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"Crises" that scare tourists: Investigating tourists' travel-related concerns

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Abstract

The importance of perceived risk by tourists – while first studied in the broader context of general consumer behaviour (Bauer, 1960) - has been of ongoing interest to the tourism industry and research. The topic is of interest to tourism even in times when no major actual risks need to be feared given that the intangible nature of the tourism product brings uncertainty in the destination or vacation choice process. However, global political events such as terrorism attacks and the emergence of global epidemics have reignited awareness of the importance of risk perceptions, adding a new dimension to the potential consequences of not understanding what scares tourists. The relevance of the topic to the tourism industry is essentially driven by the fear of demand fluctuations due to unpredictable events that are beyond the control of tourism authorities and the industry. Consequently, it is important to gain in-depth understanding of concerns tourists have and the way they might react to different kinds of events in the course of a travel or destination choice process. Being aware of such aspects empowers tourism authorities and the industry to develop the right products, send the optimal communication messages and possibly target the most suitable market segments to assure continuing demand in future times of crisis.

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"CRISES" THAT SCARE TOURISTS
Investigating tourists' travel-related concerns

by

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Introduction

The importance of perceived risk by tourists – while first studied in the broader context of general consumer behaviour (Bauer, 1960) - has been of ongoing interest to the tourism industry and research. The topic is of interest to tourism even in times when no major actual risks need to be feared given that the intangible nature of the tourism product brings uncertainty in the destination or vacation choice process. However, global political events such as terrorism attacks and the emergence of global epidemics have reignited awareness of the importance of risk perceptions, adding a new dimension to the potential consequences of not understanding what scares tourists. The relevance of the topic to the tourism industry is essentially driven by the fear of demand fluctuations due to unpredictable events that are beyond the control of tourism authorities and the industry. Consequently, it is important to gain in-depth understanding of concerns tourists have and the way they might react to different kinds of events in the course of a travel or destination

choice process. Being aware of such aspects empowers tourism authorities and the industry to develop the right products, send the optimal communication messages and possibly target the most suitable market segments to assure continuing demand in future times of crisis.

Priori work

Prior work in this area can broadly be grouped into specific investigations of particular concerns, fears or perceived risks of tourists on the one hand, and more general investigations into the patterns of tourism consumer behaviour in response to perceived risks. Among the specific investigations into particular aspects of tourist concerns, two categories of perceived risks have attracted most attention: diseases and terrorism.

In the area of health-related studies, Cossens and Gin (1994) studied how tourist decision making is affected by the knowledge of high HIV rates at destinations, a topic first discussed by Cohen (1988). Investigating how strongly certain risks are perceived to be present in different regions of the world as well as the seriousness of the risk, the confidence tourists had in the local health system and their factual knowledge about HIV/AIDS, Cossens and Gin came to the conclusion that tourists assigned higher risk

evaluations to countries with high HIV rates, and that about 15 percent were actually influenced in their travel decision by such information.

In the context of safety concerns and their influence on tourists travel decisions, Demos (1992) reported a negative association of the crime rate and inbound tourism in Washington D.C. While this association is based on aggregate data and no causal conclusions can be drawn, the survey conducted in Washington D.C. by the author does indicate high levels of safety-related perceived risk among visitors. From a tourism management point of view this is relevant information in itself (independent of the actual association with crime rate levels) due to the possible negative effects of such high levels of perceived risk on tourism demand. Pinhey and Iverson (1994) find support for Demos's conclusions in a study of Japanese travellers and reveal a number of socio-demographic factors which are associated with the strength of negative safety concerns. A number of articles were published on the interrelation of terrorism and crime and tourism (Richter and Waugh, 1986; Chesney-Lind and Lind, 1986; Wahab, 1996; Sonmez, *et al.*, 1999; Mawby *et al.*, 2000; Crotts, 2003). These were, however, not investigating the influence of perceived risk on tourist behaviour.

A number of larger scale empirical studies have investigated the role of perceived risks as a broader construct in tourism decision making. Roehl and Fesenmaier (1992) used findings from the area of consumer behaviour as their starting point, selecting six broad risk categories items for the survey: equipment risk, financial risk, physical risk, psychological risk, satisfaction risk, time risk. They derived underlying factors of the items and use the

factor scores to construct a posteriori (Mazanec, 2000) or data-driven (Dolnicar, 2004) segments of tourists with specific reaction patterns to the listed risk items. These resulting groups of tourists are referred to as place risk group, functional risk group and risk neutral group. Group membership is shown to be associated with significantly different patterns of travel behaviour. Similar segmentation studies conducted by Dolnicar (2005a;2005b) support the validity of Roehl and Fesenmaier's findings a decade later using both an a priori (Mazanec, 2000) and a data-driven segmentation approach. In both cases distinctly different segments with regard to concerns tourists have in relation to travel are identified. These segments demonstrate significant differences regarding additional characteristics, for instance media behaviour, which makes target marketing of such "fear segments" viable. Sonmez and Graefe (1998) conducted an empirical study including the Roehl and Fesenmaier items and adding terrorism, health and political instability. They found that perceived risks and perceived safety are associated with expressed intentions to travel by respondents.

