelling ordered or purchased tourism-related products when the COVID-19 pandemic hit. The main problem was the refusal to cancel (4%). Regardless of whether

<table>
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<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Targets of complaints</th>
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<td><strong>Objects of complaints</strong></td>
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<td>Short-term rental platforms</td>
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<td>Official WeChat accounts</td>
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consumers engaged in oral negotiations with sellers or used mobile apps, the cancellation requests made by tourists were rejected. Even after tourists had detailed objective reasons for their inability to travel, their requests are still rejected. The second most common problem was the inability to cancel (2.42%). This category mainly relates to two aspects. On the one hand, consumers could not complete the cancellation requests by themselves on websites or mobile apps, and the primary reasons were the lack of a cancel button and unsuccessful submissions. On the other hand, sellers replied that the orders would proceed as usual; thus, they could not cancel. Additionally, some sellers provided consumers with a

Table 2  Complaint contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Category</th>
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<th>(%)</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Cancellation barriers (6.66%)</td>
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<td>Inability to cancel</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Cancellation without authorization</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cancellation delays</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refund barriers (61.98%)</td>
<td>Cancellation fees</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>19.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Refusal to refund</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>15.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Refund delays</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>12.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Returning travel vouchers instead of cash</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>3.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No assistance for refunds</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>3.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mutual evasiveness</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>2.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No rational explanation for deducted expenses</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inconsistent statements on refunds</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unreasonable refund policies</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Restrictions on travel voucher use</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer relationship management (31.36%)</td>
<td>Contact problems</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>13.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Procrastination</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>8.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No response</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>2.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative employee words and actions</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Deceit</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ignoring tourists’ safety</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Duty issues</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>OTA siding with travel retailers</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Compulsive behaviour</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
chance to change the service time, but the consumers still refused the solution proposed by the sellers because they did not think that it is appropriate to travel after the outbreak. Finally, there were two isolated cases, namely, cancellation without authorization (0.12%) and cancellation of a delay (0.12%). Cancelling ordered tours was the first step taken by Chinese tourists when the outbreak began, but there were fewer complaints about cancellation barriers.

Refund barriers

Most tourists could cancel their purchased travel products, but receiving a refund caused problems for them. Of the three themes, refund barriers (61.98%) were the top theme, accounting for more than half of all complaints. This theme covered a series of difficulties preventing consumers from receiving a satisfying refund. Specifically, there were 10 sub-themes, namely, charging cancellation fees (19.25%), refusing to refund (15.74%), refund delays (12.71%), returning travel vouchers instead of cash (3.75%), no assistance for refunds (3.15%), mutual evasiveness among platforms, travel agencies and third-party service providers (2.78%), no rational explanation for refund items (2.3%), inconsistent statements on refunds (1.33%), unreasonable refund policies (0.61%) and restrictions on travel voucher use (0.36%).

Charging cancellation fees was the most common problem encountered by tourist consumers in the refund process, occurring 159 times. Many complainers mentioned that related authorities, tourism companies, airlines and others had declared COVID-19 as a force majeure and consumers could obtain a full refund if they cancelled an order; thus, these charges violated the state provisions. A few customers also expressed their understanding of the need for merchants to deduct a portion of the cost, but the lack of a rational explanation or proof of deducted expenses was unacceptable to consumers.

As Becken (2013) stated, the loss of revenue because of cancellations and fee refunds is a fatal blow to businesses. When a disaster occurs, the willingness of visitors to cancel orders conflicts with an OTA platform’s desire to serve its own interests, creating cancellation and refund barriers.

Customer relationship management

This theme focuses on the attitudes and behaviours of tourism enterprises in the process of dealing with conflicts. Customer relationship management (31.36%) consisted of nine categories and was also a significant focus of complaints. The most common complaint was about contact problems (13.44%), showing that consumers were unable to contact sellers by any means, especially OTAs (Orchiston and Higham, 2016). Procrastination was the second most common complaint (8.11%); that is tourism enterprises delayed addressing the problems raised by customers and never solved them. The third most common complaint was no response (2.78%), which means that tourism enterprises treated customers passively and ignored their requests. The fourth and fifth most common complaints were negative employee words and actions (2.3%) and deceit (2.06%), respectively. Ignoring tourists’ safety (1.46%) means that tourism companies continued to organize tours and persuade tourists to travel during the outbreak. Finally, the remaining categories were duty (0.73%), siding with travel retailers (0.36%) and compulsive behaviour (0.12%).

