News framing effects on destination risk perception

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Application of media framing theory to study effects on perceived risk.
- Exposure to different risk frames results in different levels of perceived risk.
- Influence of risk frames depends on tourists' psychographic characteristics.

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ABSTRACT

News coverage of hazards is often commented to be of critical importance to individuals' perceived risk associated with tourist destinations. Despite the significance of this issue to the global tourism industry, the link between portrayals of hazards and audience reception is rarely studied in this context. This study adopted the framing theory to evaluate media effect on tourists' perceived risk of portrayals of terrorism and political instability incidents. This involved a survey-embedded experiment which manipulated potential elements of a news report concerning a hazard. The content of fictitious articles used in the experiment was created on the basis of extant risk perception theories. Results revealed that the use of risk amplifying frame and risk attenuating frame result in higher and lower ratings of risk respectively. Moreover, tourist psychographic characteristics were found to moderate the influence of news frames on perceived risk. Implications for tourism destination managers and marketers were discussed.

1. Introduction

The media coverage of hazards is fundamental as to the way in which some hazards are perceived as risky and some are trivialised (Flynn, Slovic, & Kunreuther, 2001; Kasperson, 2005; Petts, Horlick-Jones, & Murdock, 2001). Lack of personal experience with hazards such as terrorism or political instability (hereafter 'PI') increases audiences' reliance on secondary sources of information. Among these, the news media are often commented to be a particularly important source of risk perceptions of hazards and the tourist destinations in which they take place. While providing people with crucial information in a timely manner, news media coverage of hazards is commonly believed to be associated with producing distorted understanding of safety levels at destinations (Chew & Jahari, 2014; Larsen, Brun, Torvald, & Selstad, 2011; L'Etang, Falkheimer, & Lugo, 2007). Consequently, this is of importance to

Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) who wish to minimise negative impacts of such coverage by understanding how potential tourists make sense and act upon this information and devising their own communication strategies to convey a more balanced view of the situation (Baxter & Bowen, 2004; Ritchie, Dorrell, Miller, & Miller, 2004).

Media scholars note that key to understanding the potential media effect on perception of risk is the way in which hazardous events are framed (Hove, Paek, Y., & Jwa, 2015; Hughes, Kitzinger, & Murdock, 2006; Marks, Kalaitzandonakes, Wilkins, & Zakharova, 2007). A number of studies demonstrate cases of mass media coverage of hazards which puts emphasis on some aspects of hazards to the exclusion of others (Daye, 2014; Spencer & Triche, 1994; Woods, 2007). It is widely agreed that the aspects of an issue highlighted by the speaker can influence the way audiences understand and interpret the issues covered (Price & Tewksbury, 1997). Tourism and hospitality studies that employ framing theory demonstrate that message frames can influence hotel booking intentions and trust (Sparks & Browning, 2011) and destination attractiveness (Min, Martin, & Jung, 2013). However, despite the

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agreement among tourism scholars that news framing can cause destinations to appear safer or more dangerous (Hall, 2002), there is a paucity of empirical studies on tourists' responses to different portrayals of risk (risk frames). The need for a study in this area is reinforced by a recent call on framing effects research in tourism by Liu and Pennington-Gray (2015).

Beyond considering the influence of different ways of portraying hazards, framing effects scholars note that it is equally important to consider characteristics of the audiences (Lecheler, de Vreese, & Slothuus, 2009). This is especially relevant in the context of perceived risk, which is subjective and depends upon a broad range of tourist characteristics. Among these, the degree of allocentricity has seldom been used to understand variance in perceived risk. Plog (1974) model of allocentricity identifies tourists' personality along a continuum from allocentrics to psychocentrics. The allocentric type is described by Plog (2001; 2002) as more outgoing, adventuresome and exploring, and self-confident than the psychocentric traveller.

Guided by framing effects theory and existing knowledge of perceived risk in tourism, this study sought to understand whether different media frames concerning hazards influence tourists' judgment of risk. Specifically, this study employed an experimental design to explore the impact of different portrayals of terrorism and PI hazards. Moreover, tourist characteristics of age, gender, and degree of allocentricity were considered as potential moderators of the media effect. The findings should provide needed empirical support for the often implied yet rarely tested influence of media messages on tourists' perception of risk. This issue is of significance from a theoretical standpoint and for the practice of communication strategies that help to recover problematic destination images.

