



Assessing tourists' cognitive, emotional and behavioural reactions to an unethical destination incident



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Examines tourists' reactions to an unethical destination incident.
- Applies cognitive appraisal theory to a novel tourism context.
- Highlights opposing effects of negative WOM and avoidance on destination loyalty.
- Provides support for a cognition-emotion-coping sequence.
- Offers management strategies to address unethical incidents.

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ABSTRACT

Studies of how tourists react to unethical incidents in destinations are scarce. Based on an online survey (n = 1350) and grounded in cognitive appraisal theory, this study examines people's reactions to a hypothetical breach of ethics at a tourism destination. Results from a structural equation model suggest that the more severe the incident and the greater the attribution of responsibility to agencies within the destination, the more likely it is that an individual will develop hostile emotions toward the destination. The tourist may then decide to avoid the incident emotionally or to spread negative word of mouth (WOM) about it. The study also highlights the importance of a positive destination image in reducing hostile emotions during such incidents. Moreover, tourists will be more likely to re-visit a destination if they choose to avoid engaging emotionally with an unethical incident and less likely to do so if they spread negative WOM.

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1. Introduction

The world tourism industry has been hit by numerous crises in recent times. Fostered by the pervasiveness of the internet, such crises can gain immediate negative media coverage and can cause both short- and long-term damage to a tourism destination (Carlsen & Liburd, 2008; Ritchie, 2004). Ritchie, Crotts, Zehrer, and Volsky (2013), for example, report that the 2010 *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill led to a 15.7% fall in vacation rental revenues in Central West Florida and a 16% fall in rental revenues in Southwest Florida (compared to Northeast Florida, which had the lowest probability

of oil-spill deposits, where rental revenues actually increased by 17.5%). By 2013, this had resulted in BP, the owner of the oil installation, paying US\$13.5 billion in out-of-court settlements for damages to tourism businesses. Following the crash of Flight MH17 in July 2014, meanwhile, Malaysia Airlines reported a 33% fall in bookings. Combined with the on-going effect of the unexplained loss of Flight MH370 earlier that same year, which contributed to the company making a US\$94.4 million loss for the period April–June, analysts were unsure whether the airline could achieve a full financial recovery without making significant structural changes, including job losses of up to 25% (BBC News, 2014). While the impacts of such crises tend to be short-lived, with visitor numbers and revenues often recovering quickly after media attention has moved away from the events (Faulkner & Vikulov, 2001), longer-term impacts may also ensue, including damage to corporate reputations, the downgrading of the destination image

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and the increased ownership of economic resources by outside interests (Alvarez & Campo, 2014; Beirman, 2003; Insch & Avraham, 2014).

Tourism researchers have tended to focus primarily on externally imposed crisis events, including those with fundamentally natural causes, such as earthquakes and floods (Cioccio & Michael, 2007; Faulkner & Vikulov, 2001; Huang & Min, 2002; Hystad & Keller, 2008), and those that are essentially man-made, such as terrorist attacks (Chu, 2008; Goodrich, 2002) and financial crises (Okumus, Altinay, & Arasli, 2005; Wang, 2009). In comparison, internally imposed crisis events, which are caused by managerial or institutional faults, have largely been neglected. As noted by Faulkner (2001), the distinction is important since the implications of externally imposed crises are likely to be quite different to those of internal, self-inflicted ones. While both can be assumed to have negative effects on the attractiveness of a destination, an internal crisis may be more harmful due to tourists assigning blame to the destination itself rather than to unforeseen, uncontrollable circumstances. Following Weiner's (1985) attribution theory, this paper argues that tourists are more likely to attribute responsibility for what they perceive to be external crises to forces outside of a destination's sphere of control, which generally leads to positive outcomes such as forgiveness and maintained loyalty. If the incident is deemed to be an internal crisis, however, responsibility is likely to be attributed to the destination and its constituent organisations, which is more likely to result in damaging behaviour on the part of tourists, including terminating their loyalty to the destination and spreading negative word of mouth (WOM) (Lee, 2004; Weiner, 1985).

This paper looks specifically at what we propose be termed *unethical destination incident*. An unethical incident is defined here as a crisis event that is perceived by stakeholders to be internally imposed (i.e. self-inflicted by one or more destination organisations) and unethical in nature. As noted in the literature (e.g. Cavicchi & Santini, 2011; Lee, 2004) and accounted for in the present research design, unethical destination incidents can also be expected to receive extensive negative media publicity and thus to reach a global audience of potential tourists.

As well as there being a relative paucity of research on unethical destination incidents, the empirical evidence with regard to tourists' reactions to crisis events more generally remains largely unexplored. The extant literature focuses mainly on managerial strategies, such as the development of crisis communication plans and internal recovery processes (e.g. Blackman & Ritchie, 2008; Evans & Elphick, 2005; Ritchie, 2004), while tourists' perceptions of crisis events, along with the resulting behavioural changes, have not been widely considered (Carlsen & Liburd, 2008). While several authors have suggested that both external and internal crises events negatively affect tourists' behaviour, the evidence presented to support this remains thus far largely anecdotal or descriptive (e.g. Henderson, 2003; Pforr & Hosie, 2008; Ritchie, 2004; Ritchie et al., 2013).

This paper attempts to address this shortcoming in the literature by drawing on cognitive appraisal theory (Lazarus, 1982, 1991a, 1991b) to analyse empirically how tourists' cognitive and emotional evaluations affect their immediate coping strategies and

future behaviour, as illustrated in Fig. 1. Cognitive appraisal theory suggests that an individual's reaction to an event follows a set cognition-emotion-behaviour sequence (for a recent review, see Moors, Ellsworth, Scherer, & Frijda, 2013). Applied to the context of this study, the theory predicts that tourists' first reaction to an unethical incident will be to engage in *cognitive evaluations*, which are represented here by their perceptions of the degree of severity of the unethical incident, the image that is publicised by the destination and on whom they place the blame (i.e. responsibility attribution). Subsequently, an *emotional response* occurs. In the case of an unethical destination incident, these could be hostile emotions such as anger, contempt and disgust, which then lead to the formation of certain behavioural intentions. In this paper, we distinguish between immediate intentions, conceptualised as two different *coping behaviours* – 'avoidance' and 'negative WOM' – and subsequent future re-visiting intentions – here equated to the concept of *destination loyalty*, as suggested by Chen and Tsai (2007) and Oppermann (2000). Studies in the corporate crisis literature have already shown the applicability of cognitive appraisal theory to unethical corporate incidents (Jin, 2009; Jin & Hong, 2010; Kim & Cameron, 2011) and these are adapted here to a destination context.

