

THE DIMENSION OF RISK PERCEPTION IN THE CONTEXT OF POLITICAL CRISES

Tuankarn Watthanaboon* & Tetsuo Shimizu*

Tokyo Metropolitan University, Japan

Abstract: The tourism industry is fragile because tourists are highly vulnerable to various crises and disasters. Because of the safety concerns of tourists, the tourism industry can suffer as a direct result of internal political conflict. Political crises can increase the perception of risk at the tourist destinations. This paper aims to examine the underlying dimension of risk perception in the context of political crises. A qualitative approach was employed to gain multiple perspectives and a deeper understanding of risk perception from an international tourist's perspective regarding political crises. The semi-structured interview technique was selected to identify the types of risks or fears of the respondents when travelling to the political crisis destination. There were 64 respondents, comprising both potential international tourists and tourists who had previously visited Bangkok. Some respondents had experienced political crisis incidents, others had not. Thematic analysis of the data resulted in the identification of 32 political crisis risk perceptions which were grouped into 6 main themes as follows: 1. Trust in government; 2. Feeling lost; 3. Political turmoil anxiety; 4. Feeling detained; 5. Hospitality distorted; 6. Lack of political crisis knowledge/background. Understanding risk perceptions regarding political crises will help destination managers develop more effective crisis management strategies for dealing with potential political crises in their countries.

Keywords: Tourists' Risk Perceptions, Political Crises, Dimension of Political Risk Perception

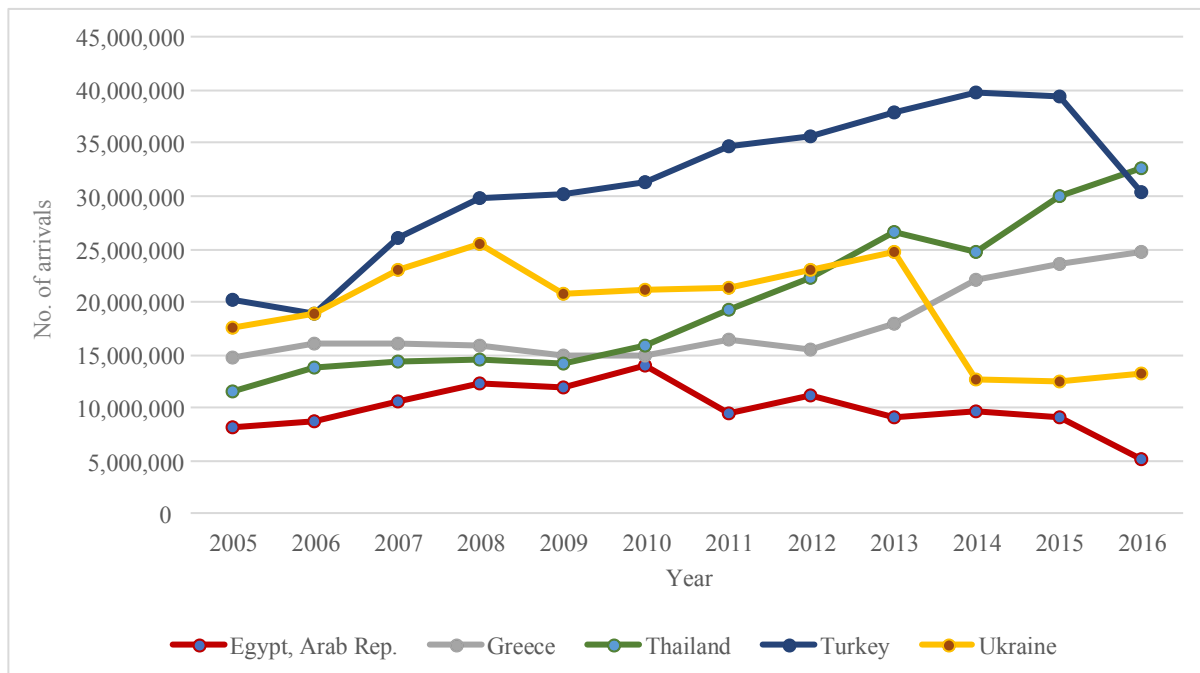
Introduction

Tourists are very sensitive to crises and disasters in destination countries which give rise to risk and safety concerns. In some parts of the world the tourism industry is in crisis as the result of ongoing political uncertainty and interconnected violence. Recent examples include the protests in Bangkok, Seoul, Hong Kong, Kuala Lumpur, and Istanbul, as well as the safety and security concerns arising from the North Korean missile tests which have created tension between the countries around Korean Peninsula. In many tourist destination countries where political instability and conflict has occurred, the tourism industry has been affected negatively, with a decline in the number of international tourist arrivals and tourism revenue.

