

How tourist power in social media affects tourism market regulation after unethical incidents: Evidence from China

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ABSTRACT

Few studies have explored how stakeholders react to unethical incidents and the consequences of their behaviors under Web 2.0. Unethical incidents pose real challenges for the destination. This study takes Snow Town as a case and proposes a process model for examining how tourist power in social media affects tourism market regulation after unethical incidents. Based on long-term follow-up surveys, this study finds that tourists' perceived tourism market regulation depends on the perceived severity of an unethical incident, responsibility attribution, and tolerance of ambiguity. Tourists' behavioral reactions to an unethical incident follow a set sequence: cognition, emotion, perceived tourism market regulation, behavior, market re-configuration. The paper offers a conceptual model for understanding market re-configuration after unethical incidents.

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Introduction

Social media has transformed the power relations between and among service providers and tourists (Mehraliyev, Choi, & King, 2021). It also brought decisive impacts on destinations and even the tourism industry (Lund, Cohen, & Scarles, 2018; Mehraliyev, Choi, & King, 2021; Usui, Wei, & Funck, 2018), which is vulnerable to economic downturns, natural disasters, and public health crises (Novelli, Burgess, Jones, & Ritchie, 2018). Among such crises, unethical practices, such as zero-commission tours (Zhang, Heung, & Yan, 2009), ethically dubious activities (Harris, 2012), and unethical marketing practices (Breitsohl & Garrod, 2016; Cavicchi & Santini, 2011; March, 2008), are difficult to monitor and regulate using existing laws and regulations. These activities have great negative impacts on tourists' experiences and destination image (March, 2008), easily drawing substantial attention through negative word-of-mouth on social media. Such malpractices in the tourism market severely harm the consumption of tourism products and disturb the regulation of tourism market (Liu, Yao, & Fan, 2020). Tourism market regulation serves to protect consumers (Baldwin, Cave, & Lodge, 2011; Liu, Yao, & Fan, 2020). Why do short-sighted, unethical business practices happen so frequently across the world? Tourism operators do not seem fully conscious of tourist power and the consequences of tourists' behaviors in pursuing tourism market regulation in the Web 2.0 era. Web 2.0 describes the real-time network characterized by sharing, facilitating bi-directional interactions in which users generate, change, and upload web-based content (O'Reilly, 2007). This study investigates how tourist power in social media can affect tourism market regulation and push a destination to restore order after unethical incidents.

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This paper's case study is Snow Town National Forest Park ("Snow Town"), located in Mudanjiang City, Heilongjiang Province, and covering an area of 17,916 ha at 1100 m above sea level. On December 29, 2017, an online post by "Yimuxing" provoked heated discussion. It was titled "Snow in Snow Town cannot hide the pure black heart! Stop going to Snow Town! (Yimuxing, 2017)" A series of unethical incidents occurred during the 2017/18 winter tourism season in Snow Town, such as forced consumption, tour guides cheating tourists, and hotel owners deceiving tourists and neglecting contracts, creating a national scandal (China Daily, 2018). These incidents make Snow Town a typical case. The successive exposures of these incidents caused a tourism crisis in the resort, which had previously been ranked among "China's top ten most beautiful villages", "most beautiful tourist attractions in winter", and "the top ten best scenic areas of 'beautiful China'" (Heilongjiang Daily, 2013). Snow Town has a peculiar microclimate with snowfall lasting for seven months from October to April and snow thickness reaching about 2 m. The snow takes the varied shapes of whatever it covers, creating a fairytale world that represents a unique and non-replicable scenic area in China (see Fig. 1). Media reporting of unique tourism resources and distinctive folk customs brought fame to Snow Town. Because of the unethical incidents, Snow Town had changed from a famous tourist destination to a destination boycotted by tourists. Although this case is based on evidence from China, the problem this paper tackles is not limited to China. This study focuses on redressing a real-world situation with critical realism, a philosophical framework that deals with intersubjective knowledge and real-world practical problems (Bhaskar, 1978; Botterill & Platenkamp, 2012).

Short-sighted, unethical business practices affecting tourists' experience frequently happen throughout the world (Breitsohl & Garrod, 2016; Cavicchi & Santini, 2011; Harris, 2012; Kim, Pillai, Haldorai, & Ahmad, 2021; March, 2008). Tourism is fraught with intricate ethical issues (Malone, McCabe, & Smith, 2014), and poses real challenges for destinations. How to restore tourism market regulation after an unethical incident is a key challenge for tourism destinations. When unethical issues arise concerning a physical product, consumers' emotional and behavioral reactions mainly focus on the product or its producer (Govind, Singh, Garg, & D'Silva, 2017). Specifically, consumers evaluate and choose producers and products to challenge ethically, environmentally, or politically objectionable institutional or market practices (Stolle & Micheletti, 2013, p. 39). Tourism products are distinguished from physical products by their service dimension and experiential nature (Liu, Yao, & Fan, 2020). Consequently, tourists' emotional and behavioral reactions toward unethical issues are focused on not only corporate practices but also the destination. Therefore, this study proposes a process model for examining how stakeholders (tourists, tourism operators, regulatory authorities, destination residents) reconstruct tourism market regulation after unethical incidents.

To fill the research gap, this research adopted critical realism and critical discourse analysis to reveal explanations for the unethical real-world marketing practices in Snow Town. First, based on interviews and grounded in cognitive appraisal theory, this study aims to find factors that influence a destination's perceived tourism market regulation and tourists' behavioral reactions following an unethical incident. Second, the research elaborates on stakeholders' processes in improving the governance and regulation of tourism in an area tainted by unethical incidents. The aim is to reveal how tourist power in social media can affect tourism market regulation in Snow Town. The study's purpose is to offer a process model as a theoretical basis for understanding market re-configuration by stakeholders. We also seek to fill a research gap by empirically examining the relationships between the model's components.

Literature review

Unethical incidents and behavioral reactions

An unethical incident is defined as a crisis event that is attributed to internal factors and unethical in nature (Breitsohl & Garrod, 2016). Unethical incidents have distinctive features: negative influence and open communication (e.g., Breitsohl &



Fig. 1. A view of Snow Town.