The principal contribution of this study is to provide a validated empirical model of how tourists react to an unethical destination incident. This, in turn, will be useful to destination management organisations and tourism businesses by informing both pre-emptive and post-incident strategies. Specifically, the present findings highlight which cognitive factors have the greatest influence on tourists' evaluations of unethical incidents and should therefore be targeted in managerial response strategies. Furthermore, the paper provides guidance for managers as to which coping strategies should be encouraged and discouraged in order to maintain tourists' destination loyalty.

2. Literature review

The literature review that follows is divided into three sections. The first considers the theoretical background to the study, which focuses on individuals' reactions to crisis events and is based on cognitive appraisal theory. The second then considers how individuals' cognitive appraisal is translated into short-term behaviour in the form of coping strategies. These can take the form, for example, of avoidance or negative WOM intentions. The third section then examines longer-term behaviour, specifically destination loyalty.

2.1. Cognitive and emotional reactions

The conceptual model used in this study is based on Lazarus' (1991b) cognitive appraisal framework. As shown in Fig. 1, the sequence begins with the *cognitive evaluation*, which is modelled here using the variable **responsibility attribution**. This describes the cognitive association of the cause of an incident to one or more entities (Coombs, 2007). This can be said to equate to the concept of blame, i.e. the share of guilt that can be attributed to an entity whose action is deemed ethically or socially wrong (Alicke, 2000). **Severity**, meanwhile, is related to the perceived amount of damage that is caused by the incident (Coombs & Holladay, 2002) and the degree to which established expectations have been breached by the culprit (Fediuk, Coombs, & Botero, 2010). It is also related to the estimated likelihood of the negative impact concerned being suffered by the individual making the determination (Tennen & Affleck, 1990; Walster, 1966). The expectations that an individual has of the supposed culprit are operationalised in this paper through the concept of **destination image**, which connotes the sum of a tourist's subjective beliefs, ideas, expectations and

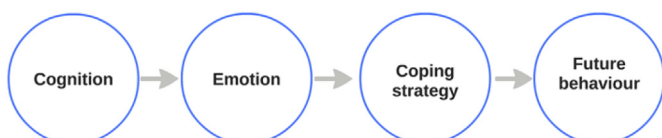


Fig. 1. Sequence of a tourist's reactions to an unethical destination incident.

impressions connected to a destination (Chon, 1991; Murphy, Pritchard, & Smith, 2000).

With regard to the second dimension, the *emotional response*, this paper draws on Izard's (1977) hostility triad of emotions – namely anger, contempt and disgust – which has recently been shown to be experienced by consumers in the context of an unethical incident (Grappi, Romani, & Bagozzi, 2013). Evidence suggests that these emotions are likely to occur when attributing blame (Smith & Ellsworth, 1985) and that they are directly linked to coping strategies (Lazarus, 1991b). **Anger** is generally described as a retrospective emotion which is elicited when an offense is deemed to affect oneself, one's social relations or even the public at large (Keltner, Ellsworth, & Edwards, 1993; Lazarus, 1991b; Nabi, 1999; Romani, Grappi, & Bagozzi, 2013; Turner, 2007; Yuksel, Yuksel, & Bilim, 2010). **Contempt** refers to the negative evaluation of others in terms of their socially or ethical conduct (Rozin, Lowery, Imada, & Haidt, 1999), and **disgust** describes an emotion experienced when 'ethics of divinity' (such as assaults on human dignity) are violated (Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007). Since recent research in moral psychology has emphasised their strong conceptual and psychometric overlap (Hutcherson & Gross, 2011), these three emotions are conceptualised as a single factor (a 'triad') and hereafter referred to as hostility emotions (see also Rozin et al., 1999).

Attribution theory holds that if an unethical incident is deemed to be due to forces over which the destination concerned had significant control, those affected will experience greater anger than if the incident was ascribed to forces over which the organisation had limited control (Han, Lerner, & Keltner, 2007; Roseman, 1991; Weiner, 1985). Psychological experiments on subjective emotional experiences provide support for this relationship (Aquino, Tripp, & Bies, 2006; Keltner et al., 1993; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985). Likewise, several authors in the crisis communication literature have found that assigning a greater share of responsibility to a business organisation increases consumers' anger across different scenarios including unethical incidents such as children's safety, technical product recalls and airplane crashes (An, 2011; Choi & Lin, 2009b; Coombs & Holladay, 2007; Jorgensen, 1996; McDonald, Sparks, & Glendon, 2010). In comparison, scholars have shown that when contempt and disgust are elicited during an unethical incident they may affect subsequent anti-corporate behaviour such as boycotts and public protests (Grappi et al., 2013; Romani et al., 2013). Taken together, the following is hypothesised: (see Fig. 2)

H1. The more fully a tourist attributes blame for the occurrence of an unethical incident to the destination, the stronger will be her or his hostility emotions towards that destination

With regard to the effect of severity on subsequent emotions, Lee (2004) explored the link between sympathy for the victims and perceived severity in the context of an unethical incident involving an airplane crash and did not find a significant relationship. Studies from both the service and organisational psychology literature indicate, however, that the perceived severity of a negative incident increases the strength of observers' negative emotions (Aquino et al., 2006; Dunning, O'Casey, & Pecotich, 2004; Grégoire, Laufer, & Tripp, 2010). A number of studies in social psychology have also shown that the perceived severity of the consequences of an incident enhances the anger experienced by those affected, which strengthens the perception that negative emotions are appropriate in the given social context (Roseman, 1996; Weber, 2004). Taken together, it can be assumed that such a relationship will also hold in a scenario relating to an unethical destination incident:

H2. The more severe a tourist perceives the unethical incident to be, the stronger will be the hostile emotions she or he experiences

