

Heritage, Cultural Events and Promises for Better Future: Media Strategies for Attracting Tourism during the Arab Spring Uprisings

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Abstract : The Arab Spring was widely covered in the global media and the number of Western tourists traveling to the area began to fall. The goal of this study was to analyze which media strategies marketers in Middle Eastern countries chose to employ in their attempts to repair the negative image of the area in the wake of the Arab Spring. Several studies were published concerning image-restoration strategies of destinations during crises around the globe; however, these strategies were not part of an overarching theory, conceptual framework or model from the fields of crisis communication and image repair. The conceptual framework used in the current study was the 'multi-step model for altering place image', which offers three types of strategies: source, message and audience. Three research questions were used: 1. What public relations crisis techniques and advertising campaign components were used? 2. What media policies and relationships with the international media were adopted by Arab officials? 3. Which marketing initiatives (such as cultural and sports events) were promoted? This study is based on qualitative content analysis of four types of data: 1) advertising components (slogans, visuals and text); (2) press interviews with Middle Eastern officials and marketers; (3) official media policy adopted by government decision-maker (e.g. boycotting or arresting newscasters); and (4) marketing initiatives (e.g. organizing heritage festivals and cultural events). The data was located in three channels from December 2010, when the events started, to September 31, 2013: (1) Internet and video-sharing websites: YouTube and Middle Eastern countries' national tourism board websites; (2) News reports from two international media outlets, The New York Times and Ha'aretz; these are considered quality newspapers that focus on foreign news and tend to criticize institutions; (3) Global tourism news websites: eTurbo news and 'Cities and countries branding'. Using the 'multi-step model for altering place image,' the analysis reveals that Middle Eastern marketers and officials used three kinds of strategies to repair their countries' negative image: 1. Source (cooperation and media relations; complying, threatening and blocking the media; and finding alternatives to the traditional media) 2. Message (ignoring, limiting, narrowing or reducing the scale of the crisis; acknowledging the negative effect of an event's coverage and assuring a better future; promotion of multiple facets, exhibitions and softening the 'hard' image; hosting spotlight sporting and cultural events; spinning liabilities into assets; geographic dissociation from the Middle East region; ridicule the existing stereotype) and 3. Audience (changing the target audience by addressing others; emphasizing similarities and relevance to specific target audience). It appears that dealing with their image problems will continue to be a challenge for officials and marketers of Middle Eastern countries until the region stabilizes and its regional conflicts are resolved.

Keywords : Arab spring, cultural events, image repair, Middle East, tourism marketing

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