Photo from the official website of Snow Town <http://www.zhongguoxuexiang.com/>.

Garrod, 2016). People tend to be more sensitive to unethical incidents, and also more willing to spread negative information (Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, & Unnava, 2000). An incident deemed to be an internal crisis at a tourism destination, especially an unethical marketing practice, is especially likely to result in huge damage to destination image (Cavicchi & Santini, 2011; March, 2008). Compared with illegal incidents, unethical but lawful practices can also be expected to easily draw substantial attention through negative word-of-mouth, reaching a global audience of potential tourists (Cavicchi & Santini, 2011; Liu, Yao, & Fan, 2020).

Unethical incidents can affect potential tourists' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral reactions toward the tourism destination (Breitsohl & Garrod, 2016). According to cognitive appraisal theory (Lazarus, 1991), an individual's reaction to an unethical event follows a set cognition-emotion-behavior sequence (Breitsohl & Garrod, 2016) (Fig. 2). This means that tourists' first reaction will be to cognitively evaluate the severity of the unethical incident, destination image, and other related factors. Tourists' cognition of unethical incidents will affect their emotions, such as anger, contempt and disgust, leading to immediate intentions, conceptualized as two different coping strategy – “avoidance” and “negative WOM”, then future behavioral responses (Breitsohl & Garrod, 2016). As ethical behavior is related to rewards and unethical behavior to punishment (Power, Domenico, & Miller, 2017), tourists encountering a bad experience are less likely to revisit. With the rapid development of information and communication technology, tourism information has become more open and transparent. Once an unethical incident occurs, the subsequent tourism crisis harms not only the destination image but also the sustainable development of the local tourism industry (Liu, Yao, & Fan, 2020). The destination and its constituent organizations have no control over what tourists put on social media or the Internet, so it is critical that they respond appropriately.

Tourist power in social media

Power is defined as the “ability to impose one's will or advance one's own interest” (Reed, 1997, p. 567); a capacity conferred by the individual's ability to provide or withhold valuable resources and enforce punishments (French & Raven, 1959; Hunt & Nevin, 1974). French and Raven (1959) classify five forms of social power: reward power, coercive power, legitimate power, referent power, and expert power. Relying on the work of French and Raven, a model of power with coercive versus noncoercive in a channel of distribution was put forward (Hunt, 2015; Hunt & Nevin, 1974). Rezapakhsh, Bornemann, Hansen, and Schrader (2006) applied French and Raven's power concept to power relations between consumers and suppliers, and compared consumer power between the online and traditional offline conditions. This comparison shows that “the Internet enables consumers to ... obtain high levels of market transparency, to easily band together against companies and impose sanctions via exit and voice” (Rezapakhsh et al., 2006, p. 3). Consumers are thus empowered to avoid goods and services according to individual preferences (Rezapakhsh, Bornemann, Hansen, & Schrader, 2006).

Social media is becoming increasingly important, especially in empowering individuals by dynamically changing the balance of power (Labrecque, Jonas, Mathwick, Novak, & Hofacker, 2013). Social media have transformed the Internet from an information platform to an influence platform (Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011). In Web 2.0, consumer power is no longer limited to purchase or boycott choices (Zureik & Mowshowitz, 2005) as more transparent information and user-generated content are easily accessible (Liu, Yao, & Fan, 2020), thus empowering consumers with increased options (Chaney, 2019). Consumer empowerment means exercising the power of choice and self-management through consumption (Shankar, Cherrier, & Canniford, 2006). As digital content can be shared and distributed in social media, network-based power and crowd-based power can promote consumers' collective action to influence markets (Chaney, 2019).

Power is omnipresent in tourism, especially in the tripartite system of tourists, locals, and brokers (Cheong & Miller, 2000). It governs the interactions among actors (Hall, 2011). As Hall (2011) argues, power operates in interpersonal and institutional relationships in tourism, such as community tourism issues, tourism governance, policymaking and policy implementation, destination management. In the tourism industry, social media empowers individuals to make their own holiday arrangements. According to Rezapakhsh, Bornemann, Hansen, and Schrader (2006), tourists as consumers have sanction power, legitimate power, and expert power. Tourists can reward or punish a service supplier by applying the positive sanction of “loyalty” or the negative sanction of “exit” (Hirschman, 1970; Rezapakhsh, Bornemann, Hansen, & Schrader, 2006). In the Web 2.0 era, tourists are inundated with choices and information, which are empowering. Social media giving tourists more initiative power (Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011), they can self-organize and spread word-of-mouth at a lower cost online.

Tourism market regulation

Regulation of the tourism market is to protect consumers (Baldwin, Cave, & Lodge, 2011; Liu, Yao, & Fan, 2020). Tourism market regulation ensures that transaction activities can happen in an orderly fashion, following clear norms. The study of market regulation originated in the field of the market economy. Hayek's spontaneous order theory posits that market regulation is formed

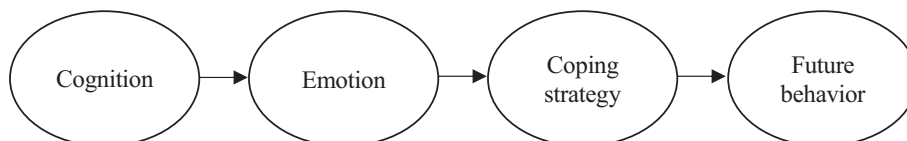


Fig. 2. Sequence of a tourist's reactions to an unethical destination incident (Breitsohl & Garrod, 2016).