Moreover, the literature on corporate reputation demonstrates that a favourable attitude towards a corporate image can insure companies against consumers' hostile reactions to a crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2008; Kim & Cameron, 2011; Lyon & Cameron, 2004). Kim and Cameron (2011), for example, show that attitudes towards a company are negatively related to consumer anger in an unethical incident regarding a mobile-phone battery explosion. Likewise, Utz, Schultz and Glocka's (2013) study on a nuclear-power-plant scandal, Choi and Lin's (2009a) findings in relation to a scandal involving the safety of Matell's toy products, and Pace, Fediuk and Botero's (2010) research on fraud by an estate agent, all confirm a negative relationship. More recently, Van der Meer and Verhoeven (2014) found that the amount of anger experienced had a significant effect on corporate reputation in an unethical incident concerning a product recall of cars and bikes. Consequently, the following is hypothesised:

H3. The more favourable a tourist perceives a destination image to be, the less strong will be the hostile emotions she or he experiences

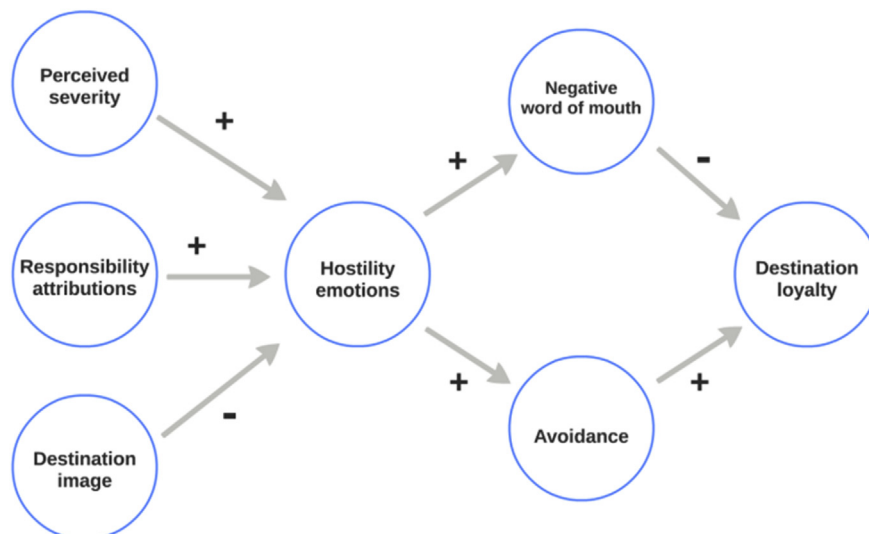


Fig. 2. Model of tourists' reactions toward an unethical destination incident.

2.2. Coping strategies

Researchers have analysed various behavioural reactions to unethical incidents, including social support-seeking (Jin & Hong, 2010), requests for additional information (Lyon & Cameron, 2004), intentions to punish (Sweetin, Knowles, Summey, & McQueen, 2013), boycotting (Sen, Gürhan-Canli, & Morwitz, 2001), spreading negative WOM (Liu, Austin, & Jin, 2011) and protest behaviour (Grappi et al., 2013). Drawing on cognitive appraisal theory (Lazarus, 1982, 1991a) and recent suggestions by Jin (2009) and Jin and Hong (2010), this study suggests that such behaviour can be meaningfully investigated within the framework of *coping strategies*. Simply defined, the concept of coping refers to the actions taken by individuals when dealing with stressful experiences (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). Recent research has identified a two-dimensional coping model as being the most reliable construct (Duhachek & Oakley, 2007; Folkman & Lazarus, 1988), which distinguishes between inwardly focused and outwardly focused coping (Chebat, Davidow, & Codjovi, 2005; Suls & Fletcher, 1985). The former has an emotion focus, while the latter has a problem focus (Folkman & Lazarus, 1988; Zourrig, Chebat, & Toffoli, 2009).

As such, when tourists experience hostile emotions, they may decide to concentrate on trying to manage their emotions by physically or mentally distancing themselves from the incident (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989). Such **avoidance** behaviour allows the individual emotional relief and can be defined as consumers' attempt to regulate their emotions through the mental or physical detachment from a harmful or distressing situation (Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986). Avoidance strategies are often chosen when a stressful situation appears to be overwhelming (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987) or is deemed unchangeable (Folkman et al., 1986). Recent studies by Jin (2009) and Jin and Hong (2010) have established that avoidance coping occurs in a crisis context.

Alternatively, the tourist may elect to concentrate on the problem and warn others about it through the use of **negative WOM**. In the crisis literature this is generally defined as the making of negative attribution statements about an assumed culprit (Coombs & Holladay, 2007). Negative WOM has been argued to be particularly harmful to the blamed culprit as it is often the most credible (Smith & Vogt, 1995) and contagious (Ward & Ostrom, 2006) form of damaging publicity. Negative WOM represents a problem-focused coping strategy which aims to make an external impact by warning other tourists.

Importantly, research has shown that consumers may engage in multiple coping behaviours, rather than exclusively focussing on one strategy (Barnes, Brown, & Osterman, 2009; Endler & Parker, 1990; Folkman et al., 1986). A qualitative study by Tuzovic (2010), for instance, has shown that both avoidance and negative WOM are likely strategies to be chosen by airline travellers after a service failure. In the context of the present study, it is argued that tourists may, for example, choose to try to avoid the unethical destination incident in order to regulate their hostile emotions (adopting an emotion-focused orientation) but will nevertheless warn others about the incident when these emotions are triggered in social contexts such as when discussing future holiday plans with family and friends (adopting a problem-focused orientation).

With regard to the hypothesised relationships in the proposed model, several authors provide evidence that hostile emotions increase a consumer's tendency to spread negative WOM after an unethical incident. Grappi et al. (2013), for instance, show that anger, disgust and contempt foster consumers' negative WOM in the context of both ethical and social transgressions. Likewise, Coombs and Holladay (2007), as well as McDonald et al. (2010), show that a consumer's anger positively influences her or his

negative communication behaviour. Similar results were obtained from recent studies by Lindenmeier, Schleer, and Priel (2012), who investigate a corporate scandal in relation to a supermarket spying on its employees, and Utz, Schultz, and Glocka (2013), who looked at corporate misconduct in a nuclear power-plant. The following hypothesis is put forward:

H4. The stronger the hostile emotions a tourist experiences, the more she or he will prefer to employ negative WOM as a coping strategy

