

Public Opinions on the Tourism Industry in the Post-Covid-19 Period: Inherent Features and Guiding Strategies

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Abstract: The tourism industry has been severely hit by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. The severity of this unprecedented crisis is characterized by mobility and clustering. In the post-epidemic period, public opinions on the tourism industry will be confronted with a new environment, exposing obvious industrial characteristics and staged representations. In the context of diverse and complex online public opinion, this study analyzes the inherent features of public opinions on the tourism industry in the post-epidemic period, and thoroughly explores the recovery measures from the perspective of the tourism industry, tourism products, tourism markets, and tourism services, in order to improve the governance and control of public opinion on the tourism industry during the post-epidemic period.

1. Introduction

COVID-19 constitutes a major public health emergency in China due to its rapid spread and extensive infection rate. This development compelled China to roll out the most challenging prevention and control measures in the country's history. On January 24, 2020, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism issued an emergency notice to suspend all business operations of tourism enterprises. As the dust settled and the epidemic gradually eased up, to drive recovery, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism issued successive policies to guide the safe and orderly re-opening of tourism enterprises. In addition, the post-epidemic period introduced a dramatic shift in the re-imagining of the social economy and people's lifestyles. In the post-COVID-19 period, traveler confidence was gradually restored. Attention has been re-directed to travel, especially incidents such as traffic control, prevention and control measures in scenic areas, traffic restrictions on private cars, and safety issues on food and accommodation. Any link without strengthened management may form a communication element and produce irrational public opinions, thus affecting the reputation and image of tourist destinations or enterprises. Therefore, on the basis of scientifically analyzing the inherent features of the development of public opinion in the tourism industry, strengthening the guidance and control of public opinions and guiding the public's perspectives on work resumption in the tourism industry are of great importance for the recovery and revitalization of the tourism industry in the post-COVID-19 period. Furthermore, this will create a stable economic and social environment for the historical mission of high-end positioning and high-quality development of the tourism industry as one of the "top five happiness industries".

2. The Significance of Guiding Public Opinions on the Tourism Industry in the Post-Epidemic Period

For a short period during the lockdown, the COVID-19 pandemic suppressed travel demands. The effectiveness of we-media to make public opinions has made constructing public opinion hotspots easy. Coupled with the timeliness and fragmentation of the diffusion process of public opinion, there is a high risk of break out of public opinion incidents centered on the tourism industry. Looking ahead in the post-epidemic period, it is of great practical significance that the recovery of the tourism industry focuses on ways to fully solve the dilemma of public opinions and guide the sound development of public opinions.

2.1 Defuse the Public Crisis Caused by Tourism Emergencies

The COVID-19 pandemic is not only pivotal to the safety and health of the people. Its chain reaction and extensive spread have also led to a series of improper response measures and introduced huge public opinion pressure on the government's social governance, once these public opinion pressures or imbalanced considerations appear in the process of handling public security crises. Dense crowds of people due to tourism activities will increase the risk of outbreaks. The wave of refunds and cancellations in the tourism industry will easily trigger a public opinion vortex. Weak emergency responses will trigger the rise of public opinions and increase the possibility of a public crisis of emergency. In the post-epidemic period, there's a shift in public opinions on COVID-19 from the volatile period to a recession period. Using positive public opinion publicity, the government and enterprises can enhance the confidence of tourists to travel and reasonably coordinate possible negative emotions and complaints of tourists. This can boost the momentum of the industrial development, and defuse the crisis of tourism emergencies, thereby minimizing the impact of the epidemic on the tourism industry.

2.2 Enhance Risk Resistance in the Tourism Market

The epidemic has had a significant impact on domestic tourism, outbound tourism, and inbound tourism, resulting in the steep decline of the tourism market. According to estimates by the China Tourism Academy, the number of domestic tourists is expected to increase by 56% and 15.5%, respectively in the first quarter and throughout the year 2020, with a year-on-year decrease of 932 million. As the tourism market is in a recovery phase, the government and mainstream media have injected positive energy into the market development vis-a-vis public opinion guidance to purify the public opinion environment and summed up experiences and deficiencies to provide references for subsequent risk prediction and identification of major public opinions. These initiatives can standardize the emergency management systems of enterprises, effectively enhance crisis management and contingency planning of tourism enterprises to withstand market risks, and ultimately promote the establishment of a growth-effect management mechanism and ensure the healthy development of the tourism market in the post-epidemic period.