Fig. 3. The sign at the entrance of a hostel with a QR Code.
Photo by the first author.

spontaneously through “trial and error” and “gradual evolution” in the long-term cultural process, and has been continuously expanded to cover market rules, allowing individuals to use their own knowledge freely to achieve their own needs (Hayek, 1952). Tourism market regulation has unique characteristics due to its service characteristics and experiential nature (Liu, Yao, & Fan, 2020; Yao & Liu, 2019). Liu, Yao, and Fan (2020) define tourism market regulation as an evolving state in which market rules are complied with and adjusted to protect tourists. Tourism market regulation aimed to impose obligations on all the tourism suppliers to provide what they promise to do. At the national level, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism takes the lead in coordinating the guidance and regulation of the tourism market. At the provincial and municipal level, the Department of Culture and Tourism is responsible for the regulation of the tourism market. All relevant departments of the government, such as Public Security Bureau, Administration for Market Regulation, Transportation Administration etc., cooperate with the tourism administration to guide, coordinate and regulate tourism market (General Office of the State Council, 2016). The main reasons for the unethical behaviors in China’s tourism market are immaturity of the market environment, noncredit transactions of tourism operators, unethical consumption behaviors, and improper regulation systems (Mak, Wong, & Chang, 2011; Yao & Liu, 2019). How to make an unregulated tourism market regulated after unethical incidents is a key challenge for tourism destinations. Regulation of the tourism market and governance of tourism destination involves how stakeholders determine, implement and evaluate the rules for their interaction (Hall, 2011).

Methodology

Critical realism is an underpinning philosophy and framework that allows researchers to make observations on and interpret a phenomenon (Bhaskar, 1978; Platenkamp & Botterill, 2013; Sayer, 1992). The paper applies critical realism to locate the processes and mechanisms through which tourism market regulation is reconstructed after unethical incidents in tourism destination. Critical realism has three underlying philosophical tenets: a differentiated and stratified ontology, epistemic relativism, and judgmental rationalism (Platenkamp & Botterill, 2013). Based on the first tenet, this research aims to stratify the reality of surface-level events in pursuit of tourism market regulation after unethical incidents, involving real entities with particular structures and mechanisms (Bhaskar, 1978; Sayer, 1992). According to the second tenet, this study uses multiple sources of data collected through in-depth interviews, focus groups, household surveys, and participant observations during an ongoing three-year study of unethical incidents in Snow Town. Finally, according to the third tenet, this research is demonstrated based on a real condition to promote rethinking of stakeholders’ emotional and behavioral reactions to unethical issues.

As critical realism does not advocate a particular method (Bhaskar, 1978; Sayer, 1992), this research adopts qualitative methods that sit comfortably within critical realism (Fletcher, 2017). Specifically, this research uses critical realism and critical discourse analysis to develop the process model. Fairclough’s (2004) analytical framework for critical discourse analysis comprises three dimensions: text, discursive practice, and social practice. We applied this analytical framework to code the transcripts with a view to revealing how tourist power in social media affects tourism market regulation after unethical incidents. We used Nvivo to support the data analysis.

As qualitative research, open disclosure and exposition of positionality are essential, which describes an individual’s world-views and position they adopt within a research and its social and political context (Holmes, 2020; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Both the positionality and reflexivity can influence the research (Holmes, 2020). As an academic, it is important to be aware of our own positionality and possible biases and influences in this research process. Namely, the first author, as a female Chinese academic and the interviewer, will inevitably be influenced by gender, ethnicity, social class and cultural upbringing, and that this can potentially cloud and affect our positionality and interpretation. It is impossible to be an unbiased researcher, but rather to acknowledge and be aware of possible biases and influences and how these might influence the research process.

A key focus throughout the interview process was an awareness of the role of the researcher played in directing and possibly influencing the interview direction. And during the analysis, careful attention was paid to avoid research bias shaping and influencing the findings.

In this ongoing three-year research, our positionality is never fixed and is always situation and context-dependent. As an interviewer, we try to observe interviewees' emotional expressions and critically analyze their responses. As a tourist, the first author participated in two different tour groups in Snow Town in January and November 2018. These participation experiences were intended to capture the behaviors of service providers, and to observe tourists' reactions during the tours. As an observer, field observations were conducted at Xueyun Street (public open space and main road in Snow Town) to witness how locals and tourists transact. As a researcher, reflexivity pushes us to make a self-consciousness and self-assessment about our positions to understand stakeholders' situation and make critical reflections on the context of unethical incidents. However, no matter how critically reflexive, we acknowledge that there will always still be some form of bias (Holmes, 2020), such as a recollection bias by asking tourists be deceived into recalling experience (Kirillova & Lehto, 2015), interviewees' bias against unethical issues, the researchers' unknowingly bias (Holmes, 2020), or overly sympathetic to stakeholders' situation after unethical incidents.

Qualitative interviews

The interviewees mainly include tourists, tourism operators, tour guides, tourism administrators, residents in the local destination. As no travel agents operate from Snow Town itself, we interviewed travel agents based in Harbin. We also interviewed two other types of tourism enterprises based in Snow Town: the owners/operators of tourist attractions and of accommodation, including bed and breakfasts, hostels, hotels, and caravan parks. Three types of tourists were interviewed: those who have been deceived, those who have arranged to visit or are visiting Snow Town, and potential visitors. We also interviewed two types of tourism administrations: Heilongjiang Provincial Department of Culture and Tourism, the Culture and Tourism Bureau of Dahailin Forestry Region.

Interviews were conducted in two stages. In the first stage (starting in January 2018), we conducted interviews and focus groups using purposive and snowball sampling. These sampling approaches enable researchers to critically select interviewees who are theoretically relevant to the issues being studied (Caruana, Glozer, Crane, & McCabe, 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We consulted experts in tourism policy and ethical tourism to get their views on the unethical incidents. Moreover, as an interviewer and observer, we believe that the emotional expressions and statements made by the interviewees are reliable in terms of their physical expressions, the degree of emotional involvement, and eye contact.