Given that the only study that has focused on the relationship between emotions and avoidance coping behaviour looked exclusively at fear (Jin, 2009), other fields of study will be drawn upon for the next hypothesis. Experiments in the field of moral psychology, for instance, have shown that negative emotions prompt avoidance behaviour with regard to a range of socio-moral violations in an interpersonal context, such as theft and impoliteness (Folkman & Lazarus, 1988; Hutcherson & Gross, 2011; Maltby et al., 2008). Moreover, and in contrast to Jin's (2009) findings, Barnes et al. (2009) provide evidence that anger, rather than fear, had a positive effect on avoidance behaviour in a social transgression scenario. Furthermore, research in consumer psychology has shown that negative emotions enhance avoidance behaviour when consumers experience an airport service failure (e.g. long queues) (Menon & Dubé, 2007) and when facing difficult trade-off decisions while purchasing a car (between safety and convenience attributes) (Luce, 1998). Taken together, the following can be hypothesised in the context of an unethical destination incident:

H5. The stronger the hostile emotions a tourist experiences, the more she or he will prefer to employ avoidance as a coping strategy

2.3. Future behaviour: destination loyalty

While coping can be seen as intermediate behavioural tendency (Roseman, 1991), **destination loyalty** represents the outcome variable of tourists' future re-visit behaviour (Chen & Chen, 2010; Chi & Qu, 2008; Zabkar, Brenvcivc, & Dmitrovic, 2010). It can be measured in terms of actual behaviour or expressed intention. This study adopts the latter of these and defines destination loyalty as a favourable attitude towards a destination leading to an intention to revisit that destination in the future, although not necessarily at a specified time (e.g. the following year). This differs from the approach of, for example, Chen and Gursoy (2001) who define destination loyalty as the willingness to recommend the destination to others (which is equivalent to spreading positive WOM), as well as Chi and Qu (2008), who use both re-visit intention and recommendation intention to measure destination loyalty.

A tourist's intention to re-visit a destination that has experienced an unethical incident is determined by her or his immediate choice of coping strategies. With regard to the use of negative WOM, related consumer psychology research shows that individuals strive to maintain a consistent social self-image (Higgins & Rholes, 1978; Kim, Naylor, Sivadas, & Sugumaran, 2015; Nyer & Gopinath, 2005). Therefore, having warned others about the unethical incident through the use of negative WOM, a tourist would typically find it hard to justify re-visiting the destination. This tendency is confirmed also in the service-recovery literature, which has found that consumers who are dissatisfied with a company and have spread negative WOM about it will subsequently be significantly less likely to make a purchase from that company again (Blodgett, Wakefield, & Barnes, 1995; Grégoire, Tripp, & Legoux, 2009; Wangenheim, 2005). Studies on boycotting behaviour

during corporate scandals have also shown that previously loyal customers can decide to stop purchasing from a company following negative WOM interactions with their friends and acquaintances (Einwiller, Fedorikhin, Johnson, & Kamins, 2006; Grappi et al., 2013). Finally, Coombs and Holladay (2007) have shown that negative WOM after an unethical incident can have a negative impact on travellers' purchase intention. As such, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H6. The more likely a tourist is to use negative WOM as coping strategy, the greater will be the negative effect on her or his destination loyalty.

Following Higgins' (1997) suggestions on the role of avoidance in self-regulation theory, tourists who choose to avoid and deny hostile emotions elicited by an unethical destination incident may be expected to remain loyal to their destination of preference. Moreover, cognitive dissonance theory (e.g. Festinger, 1962; Koller & Salzberger, 2007) would suggest that tourists, having decided to avoid acting upon an unethical incident, are likely to be even more loyal than before the incident in an attempt to justify why they invested their cognitive resources into ignoring the negative publicity. Indeed, Whelan and Dawar (2014) have shown that, depending on the strength of their perceived attachment to a service provider, some consumers may choose a post-crisis avoidance strategy which would allow them continuing their relationship with the provider. However, Frank and Schvaneveldt (2014), suggest that tourists would avoid visiting the destination following an unethical destination incident. Other authors (e.g. Krippendorf, 1987; Yoon & Uysal, 2005) refer to tourists' self-oriented motivation during their travel choices, arguing that avoidance allows for and enhances routine behaviour in preference of having to undergo a new, uncertainty-inducing decision-making process. Taken together, the existing conceptual suggestions and interdisciplinary findings point toward the following:

H7. The more likely a tourist is to use avoidance as coping strategy, the greater will be the positive effect on her or his destination loyalty

3. Methodology

3.1. Data collection and sample

An online survey containing a fictional scenario of an unethical destination incident was used to collect the data required to test the seven hypotheses noted above. Prior to implementation, a two-stage pilot test was conducted. First, qualitative feedback on the survey design, logical flow and conceptual coherency was gathered from eight marketing academics and 11 postgraduate students. The estimation of content and face validity by experts is commonly recommended in survey design (e.g. Burns et al., 2008) and has shown satisfactory results in marketing and electronic commerce research (e.g. John, 1984; Liu & Arnett, 2000). Changes were accordingly made to the survey instrument with regard to the personalisation of the scenario and scale content, most notably the use of 'piped text'. This was achieved using Qualtrics survey software, which enabled the researchers to ask respondents to indicate a holiday destination which they have previously visit and to which they would be likely to fly again, after which their named destination would automatically be inserted into the scenario, as well as into relevant scale items. Second, a pilot test with 34 online respondents was performed in order to identify further technical and linguistic deficiencies. This led to the addition of key

definitions at the start of the survey and the elimination of technical jargon.

For the main survey, the study employed a non-probability, convenience sampling approach, targeted at UK-based university students. The online survey generated a total of 1349 responses, of which 11 were removed since they did not indicate a meaningful destination in the piped text box. A further 61 respondents were excluded because they indicated 'never' to travel by plane to the question on their air travel frequency. Of the remaining 1277 surveyed travellers, 53% were from the UK and 62% were between 18 and 35 years old with an almost equal gender split (52% male and 48% female). A substantial majority of respondents (77%) indicated that they travelled by plane at least once per year (see Table 1 for details).

