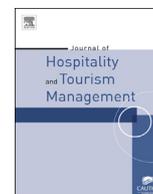




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The impact of the Fukushima disaster on Japan's travel image: An exploratory study on Taiwanese travellers



Isabell Handler

I-Shou University, No. 1, Sec. 1, Syecheng Rd., Dashu District, Kaohsiung City, 84001, Taiwan

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the effect of the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Disaster on March 11th 2011 on the travel intention and change in behaviour of Taiwanese travellers. A key objective of this study was to investigate if and how tourists plan to alter their behaviour when travelling to Japan. For this purpose Taiwanese international travellers were surveyed and the examination of the responses concluded in four factors underlying the change in behaviour, and the subsequent cluster analysis resulted in five subgroups, with varying degrees and interest in the following characteristics: a general uneasiness to travel to Japan; an increased anxiety regarding food available in the destination, both in restaurants and supermarkets; an extended search for information on the incident; and a concern regarding travelling to the affected prefectures and their surrounding area. In addition, members of different clusters had diverging opinions of the destination image, with some groups considering Japan as safe and clean and others as polluted, dangerous and stressful. The findings of this study can give suggestions for tourism organizations in both Japan and Taiwan on how to react in the aftermath of a crisis or disaster and what type of information might be searched for by potential travellers.

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1. Introduction

The accident at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power plant on March 11th 2011 in Japan has been marked in the public mind as one of the most severe disasters since Chernobyl in 1986. There has been extensive media coverage with articles published almost every day on the series of equipment failures, the release of radioactive material and the mismanagement by operator Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) as well as the Japanese government in dealing with the aftermath (for example: [Kyodo News, 13th of June, 2013](#) and [June 14th, 2013](#)).

The incident has prompted leisure tourists to shun Japan as a possible destination and the number of inbound tourists to Japan declined significantly in 2011. In 2012 the figure climbed back to pre-Fukushima levels, it is however not clear if they still avoid the afflicted areas. No inbound statistics are available to show if the tourism flow changed direction to destinations far from Fukushima prefecture, in order to avoid possible health risks or contaminated water and air ([Japan Tourism Marketing Co., 2015](#); [Statistics Bureau Japan, 2013](#)). There is also no information on whether tourists

change their usual travel behaviour in for example food consumption or information gathering. In this context, this exploratory research project tries to investigate the sensitivity of tourists towards the Fukushima incident and whether and how they change their travel behaviour. In addition, opinions on the destination image have been collected in order to understand if this incident had a negative effect on the brand image of Japan as a travel destination.

For this research Taiwanese nationals have been selected as Japan is among the most popular destinations among Taiwanese and ranks second, right after Mainland China, with 2.97 million visitors to Japan in 2014 ([Tourism Bureau, Republic of China, 2015](#)). This number has seen a significant increase on the past two years, with almost twice as many travellers visiting Japan than in the year 2012. Taiwan is also an important market for Japan as it ranks second after South Korea, and before China, in number of inbound tourists in 2013 ([Japan Tourism Marketing Co, 2015](#)). This group is therefore well suited to investigate a change in travel behaviour to Japan after the Fukushima incident and results of this survey can be of interest to both tourism professionals in Taiwan and Japan. For example, travel agents can adapt their products or recommendations can be provided to the governments for carrying out certain campaigns or action plans or suggestions for collaboration with

E-mail address: handler@isu.edu.tw.

international stakeholders in the tourism industry as suggested by Beverland and Brotherton (2001) Hagedoorn (1993) and Wang and Fesenmaier (2007). For example, the steep drop in inbound leisure tourists in 2011 (Japan Tourism Marketing Co., 2015) prompted the Japanese government to announce a 1 billion Yen campaign (although this campaign was not put into effect) of free flight tickets (McCurry, 2011) to revive tourism after the accident. But if tourists tend to forget about disasters and revert to their old behaviour after a certain time period, such campaigns are a waste of government resources and the money can be put to use for different measures.

In the survey, the Taiwanese respondents' general travel motivation factors (pull factors) are examined, which is followed by questions on the image of Japan as a destination and a section on questions about the Fukushima incident. The participants then had to state if and to what extent they would alter their behaviour in fictions situations when visiting Japan, following the approach of the stated preference (SP) method, a method widely used in travel behaviour research to identify behavioural responses to choice situations and no suitable data is available for answering the research questions (Hensher, 1994). Examples are the survey of Mabit, Rich, Burge, and Potoglou (2013) who investigated travellers on their long distance travel preferences and pointed out the lack of systematic collection of appropriate long distance data, or Parvaneh, Arentze, and Timmermans (2014), who collected data on possible behavioural changes in the presence of advanced forms of travel information through a technology not yet available in practice.

