Destination image as a mediator between perceived risks and revisit intention: A case of post-disaster Japan

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Perceived socio-psychological and financial risks influenced destination images.
- Only perceived physical risk directly influenced revisit intention.
- Destination images mediated between perceived financial risks and revisit intention.
- Destination images mediated between socio-psychological and revisit intention.

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ABSTRACT

Despite the significance of perceived travel risk and destination image, relatively few studies address the effect of perceived travel risks on the formation of destination image, and the mediating role of destination image. This study draws new insights by examining (1) the effects of perceived risks on destination image, and (2) the mediating role of destination image between perceived risks and revisit intention of repeat tourists to a risky destination. With perceived risk and destination image being empirically distinctive constructs, findings revealed that perceived socio-psychological and financial risks influenced both cognitive and affective destination images. Perceived physical risk did not have a significant influence on destination image, although it directly affected revisit intention. Additionally, destination image significantly mediated the relationships between two risks, namely, perceived socio-psychological and financial risks, and revisit intention. Several managerial implications concerning the management of risk perceptions and the promotion of risky destinations are discussed in this study.

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1. Introduction

Tourism is a service industry in which the nature of its products is intangible and an experience (Tasci & Gartner, 2007) that is susceptible to risks and threats (i.e., crime, socio-political instability, natural disasters, epidemic diseases). Such vulnerability can tarnish the image of a travel destination (Sönmez, Apostolopoulos, & Tarlow, 1999). This poses difficulty for tourists to evaluate the attractiveness of a destination as their travel decisions tend to be based on perceptions rather than reality (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999a; Chon, 1990, 1992; Echtner & Ritchie, 1991; Kim & Richardson, 2003; Roehl & Fesenmaier, 1992). Destination image is important to destination managers as travel destinations predominantly compete on perceived image (Baloglu & Mangaloglu, 2001) that is a close representation of the actual product in conveying a destination's physical attributes (MacKay & Fesenmaier, 1997; Tasci & Gartner, 2007).

Besides the formation of destination image, perception of risks is one of several critical selection factors determining travel to preferred destinations. With increasing natural threats (e.g., epidemic diseases, natural disasters), the issue of security and safety has become a pressing concern amongst tourists (Poon & Adams, 2000). Incidences of natural disaster may exacerbate the level of perceived travel risk and impede tourist arrival (Lehto, Douglas, & Park, 2008). In Japan, both domestic and international tourists are generally more concerned about travel risks after the Fukushima Disaster in 2011. Besides frequent earthquakes that can cause injury and loss of life, a lingering concern is the risk of radiation exposure through contaminated food, water, and air quality. Portraying an accurate image and mitigating perceived risks are therefore crucial to create a positive destination image so as to

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enhance competitiveness of the tourist destination. However, implementing effective positioning strategies for post-disaster tourist destinations poses additional challenges (Sönmez & Sirakaya, 2002) as perpetual threat magnifies the concern of risk in volatile destinations (Fuchs & Reichel, 2011). Hence, prominent scholars in the field call for investigation of perceived risks (Fuchs & Reichel, 2011) and destination image (Sönmez & Graefe, 1998a) in the context of revisit intention to a risky destination that is timely to understand travelers' renewed perceptions toward a travel destination in a post-disaster stage (Lehto et al., 2008).

Considering that tourists' perceptions of risks and image of a holiday destination are very likely to play a crucial role in their travel decisions and behavior (Kozak, Crotts, & Law, 2007; Sönmez & Graefe, 1998a), Lepp, Gibson, and Lane (2011) support the call to integrate the risk and image literature (Qi, Gibson, & Zhang, 2009). This call echoes an earlier argument by Sönmez (1998, p. 16) that "it is essential to understand cognitive and affective processes individuals experience when they feel threatened". Sönmez (1998, p. 35) further argued that travel risks should be studied together with destination image and tourists attitudes as such understanding is crucial for crisis management teams and destination managers to alter negative perceptions and reinforce positive perceptions.

Rare attempts have been made to link perceived risk to some form of destination image (e.g., affective response in Lehto et al., 2008; organic image in Lepp et al., 2011) possibly owing to confusion arising from the interchangeable use of travel safety and travel risk, thereby raising concerns over the appropriateness of studying perceived risk and destination image as separate constructs in an integrated study. Hence, possible interrelations between perceived risks and destination image (e.g., direct role, mediating role) need to be further investigated. An understanding of these relationships is crucial to researchers and practitioners if they are to counteract the negative impact that perceived risk might have on tourists' perceived destination image and travel choices.

