Reassurance or reason for concern: Security forces as a crisis management strategy

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Crisis security forces affects perceptions of long-term tourists about community factors.
- Security forces contribution to the destination's community affects life satisfaction.
- Perceived belongingness of security forces negatively affects life satisfaction.
- Destination life satisfaction affects migrants' intention to recommend and return.

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This paper examines effects of the deployment of security forces to a popular winter migrant destination faced with a unique humanitarian crisis situation. The study surveyed past winter migrants to the region to evaluate their perceptions regarding sociocultural, economic, and psychological impacts of security forces deployed to the region. In addition, this study evaluates the deployment's impact on satisfaction with life in the region, return intention and likelihood of recommending the region to others to find that perceived safety from the security forces significantly affected community factors and that satisfaction with life fully mediated community factor effects on destination loyalty. These finding significantly add to the limited research in crisis management response effects and substantiates the use of signaling and signal crimes perspective in managing crises.

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"People in Texas are concerned about the border… not just illegal immigration, but drugs coming in, human trafficking."

Lt. Gov. of Texas David Dewhurst (2014)

1. Introduction

In summer 2014, the Rio Grande Valley (RGV) region of South Texas experienced a dramatic surge in undocumented immigrants, with as many as 35,000 immigrants crossing into the U.S. each month where the RGV was ground zero for the surge considered a humanitarian crisis (Hennessy-Fiske & Carcamo, 2014). As a strategic response to manage the border crisis, the state of Texas deployed 1000 National Guard troops to the region to help secure its border with Mexico. The deployment received widespread media attention that likely reached many of the region's winter migrant population raising concerns about the effects of the deployment on the tourists' return to the region. These winter migrants, known locally as Winter Texans, are primarily retirees from the northern United States and Canada who routinely spend winters in the RGV's tropical region to escape the harsh, cold weather. These seasonal migrants routinely engage in social and recreational activities available in the area. Visiting flea markets, festivals, and historical sites, attending music or jam sessions, dancing, going to the beach, and crossing to Mexico for shopping or medical/dental services are among their most popular activities. In

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2014, the estimated 100,000 winter migrants to the RGV had contributed more than $710 million in direct spending to the economy and had come to the region for an average of 11 years where 57% owned their own home and 96.6% intended to return the following year (Simpson, 2014). These characteristics suggest that these seasonal visitors are very familiar with the region so are likely to have an interest in what happens there and are likely able to perceive and assess the effects of security forces in the community.

With research suggesting that media reports about disasters and crises can be devastating (Faulkner, 2001) and "have a lasting impression on potential travelers as they formulate decisions to travel (or not to travel) to key border destinations" (Woosnam, Shafer, Scott, & Timothy, 2015, p. 263), significant numbers of winter migrants to the RGV may decide not to return to the region, representing a potential tourism crisis for the destination. This potential is based on Information Integration Theory which suggests that people integrate new information to existing knowledge and experience to form new judgments which influences actions (Anderson, 2014). This may be especially true depending on how the winter migrants view the troop surge and its effectiveness. Would the tourists consider the troop surge a signal of reassurance that the destination is safer? Or would they consider the added troops a signal for concern about deteriorating conditions in the destination?

The purpose of this study then is to examine the effects of the well-publicized crisis management strategy of adding security forces to a travel destination experiencing a security crisis on perceptions and loyalty of frequent visitors—the winter migrants—to the region. With no known similar studies, the results of this research should contribute significantly to tourism research in three significant areas. First, this study should contribute to the tourism literature by focusing on frequent, long-term stay seasonal travelers, an important market for destinations worldwide. Second, the results should provide important insights about effects of news media coverage of the policing strategy on perceived effectiveness of the security forces and the tourists' perceived effects of the forces on the destination, satisfaction with life in the destination and loyalty to the destination. Third, and most importantly, the research adds to the nascent tourism crisis management literature by testing the signaling effects of overt policing. According to Fuchs and Reichel (2011) and Pizam, Tarlow, and Bloom (1997), further research is necessary to understand the effects of law enforcement strategies at destinations with security concerns. This gap in tourism research is unfortunate because of the potential implications of perceived security to the economic well-being of tourism destinations.