The relationship between the change in the number of tourist arrivals and the occurrence of political crises indicates the way the political stability of a nation can determine the future of international tourism demand. According to Reisinger & Mavondo (2005), the tourism industry cannot develop in countries or destinations that are perceived as harmful and dangerous. Safety and physical security are the primary conditions for the normal tourism development of a destination, region, or country. For example, because of the prolonged political protest in Thailand (2013-2014) the tourism business certainly experienced a decrease in the number of international tourist arrivals and tourism revenues.

The impact of political instability on a country's tourism industry is potentially both immediate and long-lasting. Additionally, in some circumstances, instability in one country may affect the tourism sector of neighbouring countries. For example, there have been conflicts within Turkey as well as conflicts in neighbouring countries and the number of international tourists has been decreasing gradually. In contrast Greece has attract more international tourists as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Number of international tourist arrivals in selected countries, 2005 - 2016



Source: (World Bank 2018)

Figure 1 illustrates the decline in the number of international tourist arrivals during and after the political crises in selected countries from 2005 to 2016. The Egyptian and tourist deaths resulting from attacks in Sharm El Sheikh and the city of Dahab in 2005 and 2006, together with the Arab Spring and the overthrow of President Mubarak (2011) led the number of international tourists to decline from approximately 14 to 9.5 million. Two years later, the political crisis in Egypt that led to the ousting of President Morsi resulted in the decrease of international tourist arrivals to 9.5 million in 2013 from 11.5 million in 2012. The period of political uncertainty in Egypt has resulted in the decline of the number of international tourists visiting the country.

Another example of the result of political crises on the number of tourist arrivals can be seen in Thailand. In December 2008 the international airport closure caused a decline in international tourists' confidence. This event led to a decrease in international arrivals of approximately 3% year-on-year. Political uncertainty continued into 2013-2014 with approximately 6 months of anti-government protests in Bangkok. The tourism industry was hit by a decline in the number of international tourist arrivals and tourism revenues (26 million in 2013 to 24 million in 2014). It shows that Thailand lost the opportunity to gain more international tourists due to the ongoing political crisis.

Given the recent decrease in international arrivals due to political conflict, there is a need to understand tourists' perceptions so that tourism organisations in both the public and private sectors can be better prepared in the future. However, less attention has been paid to international tourists' perceptions of the risks resulting from internal political crises. The purpose of the study is to provide a better understanding of risk dimensions from the tourist's perspective in the specific context of the political crisis.

Literature Review

Political Conflict and Tourism

Political instability usually takes places where a government has been plunged into, or controlled by, dissensions following riots, protests, coup d'état, or where essential functional pre-requisites for social-order control and maintenance are unstable and periodically interrupted. Williams (2012) says that 'political instability' refers to a situation in which the conditions and mechanisms of governance and rule are defined as to their legitimacy by uncontrol elements outside the regular political system.

There are different degrees of political instability. For example, from the history of Thai governments, the life spans of governments have been very short. Since 1932, the Thai military has seized power twelve times. Moreover, 6 months of prolonged protest in 2013 – 2014 resulted in a decrease in the number of international tourist arrivals and tourism expenditures. Political conflicts have dramatically affected the tourist flows, tourism industry development and policy decisions. According to Hall (2002), the issues of political disputes and political relations within and between states are greatly crucial in determining the tourist destination image and tourists' risk perceptions. Hence, if there is no safety and security at the destination, both business and leisure travel will be affected negatively.

Recent studies (Cohen and Neal, 2010) on the cumulative effects of Thailand's multiple economic and political crises on the Thai tourism industry from 2007 to 2009 point out that the occupation of Bangkok's main airport absolutely disrupted and provoked a sharp drop in the number of arrivals and in the economy of Thailand more generally. Moreover, Campiranon et., al. (2011) analysed how the Thai government responded very differently to the impact on the country's tourism industry of the 2004 tsunami and the 2008 Bangkok airport closure crisis. They noted that in the case of tsunami, the response benefited the tourism industry; while in the case of the airport closure, the response was damaging to the tourism industry.

