



# Bed bugs bite the hospitality industry? A framing analysis of bed bug news coverage



Bingjie Liu <sup>a, \*</sup>, Lori Pennington-Gray <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Tourism, Recreation and Sport Management, University of Florida, 206C FLG. P.O. Box 118208, Gainesville, FL 32611, USA

<sup>b</sup> Department of Tourism, Recreation and Sport Management, University of Florida, 325C FLG. P.O. Box 118208, Gainesville, FL 32611, USA

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Conduct a framing analysis of news coverage that is pertinent to the bed bug crisis.
- Explore the role of the hospitality and travel industry in bed bug news coverage.
- Importance of understanding the news impact post-crisis as well as the role and function of news media in tourism crisis management.

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## ABSTRACT

News coverage plays an important role in determining individuals' travel decisions and influencing the general tourism market. Bed bug infestation, as a growing crisis in the hospitality and tourism industry, has been featured in news coverage. This study conducted a framing analysis of news coverage that is pertinent to the bed bug crisis and to the hospitality and travel industry. Selected news articles, representing three different destinations, were retrieved from five national newspapers. Results showed that bed bug infestation has been framed as a typical health crisis, with aspects of consequence and seriousness featured. Findings further confirmed the hospitality and travel industry as frequently cited in the bed bug news coverage. A positive correlation existed between the mention of the hospitality and travel industry, and the use of either a thematic frame or the news frame consequence. Based on the findings, implications for tourism crisis management were discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Bed bugs (*Cimex lectularius*), as described by the Centers for Diseases Control and Prevention (CDC) (2013), are “small, flat, parasitic insects” that feed exclusively on blood. Though bed bugs are not direct vectors for transmitting infectious disease, they can cause human discomfort and various health problems, including allergic reactions, secondary infections, and emotional stress (Goddard & deShazo, 2009; Harlan, 2006). Recently, this small pest has made a strong comeback due to (1) increased travel to and from places where bed bugs remain common (Romero, Potter, Potter, & Haynes, 2007), (2) an evolution of bed bugs' resistance to pesticides (Romero et al., 2007), and (3) people's lack of knowledge about preventing and controlling bed bugs (CDC & EPA, 2010). In addition to the occurrence of bed bugs in unclean locations and

developing countries, bed bug infestations are now very common in developed countries. The United States has been overwhelmed with bed bug complaints, and the number of reported cases has climbed consistently in the last five years (CDC & EPA, 2010; National Pest Management Association, 2013). A recent national survey shows that bed bugs are found in all 50 states in the US, and vary in prevalence from private residences to public places, such as hotels/motels, airports, and restaurants (National Pest Management Association, 2013). Indeed, as international travel continues to grow, it is impossible for hospitality and tourism establishments to become completely immune from bed bug infestation (NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, 2013).

The hospitality and travel industry takes a leading role in the economy of the United States. It was estimated that in the year 2012 the industry generated US\$2 trillion in total economic output, provided 14.6 million jobs, and yielded a tax revenue of US\$128.8 billion at the federal, state, and local levels (US Travel Association, 2013a). Given the importance of the industry, impacts from any extreme or unexpected events can be devastating (Ritchie, 2004).

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 352 294 1676.

E-mail address: [icebecky@hnp.ufl.edu](mailto:icebecky@hnp.ufl.edu) (B. Liu).

Particularly, a crisis event which is health related can cause harm not only to people but also to the economy (McKercher & Chon, 2004). For example, due to the outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) many destinations experienced dramatic declines in revenue and visitor numbers, including Toronto which lost 4.5 million dollars in revenue over the same period the year before and Asia which declined 70% in tourist arrivals in 2004 (McKercher & Chon, 2004; Rosszell, 2003).

Recent epidemics such as H1N1, bird flu, and foot and mouth disease have made health-related crises one of the preeminent concerns of global citizens (McComas, 2006). These concerns are particularly important for the hospitality and travel industry who serve as hosts to global citizens who travel for work and pleasure (Jonas, Mansfeld, Paz, & Potasman, 2011; Kozak, Crotts, & Law, 2007). As occurrences of health-related crises increase, we see a risk in tourists' perceptions of travel (Kozak et al., 2007; Sönmez & Graefe, 1998). As this risk increases, or more risk adverse travelers make decisions not to travel, the entire industry is therefore at risk for decreased arrivals and revenues (Gonzalez-Herrero & Pratt, 1998).

