Attitude towards immigrants and security: Effects on destination-loyal tourists

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H I G H L I G H T S

- Widespread news reports about security forces effects word of mouth about the forces.
- Perceived security forces effectiveness affects felt safety and recommendation likelihood.
- Attitude toward undocumented immigrants affects felt safety and traveler behavior.
- Felt safety significantly effects return intention and recommendation likelihood.

A R T I C L E I N F O

A B S T R A C T

This study was conducted in the midst of a surge of undocumented immigrants into a popular seasonal migrant destination in the U.S. and the subsequent state response of adding security forces. Factors examined include the effects of the role of media in shaping perceptions about security forces, perceptions about security force effectiveness, perceptions of undocumented immigrants and political orientation. The study of 413 respondents found that attitudes toward undocumented immigrants affect felt safety in the region, likelihood of recommending and returning to the region. Perceptions of the effectiveness of the security forces were important in affecting likelihood of recommending the region to others but not return intention. These and other findings contribute significantly to the scant research on both effectiveness of crises management responses and on effects of perceptions of undocumented immigrants on traveler behavior.

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1. Introduction

Immigrants from South America and Mexico have illegally crossed the border into the U.S. for decades. In May 2014, an unprecedented 'surge' of as many as 35,000 undocumented immigrants crossed into the U.S. each month (Hennessy-Fisk & Carcamo, 2014). The news media reported extensively about this surge, which they labeled an 'immigration crisis' (CBSNews, 2015; NBCNews, 2015) or 'border crisis' (Huffington Post, 2015) as did prominent politicians, who noted the need for a resolution to the crisis (Speaker Ryan's Press Office, 2014). Most of these immigrants

were looking for a safe haven from armed conflict and gang violence in their home country or were simply seeking a better life (Preston & Archibold, 2014). However, some were intent on criminal activity, especially crimes related to drug or human trafficking. The massive immigration surge and concern about criminals among their ranks resulted in widespread protests in states across the U.S. (Graham, 2014).

With most of the immigrants crossing into the U.S. at the Rio Grande Valley (RGV) of South Texas (Hennessy-Fisk, 2014), the Texas governor deployed 1,000 Texas National Guard members and additional state troopers in support of local law enforcement agencies' efforts to reduce drug and human trafficking in the RGV. Not surprisingly, the surge in undocumented immigrants, the consequent deployment of troops to the region, and the widespread negative media attention caused great concern among destination managing organizations (DMOs) that the region would

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be seen as a militarized war zone (Texas Border Mayors, 2015), which could affect the return of the region's winter migrants. These migrants, known locally as Winter Texans, typically travel from across the U.S. and Canada to spend winters in the subtropical climate of the RGV. In 2014, about 100,000 seasonal migrants were in the RGV for an average of 133 days, had come to the RGV for an average of 11.2 years and spent more than $700 million while in the RGV (Simpson, 2014).

To address the DMOs' concerns about a potential decline in the numbers of winter migrants to the RGV, regional leaders took action because, as a business manager noted, "None of us want tourism to dry up" (Benson, 2014). One region's Chamber of Commerce president suggested that the State of Texas spend more money to promote the RGV to combat the negative publicity while another regional Chamber allocated $170,000 "to stem new concerns Winter Texans may have after watching the national media attention" about the crisis (Antonacci, 2014). Town hall meetings consisting of more than 200 area businesses and constituents were also held to discuss crisis effects on tourism and appropriate responses (City Matters, 2014; Mosbrucker, 2014). At one roundtable discussion held by U.S. Congressmen about the crises, an editor of a newspaper targeting the winter migrants expressed her concern:

> We are getting calls from Winter Texan readers asking if it is safe to come back … The perception is that it is really bad, really dangerous, down here. We have had people like Sean Hannity say there is chaos on the border. If we are not careful, we are going to see the No. 1 industry in Hidalgo County and the Valley, which is the tourism industry, destroyed. We have got to dispel the notion that people are roaming wild down here (Taylor, 2014).

Amidst the uncertain effects of the immigration and troop surge, this research draws on Sönmez and Graefe (1998b) international travel decision-making framework, integrated threat theory and information integration theory to examine crisis-related factors that may affect the return of the region's winter migrants to the destination. Such factors include individual personality characteristics such as political orientation, attitudes such as those held toward undocumented immigrants, perceptions of safety and the security force effectiveness as well as news and word-of-mouth communications about the security force deployment. Perceived safety is especially important because safety is a primary concern of tourists in destination selection and visits according to a considerably body of research (e.g., Fuchs & Reichel, 2011; George, 2003, 2010; Kozak, Crotts, & Law, 2007; Sönmez & Graefe, 1998b).