The present paper reports on the results of two empirical studies that aimed at eliciting currently perceived risks from the tourist marketplace and investigates the differences in statements of concerns with respect to different tourism settings.

Methodology

Data was collected from two sources capturing different subsegments of the tourism market. One study was conducted at an Australian University with undergraduate students across all faculties. Both open-ended questions and lists of risks were included in the questionnaire. The lists of risks were derived from student focus groups which were held prior to developing the survey instrument. 373 completed questionnaires form the basis of the data set.

The second study was conducted in co-operation with a leading Australian tour operator specialising in adventure travel. Data was collected at the tour operator's outlets across Australia during the exploratory phase; and online by emailing all the members of a newsletter mailing list during the quantitative phase. In the qualitative phase, questionnaires including one single question were handed out to tourists entering the premises. They were offered a well-targeted incentive to complete the questionnaire: the opportunity to win a vacation for two people worth approximately $4000. The statements resulting from the exploratory study were analysed using descriptive statistics and used subsequently to develop the survey tool for the quantitative phase. The following items were included in the list: An act of terrorism, War / military conflict, Political instability, Travel warning issued before travel, Natural disasters (landslides, earthquakes), Life threatening diseases eg SARS, General health concerns, Lack of access to western medical facilities, Lack of access to clean food and water, High personal mental and physical challenge, Theft, Unreliable airline, Lack of suitable pre trip training and preparation, Fear of travelling in a

small group. Respondents were asked whether these concerns would prevent them from booking a trip. 649 respondents completed the questionnaire online.

Descriptive statistics were computed on the basis of the available data sets using SPSS in its 12.1.0 version. The limitation of the data sets is that both capture particular sub-segments of the tourist population: students and adventure travellers, respectively. While this does not weaken the results derived in the context of these sub-segments, it should be noted that the results cannot be generalised to the general tourist population.

Results

As described above, the student questionnaire contained both open-ended questions and a list of risks for evaluation. The open ended questions were worded as follows: "When deciding on how to spend the next vacation, which aspects of this decision do you perceive as risky? What are you concerned about?", "When going on vacation in Australia, which are the risks you perceive? What are you worried about?", "When going on vacation overseas, which are the risks you perceive? What are you worried about?".

Safety-related factors were mentioned by 42 percent of the respondents. Responses to the open-ended questions were more frequently given in the context of overseas travel than was the case for domestic travel where only nine percent shared the safety-concern. Similarly, a fifth of the respondents stated health concerns regarding an overseas trip; only six percent were concerned about health-related aspects of their trip when staying in Australia. Details

of the aspects stated are provided in Table 1. As can be seen, Terrorism and War dominate the list of safety-related perceived risks, Diseases cause most worries among health-related statements.

Table 1: Open-ended statements within fear categories (in absolute numbers of respondents)

		general	*domestic*	*overseas*
Safety	Terrorism	47	2	73
	War	21	1	20
	Violence	8		3
	Attacks	4	1	
	Bombings	4		3
	Kidnapping / being held hostage	4		4
	Crime	2	2	8
	Attacked / bitten by animal		16	1
Health	Disease	12	1	19
	Injury	4	3	2
	Accident	2	8	2
	Hygiene	1		6
	Food supply	1		3
Money	Not enough money	4	3	3
	Money access	1		2
	Wasting Money	1	4	
Air travel	Plane crash	2	5	2
	Plane safety	1		2
Cultural risk	Culture clash	5		1
	Social	4	2	3
	Language	3		17
	Discrimination	2	1	3
Loss of property	Theft	7	3	19
	Luggage	2	5	7
	Robbery	2		6
	Valuables / passport	1	1	11
Other tourists	Crowded	2	6	
Other	Transportation / roads	1	24	9
	Getting lost	5	10	8
	Environment	3	4	2
	Natural disasters	3	2	1

Table 1 also illustrates how clearly respondents discriminate between the overseas and the domestic context. This is particularly visible in the areas of War, Terrorism, Diseases, and Theft, all of which are hardly mentioned in the Australian context. The contrary is the case regarding the fear of being attacked by animals, as well as concerns about roads and

transportation: Australia as a tourism destination appears to trigger much more concern with respect to these aspects than overseas destinations do. These differences suggest the existence of a destination-specific risk image which is present in tourists minds in a similar way to classic destination images focused on travel benefits. Such destination risk images would be likely to influence the tourist decision making process in a very similar way, limiting inclusion into the evoked set and consequent development of preferences (Woodside & Lysonski, 1989) for destinations with the lowest perceived destination risk attributes.