The insurance strategies were continuously updated, and customer service staff thus, failed to fully understand those strategies and provide customers with reasonable treatment and explanations in a timely manner. Therefore, even if a policy was formulated, various problems arose during the implementation phase. Coupled with the large number of cancellations flooding in over a short period of time, staff continued to work under high psychological pressure; thus, a bad attitude was inevitable. Although rude and indifferent
service attitudes are one of the crucial cases of service failure (Yang and Mattila, 2012) and have been widely discussed in the literature, tourism organization staff neglected the importance of their service attitude in this emergency situation.

**Tourism enterprises’ responses to COVID-19**

As shown in Figure 4, the core nodes in the measures network could be classified into three communities, namely, cancel, guarantee and policy. The cancel community includes three core nodes, namely, free of charge, travel and epidemic. The guarantee community includes four core nodes, namely, order, hotel, Wuhan and tour. Finally, the policy community also includes four core nodes, namely, China, air tickets, railway and train tickets.

Following the principle of seeking common ground while reserving differences, we further manually coded the policies formulated by major OTA platforms in China (Ctrip, Fliggy, Tuniu, Qunar and Tongcheng-Elong) in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Table 3). These policies also covered three themes: cancellations, refunds and customer relationship management (Mao et al., 2020). In the cancellation theme, the OTAs established free cancellations of hotels, transportation and domestic travel, except overseas travel. Notably, all of the OTAs had specific policies for medical workers, government workers, journalists and those working on the front line of epidemic prevention, as well as confirmed patients and their close contacts. In the refund theme, policies focused on overseas travel. Finally, in the customer relationship management theme, OTAs mainly assisted users in completing their cancellations and in refund matters. However, there was still room for improvement.

To understand the gap between tourists’ complaints and tourism enterprises’ response policies, Figure 5 presents the overlapping categories and identifies several categories that are not related to the policies by comparing the complaints of tourists and the response policies.
policies formulated by tourism enterprises. Regarding the cancellation barriers, the inability to cancel, cancellation delays and cancellation without authorization are not included among the policies. Concerning the refund barriers, refund delays, returning travel vouchers instead of cash and restrictions on travel voucher use are not mentioned in the policies. With respect to customer relationship management, tourism enterprises lack concrete service regulations or standards for procrastination, deceit, negative employee words and actions and ignoring tourists’ safety.

Notably, efficient responses to tourist complaints greatly contribute to the competitiveness of companies and have a profound effect on customer satisfaction and loyalty (Lee et al., 2011). Nevertheless, when an emergency occurs, due to time constraints, the plan is often unable to fully adapt to local conditions (Prayag, 2018; Scott et al., 2008). Thus, improvement in many details, including authorization, voucher exchange and employee

### Table 3: OTA cancellation and refund policies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Policy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cancellations</td>
<td>Special cancellations</td>
<td>Free cancellation of all product orders for confirmed patients and their close contacts (medical or other proof must be provided)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Users who travel to or from Wuhan can cancel their travel orders free of charge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Free cancellation of all product orders for the family members of epidemic prevention frontline staff (medical or other proof must be provided)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Free cancellations</td>
<td>Free cancellation of hotel orders worldwide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Free cancellation of domestic travel orders (including Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Traffic orders are cancelled according to the policy of the aviation department and related departments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Free cancellation of domestic travel orders (excluding Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refunds</td>
<td>Refunds for overseas travel</td>
<td>All the fees for overseas package tours will be refunded to users except visa and insurance fees that have been incurred</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mutual evasion</td>
<td>Overseas travel orders (package tours or independent travel) are refunded following the policies of travel suppliers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer relationship management</td>
<td>Standing with customers</td>
<td>For those areas not covered by the special cancellation and refund policies during the COVID-19 period, the OTAs will do their best to communicate with merchants to minimize users’ losses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assistance</td>
<td>The OTAs’ manual service will assist users in completing their cancellations and in refund matters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Contact</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
training (Hannigan, 1980; Jauhari et al., 2009; Paraskevas et al., 2013), is expected. Policy improvement is important for tourism companies to survive a crisis and deal with future challenges (Ritchie, 2004).