Recent scholarly work has revealed that repeat tourists revisit destinations despite risks (Gitelson & Crompton, 1984; Li, Cai, Lehto, & Huang, 2010; Rittichainuwat & Chakraborty, 2009; Shoemaker, 1994), suggesting that repeat tourists have different cognitive processes in image formation and travel behavior than those of first-time visitors (Fakeye & Crompton, 1991; Sirgy & Su, 2000). A repeat visitor in this study's context is a person who has been to Japan on previous occasions (Oppermann, 1997). The willingness to return to a risky destination, resultant from a lower degree of perceived risks, may be owed to risk reduction strategy, previous travel experience, travel motivation, loyalty and personal engagement, age, nationality, and culture (Fuchs & Reichel, 2004, 2011; Glaesser, 2003; Reichel, Fuchs, & Uriely, 2007; Reisinger & Mavondo, 2005; Rittichainuwat, 2006; Rittichainuwat & Chakraborty, 2012). Repeat tourists, on whom travel destinations are highly dependent (Lue, Crompton, & Fesenmaier, 1993), are more likely to act as a reference group or an informal channel of advertising through word-of-mouth that is effective in information dissemination and generation of new sales (Chi & Qu, 2008). Therefore, it is important to understand the behavior of repeat tourists toward traveling to a risky destination.

Despite the importance of these issues, the risk literature has barely examined perceived risks and destination image as separate constructs in a single study to understand the interrelations. Firstly, the role of perceived risks in re-forming destination image is one of the least studied areas (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999a; Beerli & Martin, 2004). Different types of risks can contribute in different ways to destination image. Secondly, the mediating role of destination image in the relations between perceived risks and revisit intention has not been previously investigated. More knowledge on intervening variables is required, especially regarding travel inhibitors

such as risk perceptions (Quintal, Lee, & Soutar, 2010). A few studies that have examined perceived risks and intention to revisit *risky* destinations report mixed findings (Fuchs & Reichel, 2011; Lepp & Gibson, 2003, 2008; Lepp et al., 2011). Contradictory to past findings that people tend to avoid risky destinations (Floyd, Gibson, Pennington-Gray, & Thapa, 2003; Sönmez & Graefe, 1998b), recent research found that repeat tourists do revisit destinations despite risks (Fuchs & Reichel, 2011; Glaesser, 2003; Rittichainuwat, 2006).

Given the mixed findings, dearth of knowledge, and the increasing vulnerability of tourist destinations to heightened travel-related risks and unfavorable images, it is necessary to address this research gap. Taking into account the significant role of travel perceptions in determining revisit behavior to disaster-struck destinations, further investigation of destination perceptions and intention to revisit of repeat tourists is warranted. Thus, taking a lead from the existing literature, the objectives of this study are to investigate: (1) the effects of risk perceptions on destination image of repeat tourists from Malaysia to Japan in the post-Fukushima disaster context, and (2) the mediating role of destination image in the relations between perceived risks and intention to revisit. Japan is chosen for this study as a risky destination because tourist arrivals in Japan showed a significant drop of 50% after the Fukushima Disaster in 2011 for fear of earthquakes, tsunami, and radiation exposure (Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO, 2012b)). To the best knowledge of the authors, this is the first study to examine the mediating role of destination image on the relationship between perceived risks and intention to revisit of repeat travelers. In specific, the study examines the mediating roles of two destination images, namely, cognitive and affective, on the relationship between perceived risks (i.e., physical, socio-psychological, financial) and intention to revisit.

In addition to addressing research gaps in the perceived risk and image literature, this study examines tourists' perceptions of real and relevant risks target to a natural and man-made disaster context instead of general assessments. Such examination provides useful knowledge to aid development of image restoration and tourism recovery strategies. This study further contributes by addressing the confusion in the operationalization of perceived risk and destination image by studying them as separate constructs in an integrated study. Given the limited studies that have only implied potential associations between perceived risk and destination image (e.g., Lehto et al., 2008; Lepp et al., 2011), this study adds to knowledge by conceptually and empirically disentangling the two constructs to create understanding of the potential distinctiveness between perceived travel risks and destination image. Moreover, integrating the constructs in a single study would aid understanding of both the interrelation between the two constructs and their influences on tourists' travel behavior, thereby providing academic and practical insights into how perceived travel risks and destination image of repeat tourists can be better managed to promote revisit intention.

2. Literature review

2.1. Prior research on perception of risks

The issue of safety and security associated with destinations has become an increasing concern amongst travelers (Poon & Adams, 2000). Perception of risk is of paramount importance in tourists' decision-making process as it can alter rational decision-making pertaining to destination choice (Sönmez & Graefe, 1998a). Perceived risk is defined as consumer perception of the probability that an action may expose them to danger that can influence travel decisions if the perceived danger is deemed to be beyond an