2.3 Improve the Government's Ability to Govern Public Opinions on the Tourism Industry

From the perspective of government governance and enterprise management, studying and judging the characteristics of representation of public opinion risk in emergencies, and proposing countermeasures for prevention and resolution of public opinion risks before, during, and after the pandemic can improve the government's ability to govern the public opinions on the tourism industry. Affected by the pandemic, if the government fails in the performance of duties, coordination, and timely provision of services in the governance of public opinions^[1], the golden time for controlling the course of events will be missed. In the post-epidemic period, integrating public opinion guidance into the modernized national governance of the new era and building a "respondent government" will help the industry to respond quickly, adjust means of services timely, enhance the subject's awareness of crisis response, demonstrate the government's ability to govern public opinions, and improve the government's public opinion governance system and governance efficiency.

3. Inherent Characteristics of Public Opinions on the Tourism Industry in the Post-Epidemic Period

The tourism industry involves all aspects of the national economy and social life. Tourists - domestic and international - have a strong sense of the subject and high enthusiasm for participating in public affairs. Thus, public opinion ecology is diverse and complex^[2]. In this critical period of tourism recovery in the post-epidemic phase, undulating public topics and epidemic situations have changed the traditional patterns of public opinion fields. The rise and spread of public opinions have displayed many characteristics reflective of the tourism industry.

3.1 The Particularity of the Guidance Environment

People have become more vulnerable and fragile during the COVID-19 pandemic. The transmission and influence of major events are powerful, and any sensitive event can be detonated among the public immediately. In one minute, the address of the academician Zhong Nanshan can be spread to 100 million Chinese, which is unprecedented. Mainstream media has been ushered in and thrives because of the popularization of the Internet and smartphones^[3]. Open and virtual network environment makes public opinions centered on the tourism industry more diverse, random, and biased. In the post-epidemic period, people's mental stress has not been eliminated, and they are still in a sensitive period. Any incident may quickly attract the public's attention, gain traction, and become a new trend for the development of public opinions. Any improper countermeasure may evolve into a "butterfly effect" and magnify the risks of public opinions. In addition, the epidemic has had a large and continued impact on the tourism industry and people due to its high personnel intensity. No matter the site environment or service space is the high incidence area of the risk of public opinion, crowd assembling enhances the risk of spreading, and the number of canceled orders and complaints also increases. Events such as poor handling of emergencies are often reported by the media. Control and emergency management of public opinions face multiple risks and challenges.

3.2 Group-Oriented Popularity

In the government work report of 2016, Premier Li Keqiang pointed out that China had entered a mass tourism era. Tourism massification will inevitably introduce diversified travel modes, directly leading to the diversification of tourists' consumer behavior and consciousness. Traveling is a process to spread information. The huge tourism market involves all facets. Every voice will be heard, even though the spread may be in slow trickles. A high-traffic of public opinions from all levels will converge in the network, forming a "snowball effect", easily inducing a crisis of public opinion. Everyone may be the maker of new public opinions, and any event can become a hot spot that will pique netizens' interests. As the individual's right of speech has become more powerful in the we-media era, tourists' desire to be heard is further stimulated. Furthermore, due to this "magnification effect", the publics' comments on events are more easily covered up by the most prominent behavioral characteristics that saturate the public opinion field. This can easily result in partial evaluation results, thus forming a periodic online public opinion. The spread of public opinions is dominated by three discourse systems: official information, expert statements, and media reports, with each having its own focus. Information barriers exist among the three discourse systems, so the comprehensiveness and scientificity of information transmission are affected. In this context, some media outlets utilize a single source of information in their reports, ignore relevant evidence and verification, and hold a pessimistic view about the development of the tourism industry. Their out-of-focus reports will propagate a deviated agenda, greatly affect information spread and public opinion understanding, cause the public perception bias, and trigger a negative chain reaction.

