Protests and tourism crises: A social movement approach to causality

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ABSTRACT

Research into tourism crises to date has largely focused on management and resolution applications. However, theoretical analyses of these crises also need to focus on exogenous economic and sociopolitical events that produce such crises rather than only on ways to manage or resolve them. This study analysed social movements – in particular protests involving conflict – as a causal agent of tourism crises. The research highlighted the characteristics of violent social movements that are important to defining the scope and magnitude of tourism crises, differentiating these movements' effects from those of other causal agents. Social movements have a multiplier effect, recurrence potential and associations with uncertainty and high-risk issues, which are factors that can significantly shape the severity of tourism crises. Based on a social movement approach, these results were drawn from an analysis of recent teachers' protests and their effects on the tourism industry in a Mexican destination.

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1. Introduction

Tourism crises have received increasing attention from researchers since the early 1970s, yet crisis management is still relatively new as a tourism industry practice (Ghaderi, Mat Som, & Henderson, 2012). Studies of tourism crises, to date, have usually concentrated on economic and financial crises (Hall, 2010) and largely focused on management and resolution applications (e.g. Cushnahan, 2004; Scott, Laws, & Prideaux, 2008). As Cohen and Neal (2010) observe, most of the literature on tourism crises is preoccupied with crisis management, that is, with the practical issue of how a swift revival of tourism can be achieved. This dominant interest in the management dimension of tourism crisis studies is shown in the considerable number of theoretical models of tourism crises already developed (Huang, Tseng, & Petrick, 2007).

While many empirical advances have been made in crisis prevention, preparedness, mitigation, response and recovery (Gurtner, 2006; Scott et al., 2008), research results have revealed little regarding the nature and development of factors causing tourism crises (Cohen & Neal, 2010). Even less is known about such factors and tourism crises, in general, in Latin American contexts, including Mexico. Limited research has been conducted on tourism crises in Mexico despite the threat that the larger sociopolitical environment poses to this country's tourism industry and the economic importance that tourism has in terms of foreign currency earnings, income and employment (Wilson, 2008).

In order to broaden the theoretical perspectives of tourism crises studies, analyses of diverse socioeconomic and political tourism contexts around the world need to be incorporated into the general body of tourism crisis knowledge. New empirical cases can inform the historical understanding of tourism crises and generate new theoretical perspectives. This is particularly necessary because the traditional crisis management techniques developed thus far may not necessarily be applicable to the developing world (Cushnahan, 2004).

Furthermore, research should focus on activities that produce these crises. Examining tourism crises' causal factors could help tourism managers' design appropriate anticipative crisis control strategies. If lessons can indeed be learnt from past experiences, tourism managers can become proactive rather than reactive when a tourism crisis occurs. This can be achieved by seeking to predict crisis situations and preparing for different scenarios (Ghaderi et al., 2012). Therefore, identifying possible causal factors may help tourism managers to be proactive and preventive during tourism crises.

As a specific potential causal factor of tourism crises, social movements are regarded as a phenomenon of contemporary, industrialised societies. These movements arise out of collectivities that share beliefs and interests and act in order to effect political, economic or cultural changes in society. When they include conflictual relations, social movements challenge the state on issues of law and public order. As such, social movements have been the focus of scholarly interest, mainly from sociology, social psychology (Klandermans, 1997; van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2013) and political science perspectives (Klandermans & Roggeband, 2007). However, these studies have been limited largely to social movements' relationship to culture (Johnston

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& Klandermans, 1995), resource mobilisation (McCarthy & Zald, 1973), networks (Diani, 2003), gender (Taylor, 1999) and politics and the state (Jenkins & Klandermans, 1995).

In tourism contexts, social movement approaches have been applied until relatively recently. They have been basically used to examine how social movements and activism generate forces working against tourism activities (Kousis, 2000; McGehee, 2002; McGehee & Almeida Santos, 2005). Social movement approaches also offer a strong lens through which to examine the role of social movements as catalysts for change in tourism (McGehee, Kline, & Knollenberg, 2014). Thus, social movement approaches can potentially offer scholars a deeper understanding of social protests' potential effects on the tourism industry.

Based on a social movement approach, the present research analysed the nature and outcomes of social protests and their disruptive implications in the tourism industry in a developing nation context. These were drawn from a case study of the recent conflicts caused by social protests and their implications in the tourism industry in the state of Oaxaca, Mexico. In this way, this study sought to contribute not only to broadening the understanding of tourism crises in contexts not yet explored but also to deepening the theoretical understanding of social movements as a potential disruptive factor for the tourism industry.

2. Literature review

2.1. Tourism crises

Glaesser (2003, p. 12) defines a crisis "as a dangerous and extraordinary situation in which a decision must be made under time pressure". The notions of risk, danger, chaos, disruption and immediate – yet often unplanned – intervention are characteristic features of a crisis. Therefore, in the tourism industry, a tourism crisis can be understood as an event of serious magnitude that disrupts orderly tourism operations and requires immediate managerial efforts to overcome the resulting problems (Laws, Prideaux, & Chon, 2007a).