Conclusion

As announced the suspension of the operation of group tours and “ticket + hotel” tourism products nationwide on 24 January 2020, China’s tourism industry was the first to stagnate on a global scale. Subsequently, a large number of cancellations flooded the tourism industry, and tourism enterprises accordingly introduced measures to deal with cancellations and refunds. Tourism organizations’ crisis management has a profound influence on business continuity and survival. This research has attempted to investigate tourism customer complaint behaviours in the case of COVID-19 and provide tourism enterprises facing different complaints with practical insights into crisis management.

Theoretical contributions

This study contributes to the literature on customer complaint behaviours and complaint management, and crisis management theory. Firstly, the prior literature has focused on customer complaint behaviours mainly in hotels (Hu et al., 2019) and restaurants (Khalilzadeh et al., 2017) and subsequently provided insights into complaint management about related industries. This study goes beyond the previous literature by removing the restrictions on the objects of complaints while concentrating on the special context of customer complaint behaviours and solutions in response. Specifically, we find that Chinese travellers are cautious and tend to choose to cancel a trip when the world is experiencing a pandemic (Law, 2006). However, their request for a smooth and gentle cancellation and refund process collides with the business distress of tourism companies affected by COVID-19, leading to a series of related complaints. Our findings also support the idea that Chinese travellers are adept at using online platforms and social media to publicly lodge online complaints, hoping to make their complaints be properly handled as soon as possible with the aid of these influential media. Meanwhile, we reveal that “cancellations”, “refunds” and “service attitude” are three focal points of tourist complaints during the outbreak of the health-related tourism crisis, revealing many companies lack related customer complaint management procedures and planned policies. To enable prompt reactions and ease customers’ tension, complaint management not only involves planned strategies but also requires internal complaint management objectives in such a grim situation. For instance, informing employees of complaint management procedures, ensuring that policies for handling complaints are accepted by them and training and stimulating employees to manage conflicts and to create positive experiences in customer interactions (Filip, 2013).

Secondly, not only did we identify the complaint targets, attributes of tourist complaints related to COVID-19 and categories of policies introduced by tourism enterprises, but we also found the deficiencies in tourism enterprises’ measures taken in response to COVID-19 by comparing the themes of complaints on social media and the solutions introduced on tourism company websites. The previous literature on crisis management and communication has shed light on the impacts of crises on tourism stakeholders, including governments (Collins-Kreiner and Ram, 2020), industry managers (Li et al., 2021) and destination managers (Ghaderi et al., 2012) and how they should do to respond to crises. However, as important stakeholders, tourists have received academic attention mostly focusing on their future travel decisions and behaviour (Luo and Zhai, 2017), ignoring what tourists are most concerned about and what they complain about during a crisis. The present study filled this gap by revealing the authentic voice of tourist complaints, and the comparative analysis will help tourism operators realize the real causes of customer
dissatisfaction and formulate service recovery strategies, especially a comprehensive, detailed and mutually beneficial policy plan in response to COVID-19.

**Managerial implications**

The current research aims to provide valuable suggestions to tourism enterprises, particularly digital service platform managers when facing an outbreak. OTA platforms (e.g., Ctrip and Qunar) and online booking platforms (e.g., Airbnb and Agoda) are two categories of digital service platforms in the tourism industry (Amaro et al., 2019; Tekin Bilbil, 2019). As intermediaries between customers and suppliers, they offer search, reservation, payment, comment and recommendation functions (Gössling et al., 2018). Similar to traditional travel agencies, OTA platforms provide travel-related products, services and information to customers (Kim et al., 2007), including airline tickets, hotels, tickets to attractions and many other travel products. Customers communicate with both the service staff of platforms and the supplier. However, online booking platforms, especially short-term rental platforms, offer a narrower range of services, often focusing only on accommodation. Short-term rental platforms are typical peer-to-peer accommodation models, which refer to online network platforms where individuals can rent out their underused property space for a short period of time (Belk, 2014). Thus, communication usually takes place directly between customers and homeowners.