Risk Perception

Slovic (2016) defined risk perception as interpretations and others subjective judgments about risks thereby risk perception refers to people's subjective judgments about probability of negative occurrences. Since 1960 theoretical inquiry and empirical research have paid significantly increased attention to the concept of risk perception. Bauer (1960) is one of the early scholars to have identified risk perception as a determinant of consumer behaviour within the context of marketing. Since that time, many researchers have broadly applied the notion of risk perception to various disciplines, including sociology, political science, geography and psychology (Mitchell 1999; Slovic 2016). Marketing literature concerning the concept of customer risk perception, also termed perceived risk, and has focused its attention on consumer decision making in the marketing context.

The significance of the concept of risk lies in its dominant operation in dealing with customers' decision-making process. When coping with a choice, the consumer perceives risk as part of the ambivalence about a decision's consequences and outcomes (Bauer 1960). Some researchers perceive it as a pivotal role of marketing consumer behaviour that might produce anxiety (Reisinger & Mavondo, 2005) and noted that risk perception influences consumer choice during the pre-decision making process and is particularly influential in the information search stage (Conchar, et., al. 2004).

Moutinho (1987) is also the first researcher to relate the concept of risk perception to the travel decision making process. He argued that there are four main factors involved in determining the perceived level of risk i.e., past behaviour, information, personality, and level of risk awareness. In his conceptual work, he emphasised that risk perception plays a role in raising the tourist's awareness of the consequence of loss in the first stage of travel decision making.

Dimension of Risk Perception

Since the concept of risk perception was recognised as an integral part of consumer purchasing behaviour, many scholars have expressed concern about both its status as an unstandardized construct and the broad classification of its dimensions (Conchar, et., al. 2004; Simpson and Siguaw, 2008). Within risk perception studies, even the term dimension is used interchangeably with terms such as 'typicality' (Mitchell 1999; Ross 1975) or 'component' (Brooker 1984). Further, there is inconsistency in the labelling of the dimensions of risk perception. For example, Roselius (1971) used the term monetary loss, while Mitchell (1999) used financial risk.

Within the marketing context, scholars have attempted to classifying the dimensions of risk perception. Roselius (1971), one of the earlier scholars, proposed that there are 4 dimensions of perceived risk, which he called time loss, hazard loss, money loss, and ego loss. While Kaplan et., al (1974) argued that there are another 5 dimensions of perceived risk which i.e., performance, financial, psychological, physical, and social. In their study, Kaplan et., al. (1974) further demonstrated that these dimensions could explain 74% of the overall perceived risk for 12 consumer products, which included health, recreational, and hygiene items. Their research claimed that performance is the most powerful dimension and that this explains the variance among the other dimensions. Brooker (1984) combined the 5 dimensions of the Kaplan et., al. (1974) and the time loss dimension of Roselius's study, and found that the performance and financial dimensions are the strongest predictors of variance among brands of generic products (Roselius 1971). The literature indicates that risk perceptions are often influenced by the context. Therefore, this study attempts to deploy the notion of risk perception within the context of international tourism to destination in political crises.

Methodology

The semi-structured interview technique was deployed with 64 respondents comprising both potential international tourists and tourists who had previously visited Bangkok. Some respondents had experienced political crisis incidents, others had not. Targeting this sample population allowed the risk perceptions of both groups to be identified. Each respondent could mention about risks or fears that they have been concerned more than 1 risk. The semi-structured interview technique was selected because some of the questions used in this study were sensitive and personal, questions related to personal political crisis experience. As suggested by Smithson (2000), the semi-structured interview is more appropriate than the use of focus groups if the topic of research is sensitive and personal. This study used purposive sampling, particularly snowball sampling.

Data Analysis

This study employed thematic analysis to identify, analyse, and report patterns (themes) within the semi-structured interview data. Regarding the accuracy of the data, each transcript and note taken was coded to ensure the anonymity of each respondent. This process allowed the researcher to identify themes in the data such as uncertainty, consequence, and concerns about travelling to Bangkok during a political crisis. The researcher generated the initial codes and listed them by their frequency. The 46 themes that resulted were reduced to 32 by eliminating

themes and words that were not relevant in a political crisis context. Themes that were infrequent were rejected.

