

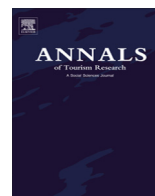


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Crisis-resistant tourists

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ABSTRACT

Despite the negative impact of unexpected events—such as 9/11 and the Global Financial Crisis—on the tourism industry, and despite substantial research into managing crises in tourism, little is known about tourists who are most needed in such situations: crisis-resistant tourists. In this study, crisis-resistant tourists are defined and theoretically conceptualized. Empirical results indicate that segments of tourists resistant to external or internal crisis events indeed exist and—as theoretically postulated—demonstrate higher levels of risk propensity and resistance to change. In contrast, risk shifting is not associated with being a crisis-resistant tourist. An initial profile of crisis-resistant tourists is provided, offering guidance to the tourism industry on how to identify and communicate with this highly attractive market segment.

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Introduction

This study is the first to propose that a segment of tourists exists, which is inherently more resistant to crises than other tourists. If indeed there is evidence of the existence of such tourists, selecting them as a target market may reduce crisis-vulnerability of tourism businesses and destinations, thereby offering a preventative, rather than curative, approach to crisis management in tourism. Tourism is an important contributor of economic growth in many countries, but also highly reactive to unexpected critical events. Unexpected critical events could include external events such as natural

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disasters, the outbreak of epidemics, terrorist attacks, financial crises, but also internal events such as family emergencies. When such unexpected events occur, tourists cancel their plans, and tourist demand can drop dramatically. This puts local tourism service providers at serious risk.

A few such external critical events occurred in the past decade, and illustrate the extent that tourism demand can be affected. The Bali bombings led to a greater than 40% fall in outbound tourist arrivals (Hitchcock & Darma Putra, 2005), the SARS pandemic caused an up to 55% decline in the number of Japanese people traveling overseas (Cooper, 2006), and the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) led to a 13% drop in arrivals to OECD countries (OECD, 2010). In addition, people also encounter situations in their own lives. For example, sickness and family emergencies can lead to booking cancellations. Although such incidents tend to distribute randomly across all tourist bookings, and do not have the effect of a major decline in demand at one or across several destinations, such incidents are still of interest in the context of the present study because how travelers react to them determines the attractiveness of specific travel consumers for destinations.

While the tourism literature presents findings related to risk perceptions of certain destinations, tourists' risk management strategies in particular contexts, and reactions to specific crisis events, it does currently not investigate whether there are tourists who are generally more likely to be resistant to crises. We investigate the notion of such crisis-resistant tourists, i.e. those who do not cancel bookings; and instead, follow through with travel plans even if unexpected events occur. Specifically, the aims of this study are to: (1) theoretically conceptualize the crisis-resistant tourist; (2) empirically test whether crisis-resistant tourists exist, and whether the proposed theoretical conceptualization is correct; (3) if so, describe crisis-resistant tourists in order to enable tourism destinations and tourism service providers to target them; and, based on the insight from the study, (4) provide an operationalization of crisis-resistant tourists that can inform tourism marketing and management.

This study contributes to the tourism literature because it is the first to conceptualize and empirically study crisis-resistance of tourists in general terms rather than related to specific events or destinations. It further contributes to risk-related literature by identifying factors that drive such general crisis-resistant behavior. The study's practical value lies in providing tourism destinations and tourism businesses with a profile of crisis-resistant tourists. Such a profile enables active targeting of crisis-resistant tourists through customized products and communication messages. Targeting crisis-resistant tourists provides some protection against unpredictable internal and external crises that are beyond destinations' control because this segment of the tourist market does not cancel trips; rather, they follow through with their travel plans no matter what happens at the destination or in their private lives.

Literature review

Crisis and disaster management is a prominent topic in tourism connected to a growing body of literature. Nevertheless, most studies focus on reactive response and recovery; only few propose proactive strategic planning (Ritchie, 2004, 2009; Ritchie, Bentley, Koruth, & Wang, 2011). It is argued that effective crisis and disaster management requires the development of resilience. Resilience can be defined as an organizational entity's 'ability to survive—possibly even thrive—in times of crisis' (Seville et al., 2008, p.18). The importance of resilience has been discussed in relation to tourism destinations, and their ability to withstand internal and external crises (e.g., Farr-Wharton, Brown, Dick, & Peterson, 2012).

However, current literature focuses primarily on resilience achieved through organizational structures and capacities. Farr-Wharton et al.'s (2012) paper represents a rare case advocating for a marketing-focused approach towards establishing resilience. The present study argues that the strategic management of demand is critical to building resilience in tourism destinations, and that this requires an understanding of who the tourists are that would endure the risks of traveling during a personal or external crisis event.

The tourism literature acknowledges that engaging in tourism-related behaviors can be associated with a wide range of risks (Chew & Jahari, 2014). General worries as well as country-specific risk perceptions broadly influence travel decisions but especially during times of crises (Fischhoff, De Bruin,

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