3.2. Survey design and measurements

Survey respondents were first presented with a number of questions relating to their air travelling behaviour, followed by the piped text question on their destination of preference. A statement at the beginning informed respondents that the purpose of the study was to investigate consumers' reactions towards an incident involving security scans at an airport. Afterwards, a mock news report was shown which announced the introduction of body scanners at all airports in the respondent's chosen destination (see Appendix 1). Next, a second news article was shown describing an incident at one of the airports at their chosen destination. This involved a male security staff member making inappropriate comments about a female passenger's body as she passed through the scanner (see Appendix 2). Both news items were designed in close relation to real-life reports taken from UK newspapers in order to increase the realism of the design (a practice proposed by Gao, Knight, Zhang, & Mather, 2013; L'Etang, Falkheimer, & Lugo, 2007; among others). Responses to a control item for realism which read 'The described scenario is realistic' (Liao, 2007) indicated that a majority of survey participants agreed to its realism (Mean = 3.6, SD = 1 on a 5-point scale; 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Furthermore, respondents strong inclination to attribute the responsibility for the unethical incident to the destination (Mean = 4.1, SD = .88 on a 5-point scale; 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) corroborates the proposed crucial

Table 1
Sample characteristics.

	Frequency (s)	Percentage %
Gender		
Male	660	51.7
Female	617	48.3
Age		
18–21	281	22
22–34	788	61.7
35–44	114	8.9
45–54	53	4.2
55–64	23	1.8
65 and over	10	.8
Prefer not to answer	8	.6
Country of origin		
Great Britain	673	52.7
Rest of Europe	59	4.6
China	162	12.7
Other	180	14.1
Prefer not to answer	203	15.9
Air travel frequency		
Less than once a year	290	22.7
Once a year	329	25.8
2–3 times per year	409	32.0
4–10 times per year	198	15.5
More than 10 times per year	51	4.0

element of the unethical incident being perceived as self-inflicted. In addition, the incident was largely perceived to be of an unethical nature (Mean = 3.9, SD = .93 on a 5-point scale; 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) which verifies the unethical aspect of the destination incident.

After they had been given a chance to read the two news items, respondents were asked to report on their cognitive and emotional reactions, coping strategies and future behaviour. All questionnaire items were based on previously verified measures and anchored by five-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). For the cognitive dimension, crisis severity was measured using a one-item scale developed by Van de Calseyde, Keren, and Zeelenberg (2013), crisis responsibility (one item) and destination image (three items) were taken from Kim and Cameron (2011). The three hostility emotions were measured using three items each, with anger taken from Thomas and McGarty (2009). Both contempt and disgust were adopted from Grappi et al. (2013). The two coping strategies were measured using three items each: avoidance was based on Folkman and Lazarus' (1988) revised coping questionnaire (detachment subscale), and negative WOM was adopted from Grégoire and Fisher (2006). Finally, tourists' future behaviour (i.e. destination loyalty) was operationalised using Bosnjak, Sirgy, Hellriegel and Maurer's (2011) scale for re-visiting intentions (two items).

4. Results

Data analysis was conducted using AMOS 22 and the two-stage structural equation modelling (SEM) approach recommended by Anderson and Gerbing (1988). Accordingly, a confirmatory factor analysis examining the quality of research measures was conducted prior to testing the hypothesised regression paths suggested in the proposed structural model.

4.1. Measurement model

A confirmatory factor analysis based on a seven-factor model was specified, with anger, disgust and contempt loading onto the second-order factor 'hostility emotions', as suggested by recent studies on consumers' reactions to corporate misconduct scenarios (Grappi et al., 2013; Liu et al., 2011). An exploratory factor analysis supported a one-factor solution with 68% of variance being explained through principal component analysis, and a Kaiser Meyer Olkin value of .95 as well as a significant Bartlett test of sphericity confirmed the factorability of the correlation matrix. In addition, the error terms for the three hostility emotions were allowed to correlate since they relate to the same latent variable and an alteration did not lead to significant changes in structural parameter estimates (see Bagozzi, 1983; Fornell, 1983). Finally, loading of the single indicator items 'responsibility attribution' and 'perceived severity' were fixed to 1 and their error term to 0 as suggested by Mackenzie (2001) and Lam, Shankar, Erramilli, and Murthy (2004).

The results indicate that the measurement model provided a good fit to the data as all fit indices met the threshold criteria recommended by Anderson and Gerbing (1988), with a χ^2 of 609 (df = 165; $\chi^2/df = 3.693$), a comparative fit index (CFI) of .973, a Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) of .965, an adjusted goodness of fit index (AGFI) of .933, and a root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) of .046. As indicated in Table 2, construct reliability can be considered adequate since the Cronbach's alpha values for all scales were above the recommended threshold of .7, and the composite reliability (CR) scores were above .6. Convergent validity was acceptable since all factor loadings always exceeded .7 and the .5 threshold for the related average variance extracted (AVE) was met for all measures (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). In addition, all factor correlations were below .8, and the AVE value for each construct was always greater than the squared

correlation estimate between any two factors, suggesting discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

4.2. Structural model

Structural equation modelling and the maximum likelihood estimator were then used to test the hypothesised relationships. In accordance with past research in tourism (e.g. Boley, Magnini, & Tuten, 2013; Meleddu, Paci, & Pulina, 2015), age, gender and country of origin were included in the model as control variables. With a χ^2 of 1077 (df = 221; $\chi^2/df = 4.837$), a comparative fit index (CFI) of .948, a Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) of .935, an adjusted goodness of fit index (AGFI) of .907, and a root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) of .055, results indicated an acceptable fit. However, modification indices suggested that the addition of two paths – the effect from destination image onto avoidance and onto destination loyalty – would significantly improve the model fit. Since both effects have received empirical evidence in the past (e.g. Bigne, Sanchez, & Sanchez, 2001; Cleeren, Dekimpe, & Helsen, 2008; Hoffmann & Müller, 2009), the two paths were added to the model and led to excellent fit statistics ($\chi^2 = 784$, df = 219; $\chi^2/df = 3.582$), (CFI = .966, TLI = .957, AGFI = .927, RMSEA = .045). Since the difference in chi-squares ($\Delta\chi^2 = 293$; $\Delta df = 2$, $p < .001$) supports the re-specification (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988), further calculations were based on the re-specified model.

