Tourism and the refugee crisis in Greece: Perceptions and decision-making of accommodation providers

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Tourism accommodation service providers need to understand complexity.
- Fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis is used to evaluate decision-making.
- Decisions may be refugee-centric and focus on the visitors-locals nexus.
- Decisions also emphasise the tourism impact of the locals' behaviour towards refugees.

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the tourism impacts of the 2015–16 refugee crisis in Greece. It examines the implications of the related publicity for the perception of Greece and the expected reaction of inbound tourists; the way refugees are regarded from a security and cultural aspect; the interaction between refugees and host communities; and the decisions made by the Greek tourism accommodation sector to face the crisis. Using fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis the paper employs a nationwide survey of 811 tourism accommodation managers. The results reveal three configurations explaining the decisions of respondents characterised by refugee-centric orientation; the emphasis on the visitors-locals nexus; and the host communities' behavioural impact on tourism. The paper also compares asymmetric with symmetric analysis highlighting the suitability of the former when dealing with complexity. The modelling exercise also steps forward from fit to predictive validity. The findings contribute to both managerial and methodological aspects of tourism.

1. Introduction

The interdependence of immigration and tourism has arguably received little attention in the academic literature (Seetaram, 2012), while research on the impact of refugee flows on tourism is almost non-existent. Genç (2012) argues that an increase of immigrants from a specific country may lead to a greater rise (in percentage terms) of tourism arrivals from that country. As immigration continues to affect many communities, the traditional classification of travel purposes into recreation, business, and visiting friends and relatives (VFR) becomes gradually antiquated; tourism experiences are now often much richer than in the past and tourists end up having significant socio-economic exchanges with local communities (Griffin, 2016). Nonetheless, the tourism − immigration nexus may prove more complex depending among others on the host society's structures and the emerging trade patterns between the host and the immigrant-source country (Balli, Balli, & Louis, 2016).

Reasons behind migration include hopeless economic and political situations; hunger; genocide; and ethnic and religious persecution in the originating countries (Toffle, 2015). Most studies, however, do not distinguish between refugee and non-refugee immigrants (Ghosh & Enami, 2015), even if there are notable differences between the two. First, the flow of refugees is typically a concerted movement of individuals en masse escaping persecution

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in their home country; on the other hand, economic immigrants are individuals moving sequentially to seek better economic security and employability conditions (Cortes, 2004). Second, the dominant flow of refugees originates from poor economies; this may not necessarily be the case with immigrants (Stark, 2004).

From a mobility perspective, the complexity of modern societies is neither anarchic nor perfectly ordered (Capra, 2002). Disasters such as wars and natural catastrophes may trigger a systemic change and produce high population mobility (Sheller & Urry, 2006); this may subsequently result into a parallel exchange and transfer of cultures and images (Linke, 2012; Urry, 2002). Contemporary societal systems are so tightly coupled that any logistical efforts to separate groups such as immigrants and refugees may break down in the face of unpredictable formations (Sheller & Urry, 2006). Moreover, tourism and immigration may intertwine, as tourists transform themselves into migrants when seeking employment in a destination country: this situation may ultimately create a tourism-immigration continuum (Illes & Michalko, 2008).

This paper examines the underlying complexity in the tourism-refugeeism nexus using the 2015—16 refugee crisis in Greece as a case study. Based on the results of a nationwide survey of Greek tourism accommodation managers/owners the paper studies the implications of the refugee crisis for the perception of Greece as a tourist destination and the subsequent reaction of inbound tourists; the way refugees are regarded from a security and cultural aspect; the interaction between refugees and host communities; and the actions undertaken by the surveyed tourism accommodation providers to address the refugee challenge. From a theoretical point of view, the paper contributes to the literature by providing a better understanding of the complex tourism-refugeeism relationship and its implications for decision-making in tourism accommodation. Moreover, from a methodological perspective, the research implements fuzzy set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA), which is regarded as an innovative tool in tourism studies and the service sector more generally. On these grounds, the paper also sets as one of its primary objectives to reveal the suitability of asymmetric (i.e. nonlinear) research on tourism against the dominant regression analysis and Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) implementation. It also progresses from fit to predictive validity for the proposed models.