In addition to the open-ended question, students were presented with a list of risks and were first asked to state whether the occurrence of this risk would increase or decrease their booking probability and then requested to do the following: "Please indicate the strength of this influence by writing a percentage value. 1% means that the influence on the booking decision is very low, 100% means it is highest." The average values assigned by all the respondents are provided in Table 2. The first two items – characterised by the highest assigned influence levels – are the two positive items, for which respondents indicated that it would increase rather than decrease their booking probability. A 50 percent influence on the booking decision is expressed by respondents. Almost as strong is the effect of bad weather. The tourists concerns raised most frequently in the open-ended questions (terrorism and diseases) are seen to have the highest influence on the booking decision excluding the two positive items and bad weather with influence values of 44 and 40 percent, respectively. Social risk, the dimension omitted by Roehl and Fesenmaier due to

the detrimental effect on the scale reliability (probably indicating a different dimension of

perceived risk altogether), was consistently rated lowest among students: the three

respective items were assigned influence values between 13 and 22 percent, respectively.

Table 2: Average strength of event influence on booking decision on a scale from low (1%) to high (100%)

	N	Mean (%)	Std. Dev.
I might undertake thrilling activities*	333	51	32
I might travel to exotic & unusual places*	340	51	32
The weather might be bad	333	48	38
I might be a victim of terrorism	334	44	45
I might be exposed to the risk of contagious diseases	336	40	42
I might get bad value for money	346	32	38
There might be a lot of insecurity involved	331	29	31
I might get sick	331	28	33
I might injure myself	332	28	32
The natural environment might be hostile	331	28	34
It might be a waste of time	329	26	34
The vacation might not be satisfying	332	25	29
My trip might cause environmental damage	327	24	82
I might not have a great time	326	23	27
I might feel socially uncomfortable	337	22	24
The vacation might not reflect my personality	332	18	24
People might have a bad opinion of me	331	13	21

Finally, the probability of occurrence of the listed concerns was investigated by asking respondents "Please indicate for the kinds of trips stated in the first row, how strongly you think each of the risks applies to this particular kind of travel on a percentage scale, where 0% indicates that the risk does not exist in that particular kind of travel and 100% indicates that the risk is extremely high".

Table 3 shows the average percentages across all respondents for each context and averaged across all four contexts. As highlighted in bold, the event perceived as most likely varies across contexts: contagious diseases are assigned the highest probability of all perceived risks in the overseas travel context, bad weather leads the list of perceived risks for domestic and adventure travel and not getting good value for money is stated to be the

most likely risk in the on a culture tourism trip. For a further discussion of the destination- and context-specific differences see Dolnicar (2005a). By computing the sum over all assigned probabilities for the four contexts a risk occurrence indicator can be computed. The resulting values are shown in the bottom row of Table 3. It becomes evident from these values that overseas trips are perceived as most risky in sum, followed by culture trips and adventure trips. However, from a managerial point of view, the nature of the risks associated with specific destinations or travel contexts are of higher practical value than such a composite index, as it enables destination management to communicate with their target markets more efficiently either by emphasizing that they are a low-risk destination or by actively providing information that reduces the levels of certain risks associated with that particular destination or travel context.

Table 3: **Average estimated occurrence of events at different destinations and in different travel contexts (in average assigned percentages)**

