

Strategic communication for resilience of urban destinations during the COVID-19 pandemic

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This paper addresses how urban Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) in Sweden, have understood their communicative role, developed communicative strategies and tactics in relation to stakeholders during the COVID-19 pandemic. The aim of this research is to develop communication strategies for urban destination resilience.

DMOs have a key role in balancing the interest of stakeholders, the management and marketing of a destination, and promotion of tourism and attracting visitors to a destination. DMOs are expected to facilitate the conditions for other organisations within a defined administrative boundary in order to meet political ambitions concerning economic and sustainable development. Hence, urban DMOs have a particularly challenging communicative task given the number of stakeholders involved in a tourist destination.

The focus of this article is organisations' strategic communication for resilience. From a destination perspective, resilience is based on individual and organisational level. And how these levels connect to different networks in the tourism system: such as businesses, government, NGO's and the community. Research concludes that the more range of networks there is, the more resilient the destination. However, resilience is not the same for all stakeholders. It is important to take into consideration: resilience for whom, what, when, where, and why? This needs to be carefully considered when developing the communicative strategies.

This research is conducted in collaboration with the Swedish network of destination management organisations (SNDMO) in a research project financed by the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth (2021-2022). During 2021, 40 semi-structured interviews with members of SNDMO were performed. Additionally, a couple of DMOs in different urban regions in Sweden have been selected as case studies for exploring problems, best practises, and more importantly as experiential arenas for testing different communicative strategies.

To deal with the difficult situation many new stakeholder collaborations have been set in motion locally. A hurdle in these collaborations is the complexity that comes with stakeholder communication that includes local businesses, residents, public organisations and so forth. Additionally the communicative role of the DMOS has expanded during the pandemic and accentuated new actors and relationships. The communicative strategies and tactics that evolved during the crisis in relation to stakeholders are characterised by handling a number of contradictions and dilemmas. The results indicate the success of the DMO is dependent on its ability to be proactive, adapt to a constantly changing environment, and use established networks for communication work.

To conclude, this ongoing project increases the understanding of communicative strategies employed for urban resilience that emerges in complex interactions between different stakeholders and the communicative role of DMOs in an extraordinary situation.