INOCULATION THEORY AND TOURISM

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Professional Biography

Josh Compton is Professor of Speech at Dartmouth College. He has authored more than 100 scholarly publications, many exploring what inoculation theory can tell us about communication in some unexpected places. His research has examined health messaging about nicotine vaping, conspiracy messaging, Stephen King adaptations, loyalty among fans of struggling hockey teams, and communication about stochastic terrorism. Much of his work focuses on health, politics, and education. He's discussed inoculation theory with audiences ranging from NATO officials to medievalists, and especially enjoys conversations and collaborations that take the theory in directions he hadn't anticipated.

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INTRODUCTION

Inoculation theory has long informed messaging strategies to protect image before it is attacked (Burgoon et al., 1995). Yet despite important foundational work on inoculation, image protection, and destination attitudes, tourism image has received comparatively little sustained attention in inoculation research. That gap has consequences because tourism managers no longer exercise full control over destination image and branding; residents also help shape both through social media, travel forums, and other online channels (Chen & Šegota, 2015). These channels can also circulate false claims and misleading images (Fedeli, 2020). In that environment, credibility becomes a valuable yet vulnerable managerial resource. Although there is much to resist, there is far less theoretical guidance on how. These conditions make anticipating and responding to misleading information increasingly important for destinations, organisations, and travellers alike, and they make collaboration between inoculation theory scholars and tourism and hospitality management researchers especially timely.

This perspective applies inoculation's preemptive logic to tourism and hospitality research by considering how communication can prepare audiences before misleading claims and crisis narratives shape perceptions. More collaborative work among tourism scholars, inoculation scholars, and practitioners can improve tourism and hospitality communication practice and provide a dynamic context for ongoing inoculation theory development.

INOCULATION THEORY OF RESISTANCE TO INFLUENCE

First introduced in social psychology, inoculation theory is now one of the most developed theories of resistance to influence (Ivanov et al., 2026). Its name captures its basic logic: just as exposure to weakened biological challenges can trigger resistance to stronger ones, exposure to weakened influence challenges can do the same (Compton, 2025; McGuire, 1964). Inoculation messages typically raise and refute a few counterarguments that might otherwise prove influential, often prefaced with a general forewarning of the challenges to come. They work by eliciting threat—not danger itself, but recognition that an existing position is vulnerable—which motivates resistance (Compton, 2025; McGuire, 1964).

Inoculation can also provide an umbrella of protection against novel challenges, including those not mentioned in the original message (McGuire, 1964). That umbrella effect makes inoculation especially useful for (pre)managing image, since attacks on image are often difficult to anticipate fully (Ivanov & Parker, 2011). In tourism contexts, what inoculation protects might range from an attitude toward a destination to loyalty toward a hotel brand; from courage in the face of flight anxiety to beliefs about the value of travel itself. But before we get into where it could go, let's first consider where it's already been.

INOCULATION IN TOURISM RESEARCH

Inoculation and tourism studies most directly intersect in destination-image research, where early theoretical work was followed by empirical tests (Ivanov & Parker, 2011; Ivanov et al., 2017, 2018). The 2017 analysis asked whether inoculation-based destination messages could affect people with initially neutral or opposing perceptions. The messages did more than protect: they shifted neutral and opposing attitudes in a favourable direction and then protected those gains against subsequent attack (Ivanov et al., 2017). The 2018 study examined whether inoculation could protect attitudes toward Bangkok, Hong Kong, and Salzburg from negative online peer reviews (Ivanov et al., 2018). Messages that both raised and refuted potential attacks—such as claims that Salzburg was boring or offered little beyond its history—protected destination attitudes better than either no strategic message or a supportive message that described only positive features.

For those who already liked the destination, inoculation could keep it that way. For those who did not, inoculation could nudge them toward a more positive image and then help protect it.

More recent tourism research has taken inoculation theory in notably different directions. Soulard and Russell (2025) suggest that engaging with complex heritage narratives can foster "cognitive vaccines" that visitors carry beyond the tourism experience, while Meng et al. (2023) found that a two-sided message strategy increased customers' willingness to communicate with hotel AI chatbots. Studies like these suggest that inoculation theory may offer more to tourism research than destination-image protection alone—and, in some cases, that tourism sites themselves are doing the inoculating.

What we know about inoculation theory and tourism is promising. What we do not yet know is motivating.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Ivanov et al. (2018) called for greater attention to tourism and inoculation theory, including other components of travel, such as hotels and attractions, as well as populations beyond college students. That call has grown more urgent as conflict, ideological division, and fast-moving misinformation create new challenges for tourism image.

I see two particularly promising future directions: preemptive tourism communication and mitigation of tourism misinformation. Rather than waiting to repair image after a challenge, tourism researchers could examine how audiences might be prepared before that challenge arrives. For example, research could compare image-repair efforts after a price hike with preemptive efforts to help tourists prepare before it takes effect. Such work could test when preemptive communication is most effective, which message features produce resistance, and whether those effects hold across destinations, tourism sectors, and audience groups. For tourism organisations, this could mean moving beyond reactive response plans and developing preemptive communication strategies.

Second, tourism misinformation offers a natural next frontier for inoculation research. Few areas of inoculation research have grown more rapidly in the past decade than misinformation mitigation (Maertens et al., 2026). Much of this inoculation misinformation work has focused on climate change communication and vaccination safety, but tourism is not immune. Misleading information can exaggerate dangers after natural disasters or political unrest, appear in the form of fabricated reviews of tourism businesses and services, drive clickbait efforts based on misleading claims, or take the form of conspiratorial narratives that hurt a destination's image (Fedeli, 2020). Destination image can affect travelers' planning, including their ultimate destination choices (Bui, 2024). So tourism misinformation may affect actual behaviors, not just perceptions of a destination. Future research should test how well inoculation can help people resist misleading claims about destinations and whether that helps protect destination image and people's trust and influences their travel intentions. Research should also compare issue-based inoculation, which tries to prepare people for specific misleading claims, with technique-based inoculation, which tries to prepare people to identify and reject the tactics that are being used to mislead them. We still have a lot to learn about how these approaches work in different contexts and with different audiences.

Such work could establish whether inoculation offers tourism and hospitality management a practical framework for communicating before misinformation and image threats take hold. Existing studies already suggest a productive relationship between inoculation theory and tourism. The future of this work is promising and especially timely.

CONCLUSIONS

Concluding their review of inoculation theory and image, Ivanov and Parker (2011, 9) proposed inoculation as "the most promising image defense strategy." More recently, Hadinejad et al.'s (2024, 1107) review of visitor-attitude research identified "theoretical disengagement in the field" and called for greater use of psychological theories. Integrating inoculation theory more fully into tourism research addresses both calls: it extends a promising preemptive image strategy into a still-underexplored context and offers tourism-image research additional theoretical footing.

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