Results of this research of long-term visitors' perceptions of the area are needed at this time for three primary reasons. First, the results should provide DMOs with potential effects of the strategy to deploy security forces to combat an immigration surge on frequent visitors' perceptions and continued return, which should aid in developing appropriate response strategies. As Mansfeld (1999, p. 35) wrote, "Market segments should be very carefully and multidimensionally analyzed before making any marketing decisions." For example, if the visitors are unaware of the immigrant surge, are unconcerned about the immigrants' presence, or if they believe the troop surge sufficiently secures the border, then no additional efforts may be needed. Otherwise, aggressive efforts may be needed by the DMOs to ensure the return of visitors. Given the increase in highly publicized 'immigration crises' seen in the U.S. and Europe, DMOs around the world are likely to be increasingly concerned about how to cope with the situation and whether the strategies used to alleviate concerns associated with the surge in immigration are effective.

Second, this research is useful in contributing to the emerging stream of research about crisis management in tourism (Carlsen & Liburd, 2008). Although a growing number of studies are investigating the effects of crisis management efforts on travelers (e.g. Avraham, 2013; Cruz-Milán, Simpson, Simpson, & Choi, 2016), many still focus primarily on crisis communication strategies (e.g. Avraham, 2013; Avraham, 2015; Liu, Pennington-Gray, & Krieger, 2016; Ritchie, Crotts, Zehrer, & Volsky, 2014). Political orientation, which likely plays a significant role in attitudes and behaviors, especially toward immigrants and immigration (e.g. Bierbrauer & Klinger, 2002), has received very little study in tourism but may be important to perceptions of destination safety and choice.

Following the definition developed by Sönmez, Backman, and Allen (1994, p. 22), a tourism crisis is:

> 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).

Various tourism crises including natural disasters, such as tsunamis, highly contagious diseases such as swine flu, economic downturns, political instability and war, terrorism, violence and crime, have been examined in the growing stream of research investigating crises and crisis management planning at tourism destinations (e.g. Hall, 2010; Ritchie, 2004; Wang & Ritchie, 2012). While much research exists about the negative effects of perceived risk and threat to safety on traveler destination selection (Fuchs & Reichel, 2011; George, 2003, 2010; Kozak et al., 2007; Sönmez & Graefe, 1998b) that may arise from a crisis, few studies have investigated the tourism effects of a crisis *response* other than case studies and a few theoretical tourism crisis management (TCM) frameworks (Faulkner, 2001; Mansfeld, 1999; Paraskevas & Arendell, 2007; Ritchie, 2004; Santana, 2004; Sönmez et al., 1999).

Within those frameworks, researchers generally suggest that DMOs work closely with law enforcement during and after a crisis to assure tourists' safety and security. Despite these recommendations, almost no known academic studies have examined the effects of a law enforcement intervention in a security crisis on tourists' responses. For example, Carlsen and Liburd's (2008) extensive review of 60,000 tourism-related references in the Centre International de Recerces et d'Etudes Touristiques database found only 30 disaster or crisis management articles with a 'research' theme and only five with an 'impact' theme as does this study. The authors concluded that most of the prior risk, disaster and crisis management research was descriptive or prescriptive in nature with "virtually no research as to the effectiveness of these prescriptive strategies" (p. 266).

Since the Carlsen and Liburd (2008) study, the Travel and Tourism Research Association identified hazards/crisis management strategies and effects on travel as a top ten research priority (Williams, Stewart, & Larsen, 2012) and other TCM research has been published, primarily in the areas of planning, knowledge management and preparedness (e.g. Paraskevas & Altinay, 2013), effects of specific health or disaster-related crises including an oil spill (Ritchie et al., 2014), the norovirus on cruise lines (Liu et al., 2016), bed bugs (Liu & Pennington-Gray, 2015) and the economic crisis and swine flu (Page, Song, & Wu, 2012) with a number of these studies also examining communication effects. However, according to Fuchs and Reichel (2011) and Pizam, Tarlow, and Bloom (1997), further studies about the effects of law enforcement-related strategies at destinations with security