3.3 The Vulnerability of the Industrial Economy

COVID-19 has had a different impact on all industries of the national economy. Due to external sensitivity and the simultaneity of production and consumption, the tourism industry is often exposed to a variety of risks, indicating the most obvious, direct or indirect, impacts, and significant losses. The tourism industry was forced to stop the effects of the epidemic. This has resulted in vulnerability in the tourism economy and weakened the enthusiasm of fringe markets to enter the tourism industry. However, the majority of tourism enterprises are small and medium-sized enterprises, and some of them may be forced into compulsory liquidation. Coupled with the doubled stress of unemployment, a chain reaction has occurred between the upstream and downstream industrial chains and between industrial factor structures. Tourism sectors such as scenic spots, travel agencies, hotels, and tourism transportation are the most directly affected. The occupancy rate and total revenue of the hotel industry have dropped dramatically, and online travel, outbound travel,

and regional travel have also been impaired in all aspects. Phenomena such as false reports, loss of voice, negative act, and excessive publicity of panic will not only spawn cognitive bias in tourists' but also trigger public opinion focus, placing the already fragile tourism industry in an even worse position.

4. Guidance Strategies for Public Opinions on the Tourism Industry in the Post-Epidemic Period

In the post-epidemic period, in face of the circumstances or potential public opinions events in the tourism industry, the government and enterprises need to work together to adopt multiple targeted measures from the perspective of the tourism industry, tourism products, tourism market, and tourism services, to improve the governance and control of public opinions on the industry and form an upright environment for the tourism development. In this manner, the tourism industry will be transformed into an industry that projects happiness to meet the needs of the people and helps construct a better life.

4.1 Adopt an Integrated Approach to Manage Public Opinions and Steadily Promote Industrial Recovery

In the post-epidemic period, positive signals are continuously issued from governments at all levels, and the public's expectations for industry recovery is increasing. Affected by the epidemic, the number of market service providers decreased, leading to a short supply of short-term tourism. At this time, the government should strictly regulate public opinions and turn crises into opportunities. The government should make full use of their official public media to serve as the “spokesperson” for industry recovery^[4], classify risks by their degree of severity, and try to find a prudent solution for industry recovery. In addition, the government must utilize the golden time to develop public opinions. Specifically, the government needs to improve the timeliness and efficiency of public opinion handling, pay attention to online messages and offer timely feedback, promptly correct improper or false public opinions and should crack down on actions that impair the development of tourism. Tourism enterprises should take the initiative to establish a public opinion governance system for public health emergencies, strengthen public safety planning for the tourism industry, strictly implement government requirements, formulate a flexible plan for population diversion and dispersion in crowded places, and clarify responsibilities, to maintain order and calm during emergencies or high-alert scenarios. Besides, tourism enterprises should fulfill their social responsibilities and rebuild market confidence by highlighting the themes of the times. The specific actions include implementing free and preferential policies for medical staff to improve corporate image and reputation, holding small festival activities to quickly restore “sense of presence” in the market, organizing training for employees to learn about public safety knowledge online, and properly protecting health and safety in public areas and of individuals, creating a positive public opinion atmosphere to form a powerful guarantee of public opinions, etc.

4.2 Focus on the Guidance of Public Opinions of Consumers and Respond to the Demands for Tourism Products

In the post-epidemic period, due to the dramatic shift in tourist consumer behavior as the attitudes, lifestyles, and demands, the decentralized non-standard tourism products and high-quality leisure living scenes will be a new trend. The government needs to take the initiative to focus on changes in demand, solve problems for enterprises, alleviate short-term pressure on enterprises, and provide policies and capital guarantees for tourist projects and product development. Affected by the epidemic, the offline tourist market is shrinking and the online tourist market has become popular. Tourism enterprises should improve their online technologies, deeply integrate cloud computing, the Internet of Things, big data, and artificial intelligence technologies. They should build big data platforms for cultural tourism, enhance the operation, management and service level of smart cultural tourism, and promote new operation modes such as online “cloud tourism”, and online entertainment, promote the development of “contactless” services and related industries, and