	over-seas	std. dev.	dom-estic	std. dev.	ad-venture	std. dev.	culture	std. dev.	TOTAL AVG.
I might get bad value for money	55	28	33	26	41	29	42	28	**43**
The weather might be bad	45	30	40	29	46	31	34	30	**41**
I might undertake thrilling activities	44	32	39	79	53	37	28	29	**41**
I might injure myself	41	31	31	29	55	37	27	28	**38**
I might get sick	50	31	28	28	37	30	33	29	**37**
I might travel to exotic & unusual places	46	36	29	29	37	34	36	33	**37**
I might be exposed to the risk of contagious diseases	56	31	23	29	28	29	37	31	**36**
I might be a victim of terrorism	54	34	25	29	26	30	38	33	**36**
The natural environment might be hostile	46	30	27	25	35	30	34	32	**35**
The vacation might not be satisfying	35	31	33	26	33	28	37	29	**34**
There might be a lot of insecurity involved	44	31	23	23	38	31	31	28	**34**
I might feel socially uncomfortable	40	29	18	21	26	26	37	30	**30**
I might not have a great time	29	29	28	27	29	29	31	28	**29**
It might be a waste of time	23	28	25	27	27	29	32	31	**27**
My trip might cause environmental damage	24	28	23	28	30	31	24	29	**25**
The vacation might not reflect my personality	23	25	19	22	25	29	25	28	**23**
People might have a bad opinion of me	26	28	17	22	19	23	24	27	**22**
AVERAGE NEGATIVE RISK EVALUATIONACROSS CONTEXTS	**39**		**26**		**32**		**33**		

A final conclusion that can be drawn from the risk probability analysis is that – across all contexts – respondents assign higher probabilities to more commonly occurring events, as bad value for money or bad weather. This is not surprising. If is, however, surprising that concerns such as Contagious Diseases and Terrorism are assigned higher probabilities than all social risk items and items such as Not Having a Great Time or the vacation being A Waste of Time. While follow-up research would be required to gain more insight into the reasons for this paradox (which contradicts the absolute probability of the occurrence of the respective events), a possible hypothesis could be the increased awareness of tourists of major global events due to higher levels of media reporting on global epidemics and terrorism activity.

The first phase of the investigation of adventure tourists' concerns consisted of collecting their perceived risks. The exact wording of the question was as follows: "When deciding on how to spend the next holiday, which aspects of this decision do you perceive as risky? What are you concerned about? Please write down all the concerns / worries / fears that come to your mind:" The aim was to collect unaided statements of tourists in order to capture the broadest possible list of concerns that are on tourists' minds during the process of vacation planning. Given that the collaborating tour operator was very careful not to burden the respondents too much, personal characteristics were not collected at this point. The fieldwork resulted in a wide variety of statements which led to the selection of the items used in the quantitative stage of the survey and can be roughly classified into the following groups: Political Risk (examples of statements include "real danger of being

caught in military conflict", "unsafe to travel to chosen location because of war"),

Environmental Risk (e.g. "Landslides"), Health Risk (e.g. "sudden illness needing

immediate treatment", "medical advice not to take the trip", "life threatening diseases"),

Planning Risk (e.g. "my travel arrangements could not be confirmed", "assured flight

home"), and Property Risk (e.g. "security of luggage etc on travel eg buses and trains"). A

detailed statistic of the responses is provided in Table 4.

Table 4: Perceived Fears of Adventure Tourists (in numbers of respondents, Source: Dolnicar, 2005b)

	general	domestic	overseas		general	domestic	overseas
Safety	157	34	177	of which:			
				Terrorism	47	2	73
				War	21	1	20
				Violence	8		3
				Attacks	4	1	
				Bombings	4		3
				Kidnapping	4		4
				Crime	2	2	8
				Animal attack		16	1
Health	48	21	76	of which:			
				Disease	12	1	19
				Injury	4	3	2
				Accident	2	8	2
				Hygiene	1		6
				Food supply	1		3
Political stability	30		18				
Value for Money	30	20	25				
Money	25	19	25	of which:			
				Not enough money	4	3	3
				Money access	1		2
				Wasting Money	1	4	
Destination	26	4	5				
Air travel	23	10	25	of which:			
				Plane crash	2	5	2
				Plane safety	1		2
Cultural risk	20	6	37	of which:			
				Culture clash	5		1
				Social	4	2	3
				Language	3		17

				Discrimination	2	1	3
Weather	18	28	2				
Loss of property	13	9	45	of which:			
				Theft	7	3	19
				Luggage	2	5	7
				Robbery	2		6
				Valuables / passport	1	1	11
Accommodation	6	7	2				
Other tourists	4	7		of which:			
				Crowded	2	6	
Other	60	80	39	of which:			
				Transportation / roads	1	24	9
				Getting lost	5	10	8
				Environment	3	4	2
				Natural disasters	3	2	1

The adventure tourists' views on perceived risks which would prevent them from booking were explored in the following question: "Which of the following risks that can occur prior to or during your trip would prevent you from booking the trip on your side? (Please tick all appropriate boxes in both columns.)". The result is provided in Table 5. Note that respondents were only able to answer by ticking or not ticking each listed perceived risk. The percentages thus indicate the proportion of the sample who stated that each respective concern from the list would prevent them from booking.