2. Tourism crisis management and policing

The mass surge of undocumented immigrants and the subsequent deployment of troops to the RGV constitutes a crisis according to Sönmez, Backman, and Allen's (1994, p. 22) definition of a tourism crisis:

"any occurrence which can threaten the normal operation and conduct of tourism related businesses; damage a tourist destination's overall reputation for safety, attractiveness and comfort by negatively affecting visitors' perceptions of that destination; and, in turn, cause a downturn in the local travel and tourism economy and interrupt the continuity of business operations for the local travel and tourism industry by the reduction in tourist arrivals and expenditures" (in Sönmez, Apostolopoulos, & Tarlow, 1999).

In the RGV, the large-scale deployment of troops as a strategy to secure the border will certainly have an effect on the destination's overall reputation for safety—either positively or negatively—that will likely impact tourism. As Hall, Timothy, and Duval (2004, p. 2) importantly note, "Tourism is irrevocably bound up with the concept of security. Tourist behavior and, consequently, destinations, are deeply affected by perceptions of security and the management of safety, security and risk." Yet, few studies to date have examined effects of any strategic response to potential security crises (Carlsen & Liburd, 2007) other than those that have examined ways of mitigating traveler perceived risk at a destination related to terrorism and communications after a terrorism event (e.g., Paraskevas & Arendell, 2007) or about advertising and communications efforts (e.g., Floyd, Gibson, Pennington-Gray, & Thapa, 2004; Lepp, Gibson, & Lane, 2011).

A few tourism studies have proposed frameworks for understanding tourism crisis management (Faulkner, 2001; Mansfeld, 1999; Paraskevas & Arendell, 2007 Ritchie, 2004; Santana, 2004; Sönmez et al., 1999). Although all of the frameworks advise communication and coordination with destination stakeholders, Sönmez et al. (1999) crisis management framework in the context of terrorism specifically advises destinations to partner with law enforcement officials where the partnership can play a pivotal role "in managing crises and helping to restore public faith in the safety and normalcy of the destination" (p. 17). Paraskevas and Arendell (2007) research came to a similar conclusion suggesting that overt or visible security presence measures should be effective in deterring crime (terrorists) and that those efforts should be communicated to internal and external constituents.

Despite recommendations to use visible security or overt policing as a tourism crisis management strategy, research regarding the action is limited. An exception is research regarding the presence of overt security measures, such as security guards, at hotels and airports (Enz, 2009; Feickert, Verma, Plaschka, & Dev, 2006; Rittichainuwat, 2013). While some of these studies have found positive effects of overt security on guests' perceived safety, a few studies have suggested negative effects. For example Jackson (2009) and Feickert et al. (2006) suggest that increasing police forces at destinations could make tourists feel more afraid and nervous. Nevertheless, Rittichainuwat (2013) study concluded that after a destination bombing, overt security measures made in-bound tourists feel safer but that security measures considered too stringent would deter them from staying at their selected hotel. Thus, whether a policing presence in a tourism destination signals to travelers either an unsafe environment or an appropriate intervention to alleviate security concerns is yet unknown but may depend upon perceived intrusiveness of the security.

2.1. Signaling and security

Drawing from Spence (1973; 2002) works in economics designed to explain the communication of information given information asymmetry, Connelly, Certo, Ireland, and Reutzel (2011) describe signaling theory as behavior between parties when one party, the sender, sends a deliberate message to another party, the receiver. As examples, a firm might communicate quality to stakeholders through various means such as debt and dividends (Connelly et al., 2011) and a job applicant might signal that he or she is a higher quality candidate than other applicants by attending a high-quality university (Spence, 1973). Accordingly, signaling theory has been examined in a number of contexts including congressional oversight (Cameron & Rosendorff, 1993), management (Connelly et al., 2011), anthropological topics (Bird & Smith, 2005) and in marketing (e.g., Basuroy, Desai, & Talukdar, 2006).