In his well-known paper on a model for analysing and developing tourism disaster management strategies, Faulkner (2001) conceptualises tourism crises as follows. They are significant triggering events that, through fluid, unstable and dynamic situations, challenge the existing structure, routine operations or survival of tourism organisations including destinations and host communities. Tourism crises are characterised by a high threat level, a short time to make decisions, surprise and urgency and by a perceived inability of those directly affected to cope with challenges. Crises also have a turning point when decisive change becomes imminent and a transformational agent who influences events, both of whose outcomes can be positive or negative.

Because of their frequently disruptive, immediate and unexpected magnitude, tourism crises, therefore, require immediate and focused interventions. According to Laws et al. (2007a), when a tourism crisis occurs, tourism managers need to:

a) Deal immediately with the crisis itself
b) Respond to the concerns and needs of the people directly affected
c) Minimise the damage resulting from adverse publicity and consequent loss of revenues
d) Resolve difficulties with suppliers and other business partners

Clearly, dealing with a crisis can be a big challenge, in particular when little is known about the nature and disruptive potential of its causal factors. While the existing literature on tourism crises offers information on management strategies, the type, magnitude and severity of crises depends on the particular circumstances and contexts in which the crises develop, including the characteristics and potential harmfulness of causal factors.

The gravity of tourism crises can be assessed in terms of its geographical scope and by the number of lost arrivals, visitor nights or expenditures (Laws et al., 2007a). Crises can take place on a scale ranging from local to global. Larger tourism crises can be experienced on a national or international scale. Tourism crises on a national scale have been well documented mainly from a management perspective in several countries but few Latin American contexts. Particular emphasis has been placed on Southeast Asian contexts, including China (Wen, Huimin, & Kavanaugh, 2005), Indonesia (Henderson, 2003; Hitchcock & Putra, 2005), Taiwan (Huang et al., 2007) and other nations such as Israel (Mansfeld, 1999) and the United States (US) (Blake & Sinclair, 2003).

Recent national experiences have also been examined in different European countries. France, in particular, offers a clear example of a national tourism crisis. The terrorist attack in Paris in November 2015 killed 130 people. This, together with floods, public sector strikes and the killing of 86 people during the celebration of Bastille Day in Nice in 2016, led to a significant drop in visitor arrivals in France. In consequence, in 2016, France experienced a 7% fall in tourist arrivals (Agence France, 2016).

Other crises can have significant impacts at the local level. In these cases, crises may be caused by a relatively simple event, and the consequences are mostly felt by local operators, with a negligible impact on a national or international scale. Some studies have focused on tourism crises at the local level. Cases such as the small island of Gili Air in Indonesia (Cushnahan, 2004), Penang in Malaysia (Ghaderi et al., 2012), Phuket in Thailand (Gurtner, 2006) and New Orleans in the US (Dimanche & Lepetic, 1999) have revealed that local tourism crises can significantly disrupt local economies. To a different extent, the repercussions of local tourism crises extend beyond the tourism industry to many other local or regional economic sectors (Blake & Sinclair, 2003). As Sönmez, Apostolopoulos, and Tarlow (1999) argue, tourism crises might not only disrupt the normal operations of tourism businesses but also cause a downturn in the local economy by reducing tourist arrivals and expenditures and their associated multiplier effects.

Tourism crises can arise for different reasons. While tourism demand is particularly sensitive to security and health concerns (Blake & Sinclair, 2003), researchers have clearly established that tourism is an industry that is quite vulnerable to several other intrinsic and exogenous factors. While many crises arise from problematic characteristics of tourism operations themselves (Laws, Prideaux, & Chon, 2007b), many tourism crises can be a consequence of exogenous events, which can emerge from broader economic, social and political processes.

In cases in which crises are caused by exogenous factors, crises can seldom be avoided. However, the negative effects can be at least minimised by considering how similar documented experiences have evolved. Exogenous factors have been associated with both natural and human-induced causal factors. According to researchers, tourism crises can occur as a consequence of natural events such as earthquakes, tsunamis and hurricanes (Ghaderi & Henderson, 2013; Huang et al., 2007; Tsai & Chen, 2010) and political and social instability (Cohen & Neal, 2010; Sönmez, 1998). Other causal factors are terrorism (Blake & Sinclair, 2003; Henderson, 2003; Sönmez et al., 1999), economic and financial instability (Papatheodorou, Roselló, & Xiao, 2010; Pine, Chan, & Leung, 1998; Prideaux & Witt, 2000) and infectious diseases (Mason, Grobowski, & Du, 2005; Wen et al., 2005). Other environmental and social factors are organic water pollution (Santana, 2004) and crime (Dimanche & Lepetic, 1999) or a combination of any of the above causal factors (Cushnahan, 2004; Ghaderi et al., 2012).

Certainly, the impact and scope of crises will depend largely on the prevention, response and recovery capabilities of destinations, but negative actions attributed to humans that trigger crises can lead to more negative consequences, as compared with natural events (Glaesser, 2003). For example, Santana writes, "human-induced crises have the potential to rival natural disasters in both scope and magnitude" (Santana, 2004, p. 303).