Findings

Thematic analysis led to 32 perceptions of political risk being identified as listed in Table 1. Each of these 32 risk perceptions constituted a minor theme. These themes were identified by keywords that were relevant in a political crisis context. Where it was apparent that minor themes could logically be grouped, they became a major theme, such as political turmoil anxiety, feeling lost and feeling detained. Therefore, each major theme is comprised of several minor themes. For example, for the major theme of government trust, there are 5 minor themes. The outcome was that the 32 risk perceptions (minor themes) were grouped into 6 major themes. The major themes were then ranked according to the number of respondents who identified with each theme.

Table 1 Themes of risk perception in a political crisis context

Major Themes	Minor Themes
1. Political turmoil anxiety (88 mentions)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Feel anxious to hear a free speech from the protest 2. Afraid to encounter corpses 3. Afraid that no one will help 4. Depression from seeing political violence 5. Chaotic situation 6. Feel anxious to see the demonstration
2. Feeling lost (72 mentions)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Difficulties in finding the hotel and transportation 2. Sudden emergence of a political violence 3. Worried about family 4. Physical loss 5. Time loss 6. Financial loss 7. Separated from family members
3. Feeling detained (69 mentions)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The main airport will be closed 2. Get trapped in the congested road 3. Language barrier 4. Disconnected telecommunication network 5. Unavailability of basic transportations 6. Get trapped in the hotel
4. Government trust (26 mentions)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Obscure information from government 2. Distrust government's crisis planning 3. Government role in safety procedure 4. Unclear mitigation information 5. Government travel warning
5. Hospitality distorted (18 mentions)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Failure of service quality standard 2. Uncooperative action of the local people 3. Unfriendly local people 4. Unfriendly/unkind government officer
6. Lack of political crisis knowledge (14 mentions)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Lack of knowledge in political crisis 2. Inadequate information on political crisis 3. Lack of personal knowledge on political crisis mitigation 4. Lack of political background

Major theme 1: Political turmoil anxiety

Within the major theme of political turmoil anxiety are 6 minor themes, which were summarised from the 88 comments that respondents made relating to this theme. As becomes evident from an explanation of the 6 minor themes, political turmoil anxiety is mainly a psychological risk. This finding supports the work of Kaplan et., al. (1974) and Mitchell (1999). Moreover, this theme also relates to negative emotions that might affect risk perceptions (Tronvoll 2011).

Major theme 2: Feeling lost

Feeling lost was the second most cited concern by respondents with 72 mentions. The results of this study found 7 minor themes within this theme. This theme includes physical risk i.e., the possibility that a trip to a particular destination will result in physical danger, injury or sickness (Roehl and Fesenmaier 1992) and family-related anxiety such as a fear of losing, being separated from, or worried about a family member during a turmoil. The physical risk and the financial risk are well documented in the tourism literature (Floyd and Pennington-Gray 2004; Reisinger and Mavondo 2005). The possibility of losing belongings or having to pay extra money is supported by Fuchs and Reichel (2006) in the context of political instability in Israel.

Major theme 3: Feeling detained

The risk of the inconvenience and discomfort of travelling was mentioned 69 times. These comments were then grouped into 6 minor themes within the major theme of feeling detained. This risk included the unavailability of communication networks and basic transportation. Respondents often referred to the closure of Bangkok airport in 2008, indicating the potential for a previous crisis to influence a tourist's assessment of potential risk.

Major theme 4: Government trust

Government trust relates to proactive planning for managing a disaster or crisis. Ritchie (2009) argues that with proactive disaster or crisis plan management, the role of each institution should be integrated. There were 26 mentions relating to government trust, and these were grouped into 5 minor themes.

Major theme 5: Hospitality distorted

These risks were mentioned 18 times and were categorised in 4 minor themes. The image of Thailand is of a land of smile and excellent of hospitality. Most tourists are always expecting excellent service from tourism industry staff and friendly local people. In case of political crisis, tourists are afraid of the service being unstandardized. These were social and satisfactions risks. Mitchell (1999) suggested that this kind of risk perception should be considered a performance risk.