provide tourists with desirable products and services according to the changes in tourism supply and consumption concepts. The deep integration of technology and tourism helps to promote the supply-side structural reform and the innovation of demand-side service modes using scientific and technological means in the cultural and tourism fields. The major cultural museum venues represented by the Palace Museum were made public on the Internet and launched brilliant live interactive activities. It displayed diversified cultures online through VR/AR technology, which enhances the cultural connotation and adhesion of tourism products, and stimulates new market demands. This is bound to become a new driving force for the integrated development of culture and tourism. In addition, tourism companies should also strengthen the guidance of tourism products themed on ecological cultural education, rationally restrict the use of discourse during the public participation, highlight the ideology of the harmonious coexistence of man and nature in traditional Chinese culture, and actively develop products themed on study tourism and ecological education tourism, which will make tourists respect, love, be overwhelmed, and be a responsible “spokesperson” for tourism in the new era.

4.3 Collaborate Online and Offline Governance, and Propose Innovative Marketing Modes

Data showed that paid video platforms such as iQiyi, Youku, Tencent Video, and TikTok became popular during the epidemic. People naturally gravitated towards online cultural tourism experience, and the Internet has become the new “community” for culture and tourism consumption. In this situation, sudden changes in market demands force governments at all levels to focus on improving informationalization level, strengthening interregional communication on tourism information, establish a collaborative mechanism for data sharing, improve the level of data support, information release, and public opinion monitoring, and accelerate the interconnection of tourism data resources. In this manner, they will be able to rapidly track tourist flow and tourist trajectory, establish tourist relationship maps, accurately locate sources of public opinion propagation, and have better success at realizing the “data-driven management” and “data-driven decision” in the tourism industry. Tourism enterprises should guide tourists on ways to use new media in a rational way, create good interactive relationships, cooperate with the paid video industry, and try to use intelligent technology to optimize manpower and operating costs and realize industry transformation and upgrading. Moreover, offline life circles and online groups should be merged to guide positive public opinions, and interactive plans for different groups should be formulated to strengthen the relationship and emotional chains and contribute to the optimization and transformation of the tourism economy through the “warming projects” in the post-epidemic period.

5. Create a Clear Public Opinion Ecology and Formulate Targeted Service Measures

In the new media era, the government needs to develop and play the important role of “opinion leader” in the post-epidemic period ^[5]. For example, the government should invite well-known experts and scholars and influential public figures to make authoritative and positive comments using new media to curb negative comments and create a clear public opinion ecology for the tourism industry. In response to changes in industry demands, tourism authorities should take the lead in revising industry service standards and quality standards, strengthen the improvement of public health environment, subdivide the work of “toilet revolution” and garbage sorting, and supervise the sanitation and safety of service supply chains of catering and tourism enterprises. Governments of tourist destinations should strengthen positive coverage and publicity, promote online marketing, build online communication channels for tourists, and focus on the development of new formats that meet market demands. In addition, governments should publicize and highlight the image of health and safety to quickly eliminate the psychological shadow cast by the epidemic, and guide tourists to travel in a rational manner after the epidemic, and should not neglect tourist safety for the “eye effect”. Travel agencies and online tourism enterprises should seize market opportunities, find service breakthroughs and marketing directions based on travel characteristics, network attention, and public opinion trends, restoring energy for the recovery and development of cultural tourism of the destinations. The tourist attractions should strengthen the scientific

monitoring and timely release of eco-tourism environment background data such as bacterial content in the air, the content of negative oxygen ion, radiation index, and plant pythocidene, and strictly control the capacity of tourists using real-name registration, online booking, and other forms, to reduce tourists' concern through smart management and refined service provision.

6. Conclusion

To sum up, in the post-epidemic period, it is imperative that we realize more clearly that “the correct guidance of public opinion is the blessing of the Party and the people, and the wrong guidance of public opinion is the disaster of the Party and the people.” By any measure, all should contribute to the development of the tourism industry in their own way and with their own efforts. The government and tourism enterprises should timely analyze and predict the trend of public opinions, strengthen the awareness of hidden dangers and problems, resolutely put an end to rumors, provide guaranteed public opinions, further strengthen the confidence of tourists, and make every effort to help the recovery and high-quality development of the tourism industry.

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