Consequently, the hospitality and travel industry has become more responsive not only to the actual health crisis but also to the impact of the news coverage of the health crisis (Kim & Wong, 2006). The news media serves as one of the primary information sources for the public, and regularly reports on health related issues (Coleman, Thorson, & Wilkins, 2011; Pew Research Center, 2008). However, the media can also elevate the true significance of the health issue. Previous research has found that news coverage surrounding crisis issues can produce unexpected news shocks, which generate negative effects on a tourism destination and lead to economic recession in the tourism sector (Kim & Wong, 2006). The true impact of the crisis may be minimal, but the news media make it a significant concern, such as the case with the recent coverage of the rise in cases of chicken pox and measles in Toronto (Chai, 2014). Therefore, scholars suggest that attention should be paid to the PR function of news media, especially within the area of tourism crisis management (Fall, 2004; Paraskevas & Altinay, 2013; Stacks & Carroll, 2005).

Additionally, researchers note that the crisis message and the manner in which news story is framed, influence tourists, officials, and the entire tourism and hospitality industry (Avraham & Ketter, 2008; Santos, Tainsky, Schmidt, & Shim, 2013). Frames used in the media can represent an image of a tourism destination (Santos, 2004a), reveal the tourism development issues within that destination (Wu, Xue, Morrison, & Leung, 2012), and influence potential tourists' evaluation of the destination (Sparks & Browning, 2011). While frames featured in crisis news coverage not merely shape the public perception towards a crisis issue (Shih, Wijaya, & Brossard, 2008), but also affect people's assessment of the perceived risk of travel and further determine their travel decisions (Sönmez & Graefe, 1998). Understanding media frames in the crisis news coverage that pertinent to the hospitality and travel industry is therefore critical and essential because it can assist the industry in detecting signals of a potential crisis (Paraskevas & Altinay, 2013), protect the destination image and the reputational assets during a crisis (Avraham & Ketter, 2008; Coombs, 2007), and accelerate the recovery process as well as remedy the negative consequences after a crisis (Coombs, 2007; Ritchie, 2004).

Accordingly, a growing body of literature is dedicated to studying the way in which crises are framed in news media. Recognizing that each health issue is unique in nature, and that media framing is dynamic process of reinforcement, scholars address that it is impossible to generalize findings from one single research study to another and that a situational approach is necessary (Shih et al., 2008). Bed bugs have been frequently

reported by news media (Anderson & Leffler, 2008), but empirical research examining messaging by the news media is embryonic. When considering the potential impact of a health-related crisis and the critical role news media played in crisis communication, it is necessary for the tourism and hospitality industry to have a comprehensive understanding of media frames. Given that, this research aimed to fill the knowledge gap by identifying the main frames that have been used in news coverage of bed bugs, and to provide empirical references for practitioners in order to increase their preparedness and to create effective response strategies toward a health-related crisis.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. The role of news coverage in tourism crisis management

It has been widely acknowledged that media plays an important role in the hospitality and tourism business, where media content has the potential to shape tourists' evaluation of a destination and to influence their selection of tourism products (Sönmez & Graefe, 1998). Indeed, an effective use of media strategy advances the advertising and marketing of tourism products and hospitality services; however, the tourism crisis management function performed by mass media, which is an important toolkit, has been overlooked (Crotts & Mazanec, 2013; Fall, 2004). Crisis events have been frequently reported on mass media and this type of coverage can damage the hospitality and travel industry in many ways, such as disruption of daily operation, impaired reputation of the industry, and increased hesitation of traveling. Cumulatively, an unfavorable destination image as well as revenue reduction in the tourism sector may occur as a result of the crisis media coverage, the lack of attention on this issue, as well as the inefficiency of crisis management practices (Fall, 2004).

News media enjoys an enormous popularity in mass media and serves as a major agent for the public to acquire risk-related information (Avraham & Ketter, 2008). To measure the destination image that featured within news coverage, scholars use two dimensions: one is the quantity, which examines elements such as the number of news reports, the length of news articles, and the section and pages in which the news item is published; the other one is the nature, which focuses on subtle perspectives and addresses the content of the news article (Avraham & Ketter, 2008). However, in order to increase the "story value" and to compete for the scarce spaces in newspaper, journalists have the tendency to cover crisis events selectively, deliberately focusing on serious risks (Kasperson & Kasperson, 1996). Such social amplification process of risks can exert effects on the hospitality and tourism industry, where studies found that the outbreaks of crises, manifested as media events, can lead to destabilization in tourism flow and decrease in tourism income within a destination (Sönmez, Apostolopoulos, & Tarlow, 1999). Thus, it is believed that understanding how a crisis is framed by news media can provide meaningful insights to crisis managers to create appropriate crisis response strategy and to minimize the damages brought by a crisis event (Coombs, 2007). In the field of tourism crisis management, the need for further research in this area has been brought to the frontline as a prominent concern (Crotts & Mazanec, 2013).

### 2.2. Framing theory

Frames, as described by Goffman (1974), are "schemata of interpretation" (p. 21). Gitlin (1980) elaborated on this definition, and conceptualized frames as "the principles of selection, emphasis and presentation composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens and what matters" (p. 6). Consistently, Entman

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