Different types of interviews were conducted using different interview outlines. The tourists who had been deceived were mainly asked three open questions concerning: (1) their reasons for and their decision-making process before visiting Snow Town; (2) their experiences during the visit; and (3) their emotions, perceived tourism market regulation, and how their feelings impact their future behavioral intentions in the post-travel period. For tourists who had arranged their own travel, we used a screening question to identify eligible respondents: "Are you aware of the unethical incidents that have happened in Snow Town?" Only tourists who answered "Yes" were interviewed. These interviews mainly focused on how the unethical incidents and the negative publicity they provoked on social media affected the interviewees' emotions, perceived tourism market regulation, and travel plans. Potential-tourist participants were mainly asked to consider their cognitive, emotional, and behavioral reactions to unethical issues in Snow Town, as well as their perceived tourism market regulation. Tourism operators mainly answered questions on the regulation of the tourism market, the influence of unethical issues on their business, and the actions to recover from the destination crisis. For tourism administrators, the interviews mainly focused on the regulation of the tourism market before the unethical incidents and the processes involved in improving the governance and regulation of tourism in the area.

In the second stage, in-depth interviews and a household survey were conducted in November 2018 to research the regulatory measures deployed to pursue restoring order in the destination after the unethical incidents came to light. As the Culture and Tourism Bureau of Dahailin Forestry Region (which oversees Snow Town) assisted with the household survey, we were able to conduct more in-depth interviews with tourism operators. A total of 62 interviews were conducted by phone or face-to-face, with a duration ranging between 28 and 105 min. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Data analysis indicated that dimensions and patterns became stable at the 50th informant, and the last 12 interviewees did not provide any substantive changes to the process model. In order to ensure the credibility of the qualitative approach, this research used a set of procedures proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to ensure reliability and validity. Firstly, during the data collection process, we shared information with interviewees to check its accuracy, and data were collected from different sources to enable triangulation. Secondly, during the data processing, we developed a detailed research plan, created a database of different contents, extracted and quantified relevant categories, and established an evidence verification trail. Finally, after completing the coding analysis, we conducted peer debriefing and retained memos of the coding process of questioning, recovering, and evidence reconstruction.

Observations

Observations were undertaken before and after the stakeholder interviews. The data were recorded through photographs and note-taking. The researchers recorded field observations and participant observations in written memos. The pre-interview observations facilitated in-depth interviews with respondents, while the post-interview observations supplemented the survey data

and encouraged the researchers to analyze the interviews critically. We also presented our findings on the existing problems to tourism administrations, aiming to promote their further regulation of the local tourism market.

Findings

Demographic profile of interviewees

Table 1 shows the demographic profile of the interviewees. Interviews were conducted with various stakeholders to explore the influence of unethical incidents. In total, 62 interviewees participated in in-depth interviews, focus groups, and the household survey. Among them, 56.45% (35) were male, and 43.55% (27) were female. The majority (58.07%) of interviewees were aged 30–49 years. Regarding education level, 41.94% had an undergraduate degree.

Emotional and behavioral reactions of stakeholders after unethical incidents

Tourists

As tourists are essential to every tourism destination, we explored the influence of unethical incidents on different types of tourists: those who have been deceived ($n = 4$), those who had arranged to visit or were visiting Snow Town ($n = 6$), and potential tourists ($n = 5$). Some tourists who were deceived chose to spread negative word-of-mouth on social media. One tourist who notoriously shared their experiences via social media while traveling is Yimuxing. We interviewed Yimuxing to learn more about what they experienced.

We booked a triple room for two nights from December 27 to December 29, 2017 for RMB 552 at Zhaojia Courtyard. When we arrived, the hostel owner told us that we could only stay for one night. He arbitrarily suspended service activities and unilaterally tore up the signed contract. We agreed to stay for only one night. However, the owner said we could only get the money back if we posted positive comments online. (T01, male, 30–39, tourist).

This is a typical conflict between a tourism operator and tourists due to overpricing and ignoring the contract. As the post offered a detailed account together with pictures, chat screenshots, and audio recordings, it caused heated discussion. It illustrates a tourist's use of coercive power to punish unethical behaviors (French & Raven, 1959). This tourist even recommended that tourists should stop visiting Snow Town.

The following is another typical example:

We arranged a tour that included catering, accommodation, round-trip fare, and tickets for Snow Town. During the travel, the guide began to say how bad the arranged accommodation was and recommended that we upgrade. She started to talk about various self-funded programs and forced us to buy. When we finally arrived at Snow Town, the situation was different from what the guide had said. The accommodation was very good; the accommodation owner and the driver in Snow Town were friendly. (T03, female, 18–29, tourist)

This illustrates the conflicts between tour guides and tourists visiting Snow Town because of self-funded programs, which require tourists to pay separately. This often happens in a cheap tour package, which is also named a low-priced tour. While tourists

Table 1
Interviewee profiles.

Variable	Category	Number	Percentage
Gender	Male	35	56.45%
	Female	27	43.55%
Age	18–29	9	14.52%
	30–39	20	32.26%
	40–49	16	25.81%
	50–59	11	17.74%
	≥60	6	9.68%
Education	Senior high school or below	11	17.74%
	Junior college	14	22.58%
	Undergraduate	26	41.94%
	Postgraduate or above	11	17.74%
Occupation	Tourist	15	24.19%
	Tourism operator	20	32.26%
	Tour guide	5	8.06%
	Tourism administrator	9	14.52%
	Destination resident	8	12.90%
	Others (e.g., journalist, driver)	5	8.06%

are on the way to the destination, the tour guide effectively extorts them to upgrade their package or buy self-funded programs, from which the tour guide can get some commissions. Some travel agencies even used this model to attract tourists and then recover their costs through self-funded programs. Although these tourists made positive comments on Snow Town itself, the tour guide's unethical activity negatively impacted their experience and destination image. These unethical activities can be expected to draw substantial attention and extensive negative publicity on social media, thereby reaching a global audience of potential tourists (Cavicchi & Santini, 2011). Tourists who have already arranged an itinerary are likely to cancel their travel or choose alternative suppliers. For example, as one tourist mentioned:

When we were visiting Harbin, we saw that our friends had shared their terrible travel experience on Weibo ... We originally arranged to go to Snow Town. But because a series of unethical incidents occurred, we changed our itinerary and went to Tumen city. We chose a self-service trip. (T04, female, 18–29, tourist)

Many tourists shared on social media their decision to cancel or choose an alternative supplier after the unethical incidents. Potential tourists prefer to employ avoidance as a coping behavior, and social media has empowered tourists to make purchase or boycott choices (Zureik & Mowshowitz, 2005). According to interviews with managers of travel agents in Harbin, the number of tourists served has almost halved compared to 2017.