As indicated in Table 3, all hypothesised relationships were supported. Tourists' cognitive reactions were found to be significant predictors of hostility emotions, with severity ($\beta = .62$) and responsibility attribution ($\beta = .19$) showing a positive effect, while destination image exhibited a negative effect ($\beta = -.08$). Likewise, hostility emotions significantly enhanced both avoidance ($\beta = .21$) and negative WOM ($\beta = .55$) coping strategies. With regards to tourists' future intentions, the structural paths show that avoidance coping has a positive impact on destination loyalty ($\beta = .69$), while negative WOM has a negative impact ($\beta = -.16$). None of the control variables employed in this study had a significant effect, apart from gender which positively affected avoidance ($\beta = .11$, $p < .001$), and country of origin which negatively impacted on destination loyalty ($\beta = -.11$, $p < .001$) and positively impacted on hostility, negative WOM and avoidance ($\beta = .13$; $\beta = .19$; $\beta = .12$ respectively, all at $p < .001$). The significance or direction of any hypothesised relationships was not altered by the inclusion of the control variables. Overall, the explained variance for destination loyalty was 71%, for negative WOM 39%, for avoidance 22% and for hostility emotions 53%.

Following Anderson and Gerbing (1988), the proposed model was further tested by identifying a competing model that addressed conceptual alternatives. Since the cognition-emotion sequence as suggested by cognitive appraisal theorists has been criticised by authors who propose that emotions are antecedent to cognitions (e.g. Kim & Cameron, 2011; Loewenstein, Weber, Hsee, & Welch, 2001), the structural positions of tourists' cognitive and emotional reactions were exchanged in the competing model (signifying an emotion-cognition-coping sequence). The competing model did not, however, indicate a better fit, since the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) increased from 946 to 1264 (Akaike, 1987), the RMSEA increased to .56 and the χ^2/df increased to 4.99 (Gelbrich & Roschk, 2011; Kumar & Sharma, 1999). Hence, the original model was confirmed as the one providing the better fit.

5. Discussion

5.1. Theoretical implications

The results of this study advance the literature on tourism crises

Table 2
Measurement items and psychometric properties.

Construct	α	CR	AVE
Anger	.88	.88	.70
I feel angry about the incident			
I feel irritated about the incident			
I feel outraged about the incident			
Disgust	.85	.85	.66
I feel disgusted about the incident			
I feel distaste about the incident			
I feel revulsion about the incident			
Contempt	.86	.86	.67
I feel contemptuous about the incident			
I feel scornful about the incident			
I feel disdainful about the incident			
Scandal severity			
I perceive the described incident to be severe			
Destination image	.85	.85	.65
I perceive the destination's image to be good			
I perceive the destination's image to be favourable			
I perceive the destination's image to be pleasant			
Responsibility attribution			
The destination should be blamed for the incident			
Avoidance	.75	.75	.60
I would go on as if nothing has happened			
I would accept it, since nothing can be done			
Negative WOM	.87	.75	.69
I would complain about the destination to other people			
I would say negative things about the destination to other people			
I would recommend other people not to book flights to the destination			
Destination loyalty	.76	.67	.61
I would consider returning to the destination for a holiday			
It is highly likely that I would return to the destination on holiday in the near future			

Notes: The first item was always set to fix the scale; 'the destination' was replaced by the actual name of the destination provided in the piped text box.

Table 3
Structural parameter estimates.

Hypothesised path	β^a	t-value	Result
H1: Responsibility attribution + → Hostility emotions	.19	8.20***	Supported
H2: Scandal severity + → Hostility emotions	.62	24.80***	Supported
H3: Destination image – → Hostility emotions	–.08	–3.24***	Supported
H4: Hostility emotions + → Negative WOM	.55	18.79***	Supported
H5: Hostility emotions + → Avoidance	.21	6.53***	Supported
H6: Negative word of mouth – → Destination loyalty	–.16	–5.70***	Supported
H7: Avoidance + → Destination loyalty	.69	16.94***	Supported

^a Standardised path coefficients; ***p < .001.

by making several theoretical contributions. Most importantly, the study offers a conceptual and empirically verified framework which exemplifies tourists' reactions to an unethical destination incident. Since the crisis literature has so far largely failed to address the perspective of tourists (Carlsen & Liburd, 2008), the present study is significant in that it provides scholars with a theoretical foundation on which to conduct further research. In applying it to the new paradigm of an unethical destination incident, our work expands the use of cognitive appraisal theory, which has so far been limited to research on travellers' holiday choices and experiential tourism activities (e.g. Chen & Phou, 2013; Faullant, Matzler, & Mooradian, 2011). Since the conducted model comparison suggests a cognition–emotion sequence to be a better representation of tourists' post-incident reactions compared to an emotion–cognition sequence suggested by others (Kim & Cameron, 2011), the study also contributes to the conceptual validity of cognitive appraisal theory in a tourism context.

In relation to the confirmation of all hypothesised relationships, the study opens the way for future work to explore additional influences within the suggested cognition–emotion–behaviour framework. For instance, researchers may wish to test additional cognitive elements which impact on tourists' post-incident emotions. While the model presented here explained 53% of variance in

relation to tourists' hostile emotions, research on corporate misconducts indicates that factors such as whether the destination has experienced similar incidents in the past (Coombs, 2004) and whether visual representations of the respective victim are presented (Coombs & Holladay, 2011) may further contribute to hostile reactions. While the variable *hostile emotions* used in this study has the support of most extensive empirical evidence among the limited studies of affect-based crisis reactions, future research may also investigate other relevant variables within the human-emotional repertoire, such as sympathy (Lee, 2004), anxiety (Whelan & Dawar, 2014) and the recently introduced *schadenfreude* (Coombs & Holladay, 2005). Such non-hostile emotions are likely to have a stronger effect on avoidance than on negative WOM (Jin, Liu, Anagondahalli, & Austin, 2014) and thus would provide a balanced addition to the finding revealed here that hostile emotions have a stronger influence on negative WOM (.55, p < .001) than on avoidance (.21, p < .001). Similarly, a feasible extension of the framework presented here would be the inclusion of additional coping strategies that tourists rely on when facing an unethical destination incident. This study followed Duhachek and Oakley (2007) recommendation of using a two-dimensional coping frame, which was able to explain 71% of the variance for tourists' destination loyalty: yet alternative post-incident strategies such as

informational support-seeking and opposition in form of aggressive action would also have potential and exploring them would be a worthwhile undertaking.