2. Chaos and complexity

Change and instability are considered as inherent characteristics of systems, being on the edge of chaos when a trigger event may directly or indirectly induce a crisis (Speakman & Sharpley, 2012). The theory of chaos was introduced in 1963 (Lawrence, Feng, & Huang, 2003) and proved useful in complex system analysis (Mahmoudabadi, 2015). According to Seeger (2002, p.329) the chaos perspective "proposes a broad set of loosely related theoretical and meta-theoretical orientations to the behaviour of complex non-linear systems". The theory suggests that even small behavioural differences can produce substantial diverging outcomes to dynamic systems making it impossible to predict long term patterns (Kellert, 1993). The theory of complexity has evolved from chaos theory focusing on research with complex characteristics, and "deals with systems that have many interacting agents and although hard to predict, these systems have structure and permit improvement" (Zahra & Ryan, 2007, p. 855). Management-wise, when a crisis occurs, complexity in the business environment increases (Coskun & Ozceylan, 2011); thus, the theory of complexity may also be linked to emergency management (Morakabati, Page, & Fletcher, 2016; Ramalingam, 2013). Moreover, when the degree of complexity increases the prediction of the

systemic behavioural patterns is less amenable (Fitzgerald & Eijnatten, 2002).

Both theories (i.e. chaos and complexity) are based on asymmetric (i.e. nonlinear) systems being sensitive to initial conditions (Hock, 1999); their difference is that there can be no forecast in chaos theory, whilst in complexity theory this unpredictable behaviour may be framed into a quasi-stable pattern (Olmedo & Mateos, 2015). In chaos theory, simple systems produce complicated non-predictable patterns of behaviour, whilst complexity theory emphasises the way multi-elemental systems lead to relative behavioural predictability (Baggio, 2008). As Fitzgerald and Eijnatten (2002) indicate, the theory of complexity focuses on: (i) the simple behaviours that complex systems produce; (ii) the higher-level patterns that simple interactions may generate; and (iii) the identification of recognisable patterns when a holistic examination is undertaken in the complicated system. Even if the complexity of chaotic situations may lead to unpredictable and dramatic conditions, the emerging dynamic systems are not fully uncontrolled, whilst the existence of relative order is still present (Nilson, 1995; Zahra & Ryan, 2007). Thus, in service industries research, complexity theory is used to provide an adequate evaluation and explanation of the behavioural attributes, and the process of decision-making by implementing alternative asymmetric (i.e. nonlinear) combinations of indicators (Wu, Yeh, Huan, & Woodside, 2014).

While chaos and complexity theories have been successfully applied in the context of generic management studies (Hwang & Yuan, 2014), their discussion in tourism remains limited. In fact, tourism research has not adequately focused on chaos and complexity since it had followed until now a predominantly reductionist approach (McDonald, 2009). The behavioural patterns of travellers and the enterprising decision-making depend on several factors creating complexity patterns on their formulation (Pappas, 2016). The tourism accommodation sector is characterised by countless interacting entities and activities critically vulnerable to crises produced by irregular political, climatic, and market events (Baggio, 2008; Cole, 2009; Papatheodorou, 2006). This leads to an inherent nonlinearity of the emerging relationships, which prevents the effective coupling of causes and consequences (Olmedo & Mateos, 2015); thus, decision-making is substantially affected by both exogenous and endogenous system shocks (Boukas & Ziakas, 2014). With special reference to tourism accommodation firms, Edgar and Nisbet (1996) suggest that these are spatially fragmented and disaggregated, whilst they operate in dynamic and complex environments. Even so, all tourism related factors possess some emerging features due to a partial order existence in their operations (Olmedo & Mateos, 2015). This observation led Faulkner and Russell (1997) almost two decades ago, to propose chaos and complexity as alternative though highly relevant frameworks for the examination of tourism accommodation attributes, since the comprehension of the existing dynamic systems was problematic, due to the assumption that the relationships are stable and static. Thus, the extent of behavioural complexity makes the Newtonian (linear) thinking inadequate and indicates a need for asymmetric (nonlinear) analysis (Laws & Prideaux, 2005). In tourism accommodation operations and management, the application of complexity theory can provide significant information in terms of the formulation and expression of behavioural patterns (Russell & Faulkner, 2004), helping to better understand the evolving dynamics of the tourist system (Faulkner & Russell, 2000).

In fact, complexity theory may provide important insights from a strategic risk management perspective and hence influence the decisions made by accommodation providers when tourism dynamics are significantly perturbed by extraordinary and possibly unforeseen phenomena, such as 'black swan' events (Koo, Halpern, Papatheodorou, Graham, & Arvanitis, 2016; Taleb, 2007). Large