Tourists' emotional and behavioral reactions to unethical incidents and perceived tourism market regulation depend on the perceived severity, tolerance of ambiguity of unethical issues, and responsibility attribution. As one tourist argued in a focus group discussion:

Two important factors affect the perceived tourism market regulation of the destination and tourists' behavior. The first is the severity of the unethical incident. The second is the personality characteristics of the tourist. I have a high degree of tolerance. I can tolerate certain unethical incidents with a critical perspective. (T08, female, 30–39, tourist)

Responsibility attribution describes the cognitive evaluation of what caused an incident (Coombs, 2004). Tourists will judge the responsible party after an unethical incident occurs, attributing responsibility to a tourist, a service provider, or the destination, which will affect the perceived tourism market regulation and tourists' behavioral reactions. Based on the interview analysis, some tourists were not influenced by the unethical issues, especially "offline" tourists, namely those who do not use the Internet. Particularly among the older offline tourists we interviewed in Snow Town, some interviewees had no knowledge of the unethical incidents.

Tourism operators

In early business, manufacturers dominated markets with their supply power (Kucuk & Krishnamurthy, 2007). Specifically, in the tourism industry, tourism operators hold the supply power to provide services to tourists. The development of Web 2.0 has brought a decisive shift in power from marketer to consumer, resulting in a new form of consumer–firm relationship (Labrecque, Jonas, Mathwick, Novak, & Hofacker, 2013) in which the Internet causes power relations to favor consumers (Rezabakhsh, Bornemann, Hansen, & Schrader, 2006). Nonetheless, tourism operators remain the supplier of the tourism market. Therefore, this research explored the influence of unethical incidents on their business, and investigated their actions to recover from the destination crisis, with the aim of stratifying the reality of pursuing tourism market regulation. According to the estimates of the Culture and Tourism Bureau of Dahailin Forestry Region, the number of tourists in Snow Town fell by 47.25% during the 2018 Spring Festival compared to the previous year. Unethical incidents can cause both short- and long-term damage to service providers and the tourism destination (Breitsohl & Garrod, 2016). Similarly, tourists' statements and complaints on social media can seriously damage the reputation and turnover of tourism operators or the destination. The following are examples provided by interviewees:

I've been running tourist attractions since 2003, trying to lift local people out of poverty. As we live on the tourism resources, we pay special attention to protecting the brand, as do the majority of local operators....These unethical incidents did have a negative impact. Visitors are down by about a third. We are working together to restore the image of the destination and reconstruct the tourism market. (C03, male, 40–49, tourism operator)

Our family have been operating this hostel since 2002 ... There were still many visitors here in December 2017. However, after these unethical incidents, the number of visitors decreased significantly in January 2018. We are very angry with those who deceived tourists or acted unethically. They tarnish the image of our destination. (C09, male, 60 and above, hostel owner)

Regarding tourism operators' emotional and behavioral reactions to the unethical incidents, honest tourism operators were angry with those who had deceived tourists. Mainly because Snow Town is what most locals live on. According to Izard's (1977) hostility triad of emotions, anger is generally described as a retrospective emotion triggered when an offense is thought to affect oneself, a social relationship, or even the general public (Breitsohl & Garrod, 2016; Lazarus, 1991). Unethical incidents undermine harmonious

consumer–business relationships and the destination where local operators trade and residents live. There are even conflicts between tourism operators in Snow Town and service staff (e.g., tour guides). As stated by one hostel owner:

As a service provider, we are expected to act with integrity. But not everyone knows that. I encountered a tour guide who was damaging the image of Snow Town. The tour guide was warning tourists: “Don’t enter any restaurant, you’ll get a bad meal.” I was very angry. I insisted that she had to apologize for the inappropriate things she had said, and she finally did. (C08, female, 30–39, accommodation owner)

It is worth highlighting that, some tour guides are used by travel agencies (Ap & Wong, 2001; Mak, Wong, & Chang, 2011). Ap and Wong (2001) point out that many guides have low social status, low wages, unstable job income, and insufficient job security—these problems persist today. Some unethically acting tourism businesses and service providers did not seem to fully recognize the power of tourists and the consequences of their actions. Tourists can terminate the service relationship or spread negative word-of-mouth. If and when consumers are dissatisfied with certain products or services, they can use their “voice” to share, comment in social media, and spread negative word-of-mouth (Rezabakhsh, Bornemann, Hansen, & Schrader, 2006). According to Rust and Oliver (1994) and Rezabakhsh, Bornemann, Hansen, and Schrader (2006), social media enhances the power of tourists through the quantity and quality of information it provides. Tourists’ power in social media has forced all stakeholders in the destination to change their behavior so as to reconstruct tourism market regulation and then restore the destination image.

We also found that although the tourism market in the core scenic area of Snow Town is regulated, other local tourism attractions require more attention. The unethical incident of Zhaojia Courtyard where tourists were deceived happened at Yongan Forest Farm [another scenic area]. For tourists, Snow Town’s reputation is also affected by fellow tourists being deceived in surrounding tourism attractions. Following these unethical incidents, tourism operators in the local destination initiated a self-organizing committee to regulate the local tourism industry.