As well as providing an overall model of tourists' post-incident reactions, two inherent aspects are of particular conceptual interest. First, the findings presented here suggest that negative WOM and avoidance coping have opposing effect on tourists' destination loyalty. The decision to avoid an unethical destination incident enhances tourists' intentions to return to a destination, while the opposite is true for those who would rather spread negative WOM. Although both effects have already been evidenced as customers' reactions toward a service failure (e.g. Grégoire et al., 2009; Zourrig et al., 2009), the present study is the first to provide empirical evidence of an opposite effect on loyalty behaviour. The present findings further help to clarify scholarly disagreement on whether avoidance has a positive (Yoon & Uysal, 2005) or negative (Frank & Schvaneveldt, 2014) effect on loyalty, and contribute to the limited research in the marketing literature on negative WOM as an antecedent of customer (dis)loyalty (Matos & Rossi, 2008). Considering the relative paucity of existing research on both of these coping behaviours in a tourism context, future research should also investigate their inter-relationship in order to uncover, for instance, whether they complement each other and, if so, in what sequence they may occur. This study found a positive correlation between the two coping behaviours ($r = .22$, $p < .001$) and thus hints towards a complementary relationship, supporting similar findings observed by Grégoire et al. (2009) in relation to a service failure for a restaurant scenario. Another interesting finding in relation is that the enhancing effect of avoidance on destination loyalty was much stronger than the detrimental impact of negative WOM (β of negative WOM = $-.16$, β of avoidance = $.69$). It may be speculated that the strong effect of avoidance coping is related to tourists' cognitive dissonance strategies (Frey, 1982): yet an exploratory investigation of the underlying psychological mechanism, perhaps using in-depth group interviews, would seem a promising future undertaking. Avoidance, in this context, seems to be of particular potential since hostile emotions and destination image were only able to explain 22% of its variance. This encourages the empirical investigation of additional antecedents such as empathetic concern for others (Richman, DeWall, & Wolff, 2015) or perceived stress (Anshel & Kaissidis, 1997).

A second important contribution of this study is the variation in effect strength among the cognitive antecedents as illustrated in our model. The strong effect of tourists' perceived severity ($\beta = .62$) on hostility emotions in comparison to those of the destination's image ($\beta = -.08$) and the attribution of responsibility ($\beta = .19$) suggests that the perception of crisis severity plays the central role in tourists' reactions toward an unethical incident. This contrasts to propositions made previously in the crisis communication literature (e.g. Cho & Gower, 2006; Jeong, 2009) which – based on attribution theory – assigned the key role to consumers' responsibility perceptions. In other words, the findings of this study imply that it may be more important how severe the destination incident is perceived to be rather than how much the destination is considered to blame for it. Likewise, while the present results confirm previous studies on corporate misconducts suggesting that a positive image is an important element in consumers' reactions to an unethical incident (e.g. Benoit, 1997), severity perceptions are found to play a larger role in shaping hostile emotions. These findings have important implications for future research, since they spotlight severity perceptions as the dominant cognitive influence in tourists' post-incident reactions. As severity has so far tended to be somewhat overlooked in favour of image and responsibility perceptions, a first step may be to draw on other disciplines, such as the social psychology literature. The meta-analysis of the

relationship between severity and responsibility by Robbennolt (2000) may help to add further clarity to understanding the inter-relationships between these two cognitive dimensions. Likewise, research on the role of severity in moral transgressions (Fincham, Jackson, & Beach, 2005; Wohl & McGrath, 2007) and service failures (Chang, Tsai, Wong, Wang, & Cho, 2015) may offer additional insights into the potential components which shape tourists' severity perceptions.

The findings of this study also highlight the utility of addressing the issue of crisis and, more specifically, post-incident management techniques, research on which have thus far been restricted to conceptual propositions in the tourism management literature (Carlsen & Liburd, 2008). Researchers may, in particular, draw on experimental designs as found in the product-harm crisis literature (e.g. Cleeren et al., 2008; Dutta & Pullig, 2011). Related studies could investigate, for instance, the adequacy of communication strategies that are intended to influence post-incident reactions of tourists, thereby addressing some of the managerial opportunities outlined below.

5.2. Managerial implications

The results of this study have several practical implications for destination stakeholder organisations – including tourism service providers, destination marketing organisations and other public- and third-sector bodies – in relation to internal pre-emptive and post-crisis strategies.

Given that destination loyalty is often regarded to be the key success metric in the tourism industry (Gursoy, Chen & Chi, 2014; San Martin, Collado & Rodriguez del Bosque, 2013; Yoon & Uysal, 2005), our model provides an overview of factors which influence tourists' re-visiting intentions when encountering an unethical destination incident. Most importantly, the empirical findings suggest that tourists' initial reaction is to undergo a mental evaluation of the incident. This subsequently shapes their emotions, these influence their immediate behavioural intentions and these affect their longer-term loyalty. Consequently, it is recommended that destination stakeholders concentrate their efforts on developing and implementing cognitive strategies to manage unethical destination incidents. In particular, the study presented here indicates that tourists' perceptions of the destination's image, the severity of an incident and the attribution of responsibility for its occurrence determine their initial evaluation of the incident. Of the three, the perceived severity of an incident has the strongest impact on tourists and should therefore be the primary target of destinations' recovery efforts. Studies on corporate misconduct have already shown that consumers' severity perceptions can be influenced by targeted communication efforts such as providing explanations or apologies (Rowland & Jerome, 2004; Sims, 2009). These seem a feasible option to employ: well-designed communication may help to defuse hostile emotional responses which can in turn mitigate unhelpful coping behaviour and ultimately help to maintain the loyalty of those concerned.

The study results also suggest that destination managers should carefully analyse the extent to which tourists assign responsibility for the unethical incident to the destination, as this is another factor which enhances subsequent hostile emotions. Again, studies from the crisis communication literature have already shown that depending on consumers' attribution of who is to blame for an incident, accepting or rejecting responsibility can both successfully mitigate hostile reactions (Cho & Gower, 2006; Claeys, Cauberghe, & Vyncke, 2010).

Perhaps not very surprisingly, tourists' perceptions of a destination's image are another cognitive aspect which destinations can appeal to as a means for avoiding hostile emotions and subsequent

negative behaviour. While the process of image formation and transformation on the part of tourists is a complex one that has not been the subject of the present study, the findings presented here encourage destinations to invest in image-management strategies as a proactive form of preparing for potential future incidents. Like external crises, unethical incidents *will* happen: the only question is when. This recommendation is further corroborated by the positive influence that a favourable image has on destination loyalty and the intention to avoid engaging with the incident, as evidenced in the results of the present research.