2. Literature review

2.1. Risk perception

The concept of perceived risk, or subjective risk, in social scientific literature is commonly agreed to mean 'the processing of physical signals and/or information about potentially harmful events or activities, and the formation of a judgement about seriousness, likelihood and acceptability of the respective event or activity' (Slovic, Fischhoff, & Lichtenstein, 1982 cited by Grobe et al. 2008, p. 16; Brehmer, 1987; Renn, 2004). Proponents of the psychometric paradigm of risk (Fischhoff, Slovic, Lichtenstein, Read, & Combs, 1978) demonstrate that when evaluating risks, people are influenced by a host of qualitative risk features (see Table 1), or simplifying heuristics, which produce subjective biases and misjudgements of formal (quantitative) risk assessments (Fischhoff et al., 1978; Slovic et al., 1982). For example, the public is more concerned about involuntary risks (Slovic, 1987) and risk in affect-rich contexts such as terrorist attacks, than about less spectacular but much more probable ones such as heart disease (Lowenstein,

Table 1
Qualitative aspects attenuating or amplifying perceived risk.

Attenuate perceived risk	Amplify perceived risk
Familiar	Exotic/New
Controllable	Uncontrollable
Limited effects	Catastrophic effects
Natural	Man-made
Fair impact distribution	Unfair impact distribution
Clear benefits	No clear benefits
Voluntary	Imposed
Positive affect	Negative affect
Consequences not-fatal	Consequences fatal

Adapted from: Renn (2008).

Hsee, Weber, & Welch, 2001; Sjöberg, 2007).

2.2. Risk perception in tourism: terrorism and political instability

In tourism, risk perception is a function of uncertainty and consequences (Moutinho, 2000), with some consequences being more desirable to tourists than others. Although risk may entail positive and negative outcomes, it is often studied as undesirable outcomes, such as loss of time or money, that may arise from consuming tourism products, for example, trekking in unfamiliar environments. Risks identified include threats to health (e.g. food poisoning), and terrorism or PI, e.g. in hazards such as coups, kidnappings, bombings, and street disturbances. Terrorism and PI are often commented to be particularly intimidating risks due to the uncontrollable, involuntary and random nature of the potential harm involved in visiting destinations struck by such incidents (Cavlek, 2002; Heng, 2006). This is supported by Gray and Wilson (2009) who find that political hazards such as terrorism are perceived as riskier than other physical threats (e.g. weather) and social hazards (e.g. hostile local people). This may be partly attributed to the emotional charge carried by such events, which is further amplified by the man-made nature of harm involved, as opposed to acts of nature. One of the main consequences of man-made disasters is that, apart from the physical damage, the biggest impact is often felt on the psychological level (Jenkin, 2006; Schmid, 2005).

While related, PI and terrorism have a separate conceptual identity, which is supported by a number of authors who examine the phenomena from this perspective (e.g. Enders & Sandler, 1998; Richter & Waugh, 1986; Saha & Yap, 2013; Sonmez, 1998). Numerous and diverse definitions have been proposed over the years. In an attempt to address the call from scholars for terminological unity and conceptual clarity (Gupta, 1990; Seddighi, Theocharous, & Nuttall, 2002), Tcheocharous (2010) reviews and evaluates existing approaches to studying PI and proposes a definition which encompasses the key features of the phenomenon. He describes PI as "a situation where a political system is subjected to challenges or changes in the form of internal conflict, internal change and external conflict. The extent/level of instability is determined by the deviation of any given political event (or a combination of events) from the specific normal pattern of the system in which it occurs." (Tcheocharous, 2010, p. 358). PI is related to terrorism in the sense that the latter can be an indicator and an expression of the former (Sonmez, 1998). This said, it is not uncommon for terrorist attacks to take place in politically stable destinations (e.g. Bali, 2005; London 2005; Marrakech, 2010), which is one of the differences between these phenomena. Others may be identified on the basis of a definition of terrorism proposed by Schmid and Jongman (1988, p. 28) who suggest that "Terrorism is an anxiety-inspiring method of repeated violent action … whereby the direct targets of violence are not the main targets. The immediate human victims of violence are generally chosen randomly (targets of opportunity) or selectively (representative or symbolic targets) from a target population, and serve as message generators. Threat and violence-based communication processes between terrorists (organisations), (imperilled) victims, and main targets are used to manipulate the main target (audience)." This definition highlights that terrorism is concerned with the intentional use of violence against carefully selected targets to communicate a message and satisfy specific aims, for example, targeting civilians to generate media attention, moral repugnance in the target population, and behavioural changes undertaken by the affected (e.g. avoiding travel, or certain places) (Rubin, Brewin, Greenberg, Simpson, & Wessely, 2007; Silver, Holman, McIntosh, Poulin, & Gil-Rivas, 2002) as a means to satisfy political or