Regulatory authorities

Many regulations affect the tourism industry, and these fall within the government’s responsibility. In China, the government intervenes in the tourism industry to provide infrastructure and support services, including tourism policy and planning, marketing, and fiscal measures. For instance, it can create an enabling environment by establishing supportive legislation or regulations that help tourism develop (Jenkins, 2012). After the unethical incidents, Heilongjiang Provincial Department of Culture and Tourism issued a crisis warning and launched an in-depth investigation immediately. Following Yimuxing’s complaint on December 29, 2017, the Culture and Tourism Bureau of Dahailin Forestry Region announced on January 3, 2018 that the hostel owner mentioned in the post had committed price fraud. Under the applicable regulations, the dishonest hostel owner was fined RMB 59,360 and ordered to suspend the business for rectification; the hostel was also added to the “blacklist”. Realizing the importance of social media, the local government uses it alongside other media to proclaim findings and penalties and to communicate crisis information.

As these illegal and/or unethical incidents demonstrate, the government had to react quickly to reduce the negative impact on the destination. It is the main stakeholder in reconstructing tourism market regulation following unethical incidents. As stated by a tourism administrator, “The government eventually needs to introduce regulations to stop these illegal or unethical behaviors” (G01, male, 40–49, tourism administrator). According to the interviewed tourism administrators, they have taken a series of measures to regulate the tourism market. First, the government enacted incentives and penalties to regulate the provision by all tourism operators of quality tourism services and products. Fulfilling the tourism contract is the bottom line to protect consumers (Liu, Yao, & Fan, 2020). According to the incentives and penalties, the “red list” disclosed online and displayed at the entrance of Snow Town makes it easy for tourists to find trustworthy shops, restaurants, and budget hostels, while the “blacklist” is installed as a sanction.

Second, based on Tourism Law (Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress, 2018), the government also provides institutions to regulate the intangible aspects of the tourism market. These include formal institutions (e.g., laws, regulations, judicial interpretation), informal institutions (e.g., values, ideology), and implementation mechanisms that aim to improve the institutional environment (Coase, 2012; North, 1990). All the institutional arrangements cover the regulatory principles or rules of the tourism market. For instance, on January 17, 2018, the People’s Government of Heilongjiang province issued the Notice on Strengthening the Comprehensive Regulation of the Winter Tourism Market on tackling unreasonably low-priced tours, forced consumption and other problems. As stated by one tourism manager:

Last year [2017] saw a surge in the number of tourists, probably due to low-cost tours. Some travel agencies have used this model to attract tourists and then make a profit through self-funded programs. This has led to a series of unethical destination incidents. (C02, female, 40–49, travel agency manager)

Conflicts thus arose between tour guides and tourists due to self-funded programs. Excessive competition and the unbalanced supply–demand relationship created conditions for conflicts between tourism operators and tourists due to overpricing and misleading advertising. The local government responded by providing institutions to create a fair-competition market environment and stop these abuses. Institutions should guarantee that tourists receive the services they arrange, and also ensure that service providers comply with what they offer, according to the parties’ signed contract.

Third, the government provided a regulatory strategy to push the destination to regain its order after the unethical incidents, implementing measures such as quick processing of travel feedback and regulated complaint-handling procedures. The government improved the service function of the telephone Hotline “12345” to ensure that the tourism feedback channel is unobstructed and tourists' complaints can be handled quickly. The following comments are enlightening:

After the incidents, we installed market evaluation to force all tourism operators and service staff to improve service quality. ... We hang a brand with the business name, address and QR Code at the entrance of each business place [see Fig. 3]. When tourists scan the QR Code, they can compare each service provider according to online reviews before making arrangements. They can also give comments during and after receiving the service. We have commissioners in charge of tourist comments. (G04, male, 30–39, tourism administrator)

Tourism administrations have used tourist comments as the source data for tourism market regulation. Evaluating tourism market regulation from tourists' perspective can help service providers identify areas for improvement. For tourism administrations and destination-marketing organizations, soliciting tourist comments can help them to identify what regulations are needed to regulate the market (Liu, Yao, & Fan, 2020). Tourists' power in social media forces the service providers to improve service quality. Besides these regulatory strategies, the government also empowers tourism associations to regulate all participants through codes of conduct. Tourism associations identify approved behaviors and set up self-regulation codes, which are effective supplements to legal regulation.

