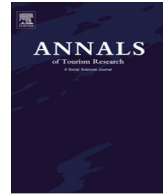




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Consuming post-disaster destinations: The case of Sichuan, China



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ABSTRACT

Addressing the call for a better understanding of tourist behavior in relation to post-disaster destinations, this study explores the motivations and intentions of potential domestic tourists (from non-hit areas) to visit Sichuan, China in the aftermath of an earthquake. Drawing on dark tourism theories, this study offers a more comprehensive insight into the consumption of post-disaster destinations, aiming to capture the impact of the changes to the destination's attributes on tourist behavior. The findings move beyond the common approach to tourism recovery, which solely focuses on reviving the traditional “non-dark” products. This study reveals the importance of newly formed dark attributes that emerge from the disaster as another means to destination recovery, reflected in the emergence of new tourist segments.

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Introduction

Tourism research has traditionally focused on the consumption of “pleasant diversions in pleasant places” (Strange & Kempa, 2003, p. 387). In contrast, the understanding of tourist behavior in the context of sad or distressing sites, particularly at destinations recovering from natural disasters, is limited (Rittichainuwat, 2008; Stone & Sharpley, 2008). Studies on post-disaster tourism predominantly focus on providing guidelines for tourism recovery (e.g., Faulkner, 2001; Ritchie, 2004) or explore tourists’

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risk perceptions (e.g., [Floyd & Pennington-Gray, 2004](#)). Conversely, attempts at clarifying tourists' motivations and intentions to visit post-disaster destinations are lacking. This is surprising as evidence suggests that many disaster sites, such as New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina and Ground Zero after 9/11, have become popular tourist attractions. This study aims to enhance the understanding of tourists' consumption of destinations recovering from disasters.

Thus, while previous studies have focused on the recovery of the destination's "traditional" products and markets ([Huan, Beaman, & Shelby, 2004](#)), the focus here is on the development of new attributes emerging from the disaster, a subject that has been largely overlooked, particularly from a demand-side perspective. These new attributes incorporate features generally associated with dark tourism consumption, underlining tourists' fascination with sites of death and atrocity (e.g., [Lennon & Foley, 2000](#); [Stone, 2012a](#)). The inclusion and application of dark tourism theories to post-disaster destinations allow for a more comprehensive understanding of tourist behavior in relation to potential changes to the destination's attributes. To address the aforementioned research gaps, domestic tourists' motivation and travel intentions are explored in the context of Sichuan, China in the aftermath of the Wenchuan earthquake (May 12, 2008). Attention is given to tourists' intention to experience the destination's newly formed dark sites or its traditional non-dark leisure attractions. Additionally, in order to facilitate the identification of potential tourist segments, the relationships between behavioral intentions and the push-pull factors that stimulate tourists to visit post-disaster destinations are explored.

Tourism and disasters

It is acknowledged that due to population growth, increased urbanization, greater use of and dependence on technology and globalization, disasters are becoming more frequent and geographically diverse ([Pelling, 2003a, 2003b](#)). Thus, contemporary conceptualizations view disasters as a disruptive state to systematic function that results from a complex interaction between potentially damaging natural, physical and environmental elements (e.g., earthquakes, violent eruptions) and the vulnerability of a society, its infrastructure, economy and environment, as determined by human behavior ([Birkmann, 2006](#); [Pelling, 2003a](#); [United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction, 2004](#)). A natural disaster is a "humanitarian disaster with a natural trigger" ([Pelling, 2003b, p. 4](#)). However, with the increasing interdependency of human and natural systems, distinguishing between natural and man-made disasters becomes more difficult ([Birkmann, 2006](#)).

As an area of human activity, tourism is not immune to disasters, and with the growth of global tourism and the attractiveness of exotic (often high-risk) destinations, tourists and tourism destinations are exposed to ever greater levels of risk ([Ritchie, 2004](#); [Rittichainuwat, 2013](#)). Indeed, [Faulkner \(2001\)](#) observes that tourism destinations in every part of the world are faced with the likelihood of experiencing a disaster. Furthermore, media inform potential tourists of the most recent and distant disasters on a continuous basis ([Hystad & Keller, 2008](#)). Yet, while the relationship between disaster and tourism has received much attention recently, it is generally agreed that there remains a lack of comprehensive knowledge in this area ([Carlsen & Liburd, 2008](#); [Ritchie, 2004](#)). Previous studies have mainly adopted a supply-side perspective ([Rittichainuwat, 2013](#)), exploring responses to disasters by particular organizations, such as small tourism businesses ([Cioccio & Michael, 2007](#)), destination management organizations ([Carlsen & Liburd, 2008](#); [Ladkin, Fyall, Fletcher, & Shipway, 2007](#)) and hotels ([Henderson & Ng, 2004](#)), or developing tourism disaster management and recovery frameworks (e.g., [Faulkner, 2001](#)).

In terms of tourism recovery following a disaster, previous studies stress the necessity of diversifying both the product offer and the market ([Carlsen & Hughes, 2008](#); [Ladkin et al., 2007](#)). In this context, it should be recognized that a disaster may change the destination's attributes and appeal. Apart from inflicting physical damage, a natural disaster may lead to a negative destination image in terms of safety, deterring tourists from visiting ([Huan et al., 2004](#)). Additionally, while some natural or cultural attractions may simply disappear, other places not previously visited may become prominent aspects of tourism consumption after a disaster. This might be due to the need to create new attractions and the fact that disaster-hit areas may transform into tourist attractions in their own right

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