



Case Study

Backpackers' risk perceptions and risk reduction strategies in Ghana



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H I G H L I G H T S

- Backpackers have considerable love for novelty.
- The perceived risk of backpackers is relatively unexplored.
- Backpackers to Ghana have six main perceived risks.
- Socio-demographic and travel characteristics influence perceptions of risk.
- Risk reductions strategies used varied by perceived risk.

A R T I C L E I N F O

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A B S T R A C T

Backpackers are noted for their love for novelty in seeking travel experiences. Despite their love for novelty, backpackers travel experiences are influenced by perceived risks which have mostly been ignored by tourism researchers. Using a sample of 603 backpackers that visited Ghana as a case study, this study explored backpackers' perceived risks, determinants of perceived risk and risk reduction strategies. The results showed that there are six dimensions of backpackers' perceived risks on Ghana, namely expectation, physical, health, financial, political and socio-psychological risks. Religion, continent of origin, sex, repeat visit and travel arrangements were found to determine backpackers' perceived risk on Ghana. Both consumption behaviour modification and information search were used as risk reduction strategies by backpackers while risk reduction strategies were found to vary by type of perceived risk.

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1. Introduction

Critical knowledge for every Destination Management Organisation (DMO) is an understanding of how travellers perceive the concept of risk. Perceived risk is an important determining factor in the tourism trade as it tends to influence tourists' choice of destinations (Fuchs & Reichel, 2006). Safety and security threats mostly serve as deterrents to tourists especially in the context of international tourism. Destinations usually perceived to be risky are avoided by tourists and travel to such destinations are affected negatively (Barker, Page, & Meyer, 2003; Boakye, 2010). Even though perceived risk tends to vary among different tourist segments, the general impact of perceived risk in tourism has been negative on destinations (Fuchs & Reichel, 2006). Even though perceived risk can be conceptualised in a negative and hence viewed as a travel constraint, it can equally be conceptualised in the

positive for others and thus serve as a travel motivator (Mura, 2010; Mura & Cohen, 2011). The issue of perceived risk is therefore a subjective one and can assume different constructions. In the case of backpackers, their travel behaviour and characteristics have suggested that risk plays a positive role in the construction of their travel narratives or experiences (Mura, 2010; Mura & Cohen, 2011). However, the concept of risk used in this study is based on the negative conceptualisation of risk.

The backpacker segment is one of the tourist segments that have been associated with risk taking due to their travel characteristics (Hunter-Jones, Jeffs, & Smith, 2007; Mura, 2010). Contemporary backpackers are often likened to Cohen's (1972) drifters. Backpackers are usually young, travel on very flexible itinerary, have least contact with the mainstream tourism industry, and travel on limited budget (O'Reilly, 2006). They are associated with the search for novelty which implies that risk may sometimes be a travel motivator for them (Hunter-Jones et al., 2007). In view of view this, little empirical work has focused on the negative conceptualisation of risk in relation to backpackers' travel experiences. Even though backpackers may be motivated by risk (positive risk), the subjective

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nature of risk implies that they equally have situations within which they may conceptualise risk in the negative. In other words, every tourist segment has a risk tolerance level beyond which risk becomes unbearable and thus seen to be negative to the travel experience (Hunter-Jones et al., 2007).

Within the mainstream tourism literature, the negative conceptualisation of risk has been given considerable attention (e.g. George, 2003, 2010; Reisinger & Mavondo, 2006; Sonmez & Graefe, 1998), while little attention has been paid to this subject in relation to the backpacker segment. The works of Hunter-Jones et al. (2007) and Reichel, Fuchs, and Urieli (2007) are the only exceptions that have looked at backpackers' perceived risks (negative risk). However none of these studies dealt with backpackers from varied cultural backgrounds. For instance, Hunter-Jones et al. (2007) dealt with backpackers from the UK, specifically the city of Manchester while Reichel et al. (2007) studied ex-backpackers from Israel. These studies did not consider backpackers from different countries and hence were not able to delve into the cultural differences in terms of risk perceptions, despite the role of culture in shaping travel risk perceptions (Fuchs & Reichel, 2006). Thus, culture informs and influences one's orientation and worldview concerning specific phenomena including perceptions of risk and safety and hence making it an important element to consider in the study of risk perception. Further, neither of the two studies explored the risk reduction strategies of backpackers despite its centrality in furthering knowledge on the concept of risk. Subsequently, the objectives of this study are to assess backpackers' perceptions of risk (negative risk) on Ghana, examine the determinants of backpackers' perception of risk (negative risk) on Ghana, and explore their risk reduction strategies used in Ghana.