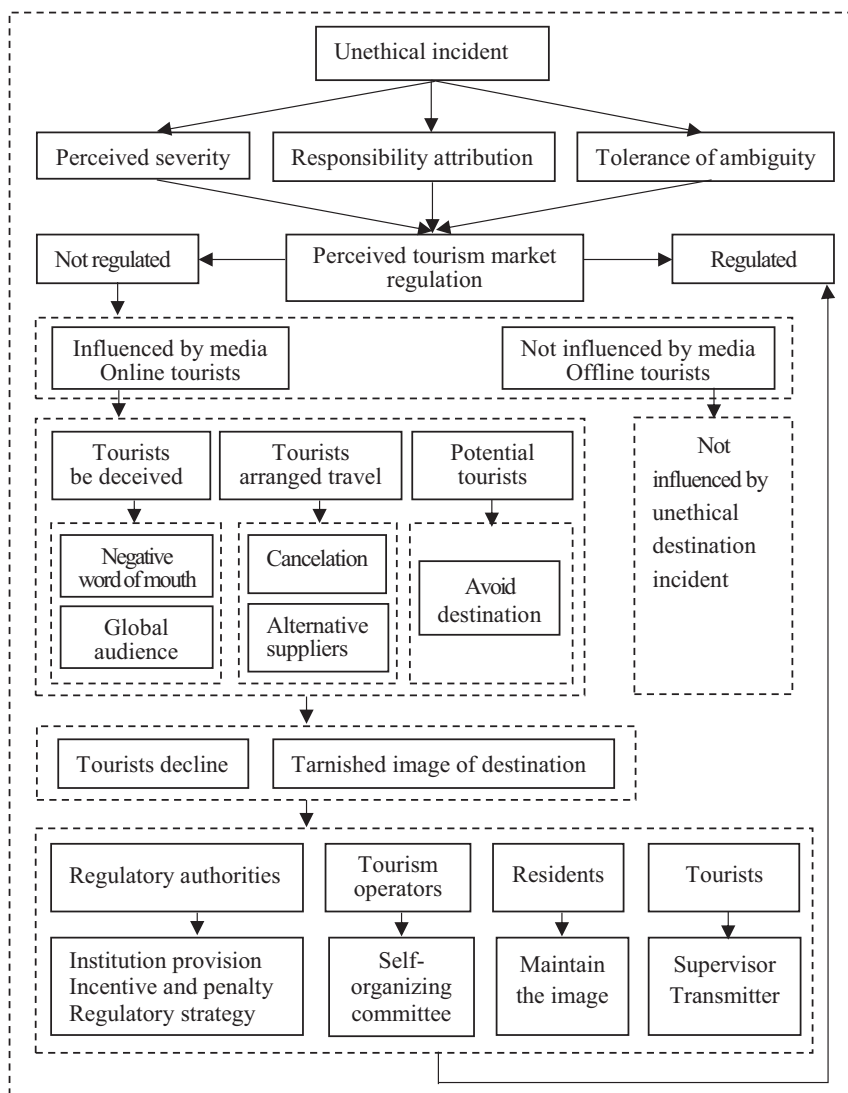


Fig. 4. Market re-configuration model after an unethical incident.

Market re-configuration after unethical incidents

To improve understanding of how stakeholders reconstruct tourism market regulation after unethical incidents, we propose the process model that is presented in Fig. 4. According to Hayek's sensory order, market regulation can be perceived by consumers (Hayek, 1952). The tourist, as the object of the tourism market transaction, participates in the whole market transaction process and is the most direct referee of the tourism market regulation.

When an unethical incident occurs, perceived tourism market regulation—in other words, sensory order—depends on the perceived severity of the unethical incident, responsibility attribution, and tolerance of ambiguity. The more severe the tourists' perception of unethical incidents, the stronger will be their hostility emotions toward it (Breitsohl & Garrod, 2016; Grégoire, Laufer, & Tripp, 2010), and the lower their perception of tourism market regulation. If tourists attribute blame for the occurrence of unethical incidents to the destination (Breitsohl & Garrod, 2016), they will regard the tourism market as unregulated. In addition, the lower the tourists' tolerance for uncertainty about unethical incidents, the stronger their hostility toward it, and the lower their perceived tourism market regulation of the destination. According to cognitive appraisal theory (Lazarus, 1991), we conclude that an individual's reaction to an unethical destination incident follows a set cognition-emotion-perceived tourism market regulation (Fig. 5).

Social media empowers tourists with increased choices (Chaney, 2019). Tourists who are deceived prefer to spread negative word-of-mouth on social media, so as to punish unethical operators and tourism destinations. According to Hirschman (1970) and Rezapakhsh, Bornemann, Hansen, and Schrader (2006), tourists be deceived choose to apply the negative sanctions of "exit", by terminating the service relationship, and "voice", by either complaining about their terrible travel experience or spreading negative word-of-mouth on social media. To reduce the risk in tourism consumption, tourists who have already arranged their itinerary tend to cancel or choose other service providers (or tourist destinations), whereas potential tourists are more inclined to avoid tourist destination where unethical incidents occur and instead choose destinations with predictable experiences. Based on the analysis, we conclude that an individual's reaction follows a set cognition, emotion, perceived tourism market regulation, behavior (Fig. 5).

As a result, the image of Snow Town was tarnished. Damage to the image of Snow Town led to a sharp decline in the number of tourists. The actual behavior of tourists and their power in social media forced all stakeholders in the destination to change their behavior. Regulatory authorities in Snow Town enacted incentives and penalties, institutions, and a regulatory strategy to promote the restoration of order in the destination after the unethical issues. Some tourism enterprises are still not fully cognizant of tourists' empowerment and the consequences of their behaviors in pursuing tourism regulation under Web 2.0. After the unethical incidents, tourism enterprises in the destination initiated a self-organizing committee to regulate the local tourism industry. The operators of tourist attractions and the owners of B&Bs, hostels, caravan parks, and souvenir shops in Snow Town paid attention to restoring and maintaining the destination image. Tourists, as a supervisor and transmitter, voted with their feet and forced destination managers and tourism enterprises to change their regulation strategy and business models. Subsequently, all stakeholders worked together to reconstruct tourism market regulation in Snow Town and make an unregulated tourism market regulated.

Based on the above analysis, this research proposes a conceptual model for examining how tourists' power in social media can affect tourism market regulation after unethical incidents (Fig. 5). Tourists' reaction to unethical incident and the consequences of their behavior follows a set sequence: cognition, emotion, perceived tourism market regulation, behavior, market re-configuration.

Conclusion and implications

This research proposes a process model for examining how tourists' power in social media can affect tourism market regulation after unethical incidents. As the model shows, tourists' perceived tourism market regulation depends on the perceived severity of the unethical issue, responsibility attribution, and tolerance of ambiguity. Tourists be deceived choose to terminate the service relationship and spread negative word-of-mouth. Following unethical incidents, tourists who have already arranged their itinerary tend to cancel or choose other service providers (or tourist destinations), while potential tourists are more inclined to avoid the tourism destination. Tourists' actual behavior and their power in social media can force all stakeholders to work toward transforming a tourism market from unregulated to regulated, which is market re-configuration.

Theoretical implications

This study's findings have three main theoretical implications. First, based on the survey and grounded in cognitive appraisal theory, the research finds that tourists' cognition of unethical incidents affects their emotions, which in turn affect their perceived



Fig. 5. Tourist power in social media affects tourism market regulation after unethical incidents.

tourism market regulation for a destination. Compared with physical products, the intangible services of tourism products make it difficult to judge the boundaries between ethical and unethical behavior. Besides this, consumers' emotional and behavioral reactions toward unethical incidents of physical product focus on the product or the corporation (Govind, Singh, Garg, & D'Silva, 2017). From the perspective of discursive consumerism, opinion formation and communicative actions express reflective and critical views held by individuals on corporate policy and corporate practice (Sandlin, 2011; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013: 39). In contrast, the emotional and behavioral responses of tourists to unethical incidents are not only focused on the service provider but also on the destination, especially on the destination's perceived regulation of the tourism market. Considering the unfamiliarity and high perceived risk of tourism, the perceived regulation of the tourism market by the tourist affects the behavioral responses of the tourist.