As can be seen, War and Miliary Conflict is the most powerful concern: it would prevent about 80 percent of tourists from booking. The next risk factor likely to prevent 60 percent of the adventure travellers from booking is found to be the occurrence of Life Threatening Diseases, followed closely by Acts of Terrorism.

Table 5: Concerns that would prevent tourists from booking

	Respondents	Percent
War / military conflict	510	79%
Life threatening diseases eg SARS	386	59%
An act of terrorism	361	56%
Lack of access to clean food and water	298	46%
Political instability	297	46%
Travel warning issued before travel	297	46%
Unreliable airline	292	45%
Natural disasters (landslides, earthquakes)	222	34%
Lack of suitable pre trip training and preparation	208	32%
General health concerns	121	19%
High personal mental and physical challenge	92	14%
Lack of access to western medical facilities	88	14%
Theft	60	9%
Fear of travelling in a small group	15	2%

General Health Concerns and the Lack of Access to Western Medical Facilities would only prevent 19 and 14 percent of adventure travellers from booking, respectively and Theft is almost negligible with only one out of ten respondents stating that they would not book for that reason.

Of particular interest in Table is the fairly high reaction to Travel Warnings. Almost half of the adventure tourists would consider not booking a trip if a Travel Warning were issued by the Australian Government. This indicates a high reactivity and a potential danger for tour operators specialising in countries which have high probabilities of being mentioned on the Government's warning list.

Conclusions, Limitations and Future Work

Tourists' concerns were investigated among two sub-segment of tourists: adventure tourists and student tourists. For each of the sub-segments both unaided open questions and closed questions with a number of perceived risk items listed in the questionnaire were used. The unaided questions aimed at deriving statements not influenced by options to choose from. The closed questions aimed at deriving valid proportions of sub-segments regarding the concerns that most influenced their travel behaviour or travel planning behaviour.

The results indicate that – no matter which sub-segment and no matter which approach to questioning – the fear of terrorism and contagious diseases is present in today's tourist's mind and has the power of dramatically modifying tourist behaviour. For instance, 80 percent of adventure tourists state that a war or military conflict would prevent them from booking. The managerial implications of this finding are significant and numerous. First, the tourism industry needs to learn as much as possible about what can potentially scare the market segment catered for from booking. Second, ways of delivering information should be investigated to ease the concerns of travellers. For instance, a miliary conflict may well be happening in parts of a country, while other parts could be totally unaffected. Such information would have to be effectively and quickly communicated to customers in a situation where, for instance, travel warnings are issued and tourists are tempted to instantly react by cancelling (or not booking) a trip. Finally, market segments could exist that are less affected in their travel behaviour by potential risks they might encounter. If this is the case, such segments should be identified and profiled. They could represent a stable

customer base that can consistently be harvested independently of global events thus providing tourism industry with the security of stable demand patterns.

Another interesting insight from the investigation of perceived fears among tourist is the distinct nature of differences of expressed concerns across both destinations and travel contexts. Again, this has important consequences for tourism industry. Destination management, for instance, could develop destination risk image profiles in the same way they are presently analysing and optimising the general images of destinations as perceived by tourists. The destination risk image profile could then be managed to either match particular segments of tourists or generally to minimise any negative risk perceptions. Furthermore, tourism operators specialising in certain areas of tourism, for instance, cultural tourism or adventure tourism, should be aware of the main concerns tourists have that are specific to their product offering in order to be able to optimally communicate with their target market.

While this investigation has led to some significant insights and allowed a number of recommendations to be deduced for tourism industry practise, the study naturally has it limitations. First, all findings are valid only for the samples under study and cannot be generalised to the total tourist population. Second, all the presented analyses are based on behavioural intentions; the extension to the study of actual tourist behaviour would be desirable in future. Third, the results presented were based on sample totals, not investigating the possible existence of segments among tourists who systematically differ in

their risk perceptions and / or reactivity to risk. Future work in this direction should therefore be conducted. For instance, are there market segments who have systematically different perceptions of how likely certain risks might occur in different tourism contexts? Are there segments who are affected to a different extent in their booking behaviour if they are concerned about certain issues? Furthermore, and on a more theoretical note, the asymmetry of positive and negative perceived risks which became evident from the question on how strongly the occurrence of certain events would influence the booking probability should be studied in more detail. Another open issue is the question whether the effect of tourist concerns on booking or cancelling behaviour is compensatory or not: are there certain concerns which can under no circumstances be compensated? Which concerns can be successfully compensated and in which way to prevent tourists from not booking or cancelling trips?

Acknowledgement

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