Even though this study focuses on a case of backpackers who visited Ghana, it has the possibility of furthering understanding of perceived risk in relation to the backpacker segment. Ghana is increasingly becoming popular with backpackers and for that matter there is the need to understand how backpackers who have visited the country perceive the country as a destination. The value of understanding backpackers' perceptions of risk on Ghana lies with their ability to influence other backpackers' perceptions of risk on Ghana through word of mouth. Meanwhile, word of mouth helps in the formation of destination image for those yet to visit a particular destination (Boakye, 2010). For this reason, capturing the risk perceptions of backpackers who have already visited Ghana presents an opportunity to partly understand how they are likely to present the destination with regard to risk to other potential backpackers. The perceptions of risk held by backpackers who have not visited Ghana or are yet to visit is formed from a variety of sources including word of mouth from others who have ever visited.

Additionally, this study brings to the fore issues on backpackers' risk reduction strategies while at the destination. Previous attempts to study risk perceptions of backpackers have focused on ex-backpackers while their risk reduction strategies have largely been unexplored. Seminal works on backpackers' risk perceptions by Hunter-Jones et al. (2007) and Reichel et al. (2007) did not explore their risk reduction strategies. Subsequently, the case study of backpackers who have visited Ghana presents an opportunity to explore their risk reduction strategies while visiting the destination.

2. Literature review

2.1. The concept of risk

Consumer decisions are plagued with risks which are more eminent in the purchase of services such as tourism. Researchers on

consumer behaviour have largely defined risk in terms of the uncertainty of buying a product or service (Dowling & Staelin, 1994) and also the unfavourable consequences of a purchase decision (Cunningham, 1967; Dowling & Staelin, 1994). Yet, other consumer researchers have defined risk in terms of expectation of loss (Stone & Winter, 1987) and the amount of loss that occurs when a decision has been made.

Risky decisions may be seen as choices among alternatives that can be described by probability over possible outcomes (Weber & Bottom, 1989). Thus, risk involves situations where one of the possible outcomes is expected to be undesirable while the other is expected to be desirable or more desirable. When this condition characterises a situation or a product/service, then the decisions involving the situation, product or service can be described as risky. Risk creates and heightens emotions that lead to anxiety and fear of the outcomes of purchasing decisions (Ropeik, 2001). These feelings affect how safe people might think their purchase decisions are or otherwise.

The literature identifies two types of risks, namely absolute (real) and perceived (subjective) risks (Haddock, 1993). Absolute risk is common amongst commercial providers who usually implement safety procedures to ensure that the real risk is minimized. This type of risk is an objective assessment of the potential of achieving an undesirable outcome. Perceived risk on the other hand may be conceptualized as a subjectively determined expectation of a potential loss in which some measure of probability can be attached to each possible outcome (Dowling & Staelin, 1994). Perceived risk can thus be seen as the individual's perceptions of the uncertain and negative consequences of buying a product or service (Dowling & Staelin, 1994), performing a certain activity, or choosing a certain lifestyle (Reisinger & Mavondo, 2005).

2.2. Perceived risk in tourism

The literature identifies a number of risks associated with the tourism product. Among the risks identified include physical, financial, equipment or functional and health risks. Physical risk in tourism deals with the possibility of physical danger or injury being suffered by a tourist (Sonmez, Apostolopoulos, & Tarlow, 1999; Sonmez & Graefe, 1998; Tsaur, Tzeng, & Wang, 1997). This type of risk may occur under various circumstances at a destination. It may be associated with road accidents, natural disasters, physical assault, or being injured through participation in a personally chosen activity. Even though this kind of risk may be somehow inevitable, certain kinds of destinations maybe associated with it than others. Another type of risk associated with the consumption of the tourism product is financial risk. Financial risk may be viewed as the possibility that a travel experience may not provide value for money spent on the trip (Basala & Klenosky, 2001). This kind of risk is attributed to the service nature of tourism which implies that money has to be spent in arranging the trip before the actual consumption takes place. In this sense, the tourist is vulnerable to the risk of service failure. Equipment or functional risk refers to the possibility of mechanical, equipment, or organisational problems occurring during travel or at the destination (Cavlek, 2002; Morgan, 2003; Roehl & Fesenmaier, 1992). Health risk is the possibility of becoming sick or contracting certain kinds of diseases while on a tourism trip (Michalko, 2004; Richter, 2003).

Other types of risk that have been identified to be associated with tourism include political instability risk (possibility of being caught up in a political turmoil of a country being visited); psychological risk (possibility that travel experience will not reflect the individual's personality or self-image); satisfaction risk (possibility that the travel experience will not provide personal satisfaction); social risk (possibility that travel choice or experience will affect

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