A further finding of practical significance in this study is the opposite effect that negative WOM and avoidance appear to exert on tourists' destination loyalty. Accordingly, a crucial managerial goal in post-incident recovery strategies is to approach tourists who spread negative WOM about the destination and to encourage them to disengage with (i.e. avoid) the incident. Assuming that tourists who talked negatively about the destination to their friends and family are concerned about an inconsistent social image if remaining loyal (e.g. Nyer & Gopinath, 2005), managerial efforts should focus on providing these tourists with a socially acceptable option to return to the destination without losing face. Respective options might include tangible means such as offering large discounts and bonuses to past visitors for remaining loyal, as well as designing advertisements and personal communication which offer intangible means that can be used as a justification to return to the destination. Indeed, the findings of a study by He and Harris (2014) imply that providing tourists who have spread negative WOM online with a convincing rationale or a humorous excuse can actually increase the likelihood of them revisiting a destination.

The finding that incident avoidance behaviour fosters destination loyalty also deserves attention by destination managers. The results suggest that if a tourist chooses not to engage emotionally with the unethical incident, the conscious decision to ignore or accept a negative incident manifests and enhances their loyalty. While there is little prior research on the role and applicability of avoidance coping, it seems feasible to suggest that destination managers might gainfully employ targeted communication strategies towards past visitors that do not mention the incident but re-emphasise the positive aspects of a destination. Such re-affirmative marketing strategies can be expected to reduce cognitive dissonance and allow tourists to feel reassured in their intentions to return.

Finally, although hostile emotions evidently play a role for tourists' post-incident behaviour, the present study indicates that they may enhance both negative WOM and avoidance behaviour,

although the latter to a lesser degree. Considering that the latter coping strategy is desirable while the former is not, addressing hostile emotions seems to be a potentially risky strategy until future research is able to shed light on whether and under which circumstances hostility can be exclusively channelled toward favourable reactions. Fig. 3 summarises the suggested corporate crisis management strategies to address tourists' reactions as exemplified by our findings.

6. Conclusions and limitations

Existing studies on tourism crises tend to concentrate on external crisis events such as natural disasters and terrorist attacks, while neglecting internal, self-inflicted crisis events such as unethical destination incidents. Moreover, scholars have exclusively focused on managerial remedies such as post-crisis action plans, without taking the perspective of the tourist into account. The main contribution of this study is therefore the provision and empirical validation of a model which captures tourists' reactions toward an unethical destination incident. The results reveal that tourists undergo a cognition-emotion-behaviour sequence when confronted with an unethical incident at a destination of their choice. In particular, the results demonstrate that the variables *crisis severity* and *responsibility attribution* enhance tourists' hostile emotions, while *destination image* can mitigate negative emotional reactions. Furthermore, it is shown that hostile post-incident emotions can enhance tourists' negative WOM as well as their avoidance intentions, which is particularly instructive given the opposite effects these two coping strategies exhibit on tourists' destination loyalty. As such, the research presented here provides the opportunity to develop the so far largely underexplored issue of how tourists respond to an unethical destination incident. It further offers destination managers a first insight into how to influence tourists' reactions to an unethical incident and its impact on their loyalty.

In light of these initial efforts to shed light on an underexplored research area, some limitations should be noted. First, the present study used a convenience sample which drew on a relatively young population of UK university students. Although air travellers tend to be centred on younger age groups, and while air travel is increasingly popular as a travel mode among students (IPK International, 2013), the findings of this study are limited in their representativeness and would benefit from future studies which survey a more inclusive demographic population. In addition, future replications would benefit from a probability sampling

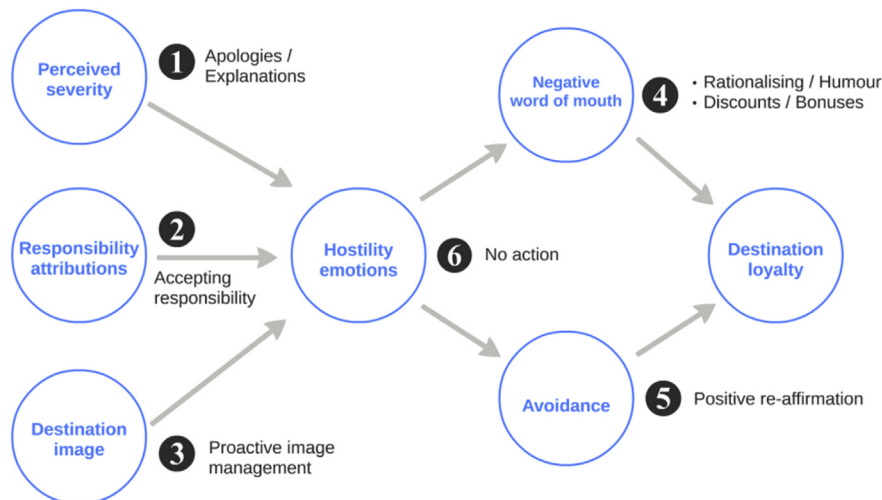


Fig. 3. Managerial response strategies to unethical destination incidents.

approach since the present study cannot exclude the possibility of non-response bias. The study's generalisability would further be enhanced by verifying the model across different incident scenarios. For instance, the levels of severity as well as the gender of the incident's victim could be varied in order to remove additional psychological bias in respondents in these respects.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data related to this article can be found at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2015.11.004>.

Appendix 1

News Report 1 – Description of body scanners

You read in the news about a new law in *respondent's destination* which obliges all airports to install full-body scanning machines. The devices are expected to improve airport security checks as they give detailed X-ray images of a passenger's figure and are able to detect metallic objects placed next to the skin. It is projected that all scanners will be in use before you fly to *respondent's destination*.

Appendix 2

News Report 2 – Incident description

The recently introduced body scanners have raised concerns amongst the public as passengers report great discomfort with having almost nude images being on display at checkpoints. In an incident yesterday, a female passenger reported to have overheard a security member of staff repeatedly commenting on her 'cute figure' whilst ordering her to go through the scanner for three times in a row.

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