Second, this study identifies the factors that influence tourists' perceived tourism market regulation, comprising perceived severity of the unethical issue, responsibility attribution, and tolerance of ambiguity. The first factor that tourists consider is the perceived severity of unethical incidents. This affects the intensity of consumers' negative emotions: the more severe their perception of an unethical incident, the stronger will be their hostility toward it (Breitsohl & Garrod, 2016; Grégoire, Laufer, & Tripp, 2010). The frequent series of unethical incidents in Snow Town include conflicts between hostel owners and tourists due to overpricing and inconsistency in travel contracts, and conflicts of interest between tour guides and tourists due to self-funded programs. The more severe the tourist's perception of an unethical incident, the lower their perceived tourism market regulation.

Responsibility attribution for the incident is another critical dimension, as appropriate acceptance or rejection of responsibility can successfully mitigate hostile reactions. According to attribution theory, the more tourists attribute unethical incidents to the destination, the more hostile they will be toward the destination (Breitsohl & Garrod, 2016; Han, Lerner, & Keltner, 2007). In turn, the lower tourists' perceived tourism market regulation of the destination, the more their consumption choices and behavioral responses will be influenced.

Tolerance of ambiguity is another factor that affects tourists' perceived tourism market regulation. Each visitor is different in their experiences, personal characteristics and tolerance for unethical incidents. Ambiguity tolerance refers to an individual's (or group's) ability to perceive and process uncertain situations or stimuli in the face of a series of unfamiliar, complex, or inconsistent cues, and as evidenced by individual differences in cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses (Furnham & Marks, 2013; McLain, 1993). The lower the tolerance of tourists to the uncertainty of unethical incidents in Snow Town, the lower their perceived tourism market regulation and the greater their inclination to avoid the tourism destination in their behavioral choices.

Third, the proposed model posits that tourists' reactions to unethical incidents and their behavioral outcomes follow a set sequence: cognition, emotion, perceived tourism market regulation, behavior, market re-configuration. According to cognitive appraisal theory (Lazarus, 1991), an individual's reaction to an incident follows a set cognition-emotion-behavior sequence (Breitsohl & Garrod, 2016; Moors, Ellsworth, Scherer, & Frijda, 2013). Through this research, we have obtained some new dimensions and expanded this model. This study finds that the occurrence of unethical incidents and their dissemination on the Internet affect tourists' cognition and emotions, and that perceived tourism market regulation affects tourists' behavioral responses. The actual behavior of tourists and the power of tourists in social media forced all stakeholders to make an unregulated tourism market regulated after unethical incidents, a re-configuration of the market. This study filled a research gap by rethinking the emotional and behavioral responses of stakeholders to unethical incidents.

Practical implications

The study's findings have implications for post-crisis strategies for destination stakeholders. For tourism service providers, with the rapid development of information technology and social media, the original bilateral transaction between service provider and tourist has been transformed into multilateral transaction. Consequently, an honest transaction conveys integrity to all visitors, while a dishonest transaction, such as ripping off tourists, conveys fraud to all visitors and damages the image of the destination. Service providers can no longer ignore tourists' feedback and power in social media in pursuing tourism market regulation. Unethical service providers should improve their business practices and abandon their short-sighted focus on making quick money. Secondly, tourists are increasingly concerned about the market environment and market regulation of destinations, especially alternative destinations when choosing where to travel. All service providers should obey the institutions and provide quality services. Third, according to the stakeholder discourse analysis, there are conflicts between service providers and tourists due to overpricing and inconsistent tourism contracts. The service provider should ensure the authenticity of the advertisement, sign a tourism contract in accordance with the law, and clearly indicate the included tourism products and self-funded programs in contract. The most important is that both the service providers and tourists should fulfill the agreement according to the signed contracts.

For tourism administrations, destination marketing organizations, and other public-sector departments, timely and effective crisis management should be operated to regulate the tourism market. The government can use incentives and penalties, institutions, and regulatory strategy to reduce damage to the destination. Second, social media empowers visitors with sanctions, legitimacy, and expertise (Rezabakhsh, Bornemann, Hansen, & Schrader, 2006) and promotes public participation in crisis events. The government should carefully analyze the extent of unethical incidents in the destination. Given our findings on the determinants of tourists' perceived tourism market regulation, the government should immediately investigate each report of an unethical incident and subsequently announce the findings of in-depth investigations through both official media and social media channels.

Their actions can change stakeholders' emotional and behavioral responses to unethical incidents. Third, through the analysis of tourists' discourses, tourists exposed unethical incidents on social media mainly because they did not find channels for complaints and feedback. Regulatory authorities should implement measures of quick processing of travel feedback and regulated complaint-handling procedures. The regulatory authorities can build a platform to collect opinions and complaints, thereby monitoring opinion formation and communicative actions expressing individuals' reflective and critical views. Besides, evaluating tourists' perspective on a destination's perceived tourism market regulation can help the government measure the status of regulation and identify any required interventions.

Limitations and future research

Although this research provides timely theoretical and practical implications for regulating the tourism market, it also has several limitations. First, although in-depth analysis of a typical case can promote the generation of theoretical relations to explain phenomena (Yin, 2011), single-case studies lack external validity. In the future, multi-case comparative studies can be conducted to test this paper's process model and conceptual model. Replicating our results would improve their theoretical and practical implications. Second, besides the determinants we identified of tourists' perceived tourism market regulation and behavioral reactions, several other factors explaining differences in tourists' behavior remain to be discovered. Third, this research offers a conceptual model as a theoretical basis for understanding market re-configuration by destination stakeholders. The model could be quantified through experiments, quantitative analysis, and other research methods in future studies. This study's model could also facilitate further empirical research, such as investigations of how perceived tourism market regulation affects tourists' travel intention, revisit intention, and destination loyalty.

Declaration of competing interest

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

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