Firstly, cancellation and refund orders surged during the COVID-19 outbreak, but the customer service system of OTA platforms could not keep up, resulting in a significant reduction in the platforms’ refund efficiency and a direct impact on the user experience. Reasonably diverting these orders is the key to solving this problem. To prevent the same order from occupying more than one service channel, platforms should improve the usability of their software (Navarro-Ruiz and McKercher, 2020), for example, by using online self-service, human customer service, email and other methods, matching them with different customers based on the identification number or product category. In addition, redeploying staff from other departments and recruiting temporary customer service staff can play a role in alleviating the pressure on the customer service system. Regarding short-term rental platforms, as they provide direct dialogue between customers and homeowners, a quick response by homeowners (rather than customer service staff) is more important.

Secondly, under the COVID-19 pandemic, the wave of refunds made the cash flow of tourism enterprises extremely tight, while some OTA platforms offered hundreds of millions of dollars to tourists in advance. To help the struggling tourism enterprises through that process, the national departments and destination marketing organization (DMO) have accelerated the introduction of tourism support and recovery policies, including a temporary refund of the deposit paid by travel agencies and increasing financial support for enterprises that are losing money in the four categories of transportation, catering, accommodation and tourism. Refund delays and returning travel vouchers are both associated with a tight cash flow. In fact, replacing cash refunds with travel vouchers is a great way to ease the cash crunch while continuing to lock in customers. However, this solution must be carried out with the consent of consumers and with fewer restrictions on use. Meanwhile, to encourage consumers to choose travel vouchers, OTAs can also refund travel vouchers that exceed the refund amount. However, companies must aware that accepting a cash refund is customers’ first choice and it is also the most reasonable and legitimate way.

Thirdly, as refund issues involve multiple policies and information, establishing a smooth refund system requires the support and cooperation of all parties in the tourism supply chain. As China’s OTA platforms, short-term rental platforms and hotel groups have introduced special policies that allow partners to support each other and jointly meet challenges, they can also organize a team to maintain dynamic policy consistency, help tourists achieve interoperability and simplify refund procedures. Therefore, the number of tourist complaints about refund issues could decline.
Finally, complaints about the poor performance of platform employees are also a priority for consumers. Crisis events often demand effective communication, in addition to rapid responses. In the refund process, effective communication and explanation work are both helpful in reassuring tourists, and they require a comprehensive and up-to-date understanding of related policies and a proactive service attitude of the staff. Therefore, managers should strengthen the implementation of policies with strict supervision and service quality management for employees in special periods. However, it is necessary to be aware that under the COVID-19 pandemic, employees have been under multiple psychological pressures in the face of health threats, limited living space, an uncertain income and changes in work arrangements and modes. Thus, enterprises also have a responsibility to assist employees in maintaining positive mental states.

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed a huge challenge to the global tourism industry. The current research provides initial insights into tourist complaints and tourism enterprise response measures during the COVID-19 pandemic. In response to the wave of cancellations by tourism consumers caused by COVID-19, the way in which tourism enterprises actually handled these cancellations did not satisfy customers and even alienated some loyal tourists (as mentioned in their complaints). The progress made in China, which has fully experienced the conflict between tourists and tourism enterprises in regard to the wave of cancellations, in bridging the gap between complaints and responses can be used as a reference for other countries or regions that are still under the same situation, and it can also provide directions for tourism enterprises to formulate a comprehensive, detailed and mutually beneficial response policy in the face of a new round of cancellations.

Limitations and future research

The limitations of this research concern three points. Firstly, this work examined data only from Black Cat due to the availability and communicability of its data. Future studies need to collect data from diverse sources (e.g. online and offline complaint data and data from different social media) to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of tourist complaints. Secondly, an analysis of the responses of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the tourism industry is lacking. Compared with major tourism operators, SMEs fail to obtain adequate supporting budgets and senior management talent (Özgener and İraz, 2006); thus, they are more vulnerable to tourism crises. Given the significance of SMEs for job creation and economic growth (Dayour et al., 2020), it is necessary to study their crisis response measures. We suggest that future research should take into account the diversity of tourism enterprise data sources and multi-level surveys and pay attention to the transformation and survival of small and medium-sized tourism enterprises under the COVID-19 crisis. Thirdly, the present study focused specifically on conducting a comparative analysis between customer complaints and the response measure of tourism companies in China. However, as COVID-19 is a global tourism crisis, tourists and tourism enterprises in all countries make their own choices and responses. Further international comparative analysis involving other countries is needed to understand the differences.

References


Further reading

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