Following previous research on analysing a travel market with the popular segmentation approach (Assiouras, Skourtis, Koniordos, & Giannopoulos, 2014; Beh & Bruyere, 2007; Cooper & Hall, 2008; Fyall & Garrod, 2005; Jang, Morrison, & O'Leary, 2001; Liu, 2014; Park & Yoon, 2009; Rid, Ezeuduji, & Pröbst-Haider, 2014; Yan, So, Morrison, & Sun, 2007), this study elaborates on the intention to change travel behaviour and destination image after the Fukushima incident, and divides the market of heterogeneous Taiwanese travellers into homogenous subgroups, which then can be targeted with customized and cost-effective campaigns, informative booklets or more satisfactory products.

2. Theoretical overview

Although there are countless works on destination branding no publication could be obtained focussing on the impact of a nuclear accident on tourism, neither after the Chernobyl nor the Fukushima incident. Articles on the consequences of environmental pollution on tourism can however be useful for this research. One of the few works available is Lukashina, Amirkhanov, Anisimov and Trunev's (1996) research on the environmental degradation along the black sea coast in Russia. It describes how the man-made pollution of large tourism centers significantly endangers the environment through pollutants and direct effects of tourist flow, owing to the alienation of land through new construction sites and new infrastructure. The study assesses the state of environmental and human health of the Black Sea Coast of Russia, the most popular resort area of the Russian Federation at that time. The research suggests that tourism in Russia was far from ecologically clean and this situation demanded regulatory control of the environment backed by special legislation. For example, one of the foci was the Heat Power Energetics and Motor Transport. Due to the high content of sulphur (3–4%) in the coal and fuel oil and the minerals (13–20%) in coal, burning is forbidden without dust and gas purification; but the 300 city boiler works omit this process. Further, fuel and heating industry works discharge over 8000 t/yr of toxic substances into the atmosphere. In addition, the city car and truck fleet includes 11,000 motor vehicles, and the sewages of these motor transport depots

contain oil products at a concentration of 3–4 times the permissible limits. Of more than 45,000 motor vehicles in Sochi in 1990–91, only 500 vehicles operated on gas harmless to the environment. At the peak of the tourism season, an average of 15–20,000 vehicles is added to those registered in Sochi. The total number of vehicles driving through the city, including transit transport, makes about 2400 operating motors per hour, or 1.5 million annually. Other types of pollution researched include the discharges of the industrial enterprises and agricultural enterprises on the Sochi riverbanks where every year the concentrations of the ammonium, nitrate and nitrite nitrogen, phosphates, silicates, synthetic active substances, and phenols had been increasing. Additional insight for this project can be obtained through literature on the disruption of tourism and the change of a destination image through terrorism and political instability. Two publications can be mentioned here: Sönmez (1998) and Avraham (2009), with the former examining and evaluating literature on the link between terrorism and tourism, and the latter researching the influence of media coverage of the wars with Israel's Arab neighbours, violent conflicts, and terror attacks on the destination image of Israel. Sönmez addressed a topic more omnipresent nowadays than at the time of his publication. He reviews the foci of the terrorism and tourism literature, such as terrorists' motives for targeting tourists or the industry; impacts of terrorism on tourism demand; and possible solutions for tourists to help minimize their risks. He describes studies examining the effects of political unrest or war on the industry focus on specific situations such as the Philippines, Fiji, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Tibet, China, Mexico, and Yugoslavia, which are valuable as case studies that provide the opportunity to analyse situations and deliberate on successful and unsuccessful management efforts of the governments involved. The author concludes that studies, although useful in chronicling offer few solutions to important questions, such as: "How do destinations burdened with political challenges deal with negative images? How does the industry manage the crisis of terrorism or political strife? How can it become immune to the effects of terrorism and political problems?"

Both publications address the topic of extensive media coverage of tourism, linked with a specific destination, and its effect on tourism demand. Avraham's (2009) work describes in depth the influence of the international media coverage of the Middle East in general, and Israel specifically. Positive coverage and esteem for Israel's achievements have been accompanied by reports on wars with Arab neighbours, violent conflicts with Palestine, and terror attacks since the 1970s. The result is a problematic public image for Israel, which has had its influence on not only tourism, but also on investment and immigration. Decision makers, foreign and tourism ministries, Jewish organizations and other key players face an extremely difficult challenge regarding the country's problematic media and public image. According to the author, Israel has high potential due to numerous special attractions, diverse culture and history, its centrality to Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and its advanced economy and technology. Confronted with problematic coverage, a multi-step model is applied to alter Israel's image into a positive one, a tool which might also become interesting in this Fukushima research project.

Another relevant study was conducted by Martinez and Alvarez (2009): Participants in a study were exposed to two different stimuli – a promotional video on Turkey and a news report and how each of those two influences the perceptions of the destination image. The interesting result was that the controllable information resource, the promotional video, had a stronger impact on the participant's perceptions than non-controllable resource, the news clip. The findings of this study confirm that the perceived image of a country is dynamic, and changes according to the type of

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