Major theme 6: Lack of political crisis knowledge/background

A total of 14 mentions were received regarding the lack of political crisis knowledge/background awareness. These were grouped into 4 minor themes. A perceived risk that has not been discussed in the previous literature is political crisis knowledge and background awareness. For this aspect of natural disasters literature, mitigation awareness is important in reducing the risk perception level, particularly for people who have previously stayed in a disaster area. This knowledge should be sourced from school, family, community, and self-

education (Shaw et., al. 2004). However, in the case of political crisis destination, knowledge of the political and historical situation in the destination is very important and can help assess levels of risk, unlike the situation in the case of natural disaster destination.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study expands the knowledge of risk perceptions such as negative emotions, uncertainty situation, negative perception of psychological risks, distrust, and cooperation in performance risks, fatality and injury in physical risks. Despite its complexity, this study provides a more nuanced direction for further research compared to that which adopts the general risk dimensions found in the marketing literature and provides access to a deeper understanding of risks from the tourist's perspective. There are several concerns arising from this study.

Firstly, travel risk is context-specific, which suggests that the general risk types in the literature are not always validated, as found in the political crisis context in this study. Clearly, the three most important risks that dominate tourists' concerns include political turmoil anxiety, feeling lost and feeling detained. It is interesting to note that there is a difference in the level of fear between human-made crises and natural disasters regarding tourist travel concerns, and between different types of tourists (domestic tourists and international tourists). Some of these risks are considered important in other risk contexts and destinations. For example, in the context of crises such as terrorism, bird flu, and epidemic in Thailand Rittichainuwat and Chakraborty (2009) found that the great risk was the money loss. While in the context of political conflict in Israel, financial and social risk play an important role in the tourist's risk perception (Fuchs and Reichel 2006; Reichel et., al. 2007). In the context of domestic tourists, financial and time risks should be of less concern due to different travel distances and different types of travel decision making. International tourism involves complex buying behaviour that requires high involvement in travel purchase, significant differences between destinations and where it is more likely to impact on financial loss (Mitchell 1999). This finding is supported by Ritchie (2009) and Sharifpour et al. (2014), who suggest that different contexts or different destinations have different tourist risk perceptions, making it clear that the general risk types vary in validity from context to contexts.

Secondly, this study found that different risk categories exist under a single risk dimension, such as those found in political turmoil anxiety, feeling lost, or feeling detained. Although they seem to be inconsistent, the finding is formulated from fundamental explorations determined by tourists. For example, the dimension of feeling lost consists of the physical risk, financial risk and time risk. Fuchs & Reichel (2006) also noticed this in the case of tourist visiting Israel, where they found that food safety and weather were incorporated under a single dimension, thus showing that risk perception is a broad and blurred concept. This is reinforced by Dolnicar (2005) who argued that risk categories are highly multifaceted and cannot be subsumed under a single heading or measured by a single item.

Lastly, the knowledge and background risk dimension of the political crisis context relates to a predictable crisis. This suggests that political crisis knowledge and awareness can be obtained from information provided in terms of information content and types of media should be concerned about reducing the risk. The media management strategy is considered by this finding. This will help the destination manager develop more effective crisis management strategies and preparedness to deal with potential political crises in their countries.

To conclude, this study explored 6 dimensions of travel risk in the context of political crises. They consist of political turmoil anxiety, feeling lost, feeling detained, government trust, hospitality distorted, and lack of political crisis knowledge/background. Many of these risks are

consistent with risks found in other contexts. However, the new finding of risk dimension in the context of political crisis is the level of concern relating to lack of knowledge/background regarding the crisis political crisis knowledge/background. As a political crisis is a predictable event, some international tourists who lack the political knowledge/background of the destination can receive news and information from many types of media to reduce their fear of risk. By understanding the risk perceptions regarding the political crises, destination managers and tourism authorities can select the information sources by which to communicate with tourists through effective crisis management strategies. To advance the findings of this study, it is proposed to investigate travel intentions and the factors that influence international tourists' risk perception in the context of political crisis.

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Contributors: Tuangkarn Watthanaboon, PhD Candidate, Department of Tourism Sciences, Graduate School of Urban Environmental Sciences, Tokyo Metropolitan University, Japan; Professor Tetsuo Shimizu, Tokyo Metropolitan University, Japan.

Corresponding Author: Tuangkarn Watthanaboon. Email: tuangkarn@yahoo.com