

Risk perception towards international travellers' destination choice: A case of Sabah

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Izyan Dahlia Supani¹

Zuliah Abd Hamid*²

¹Tourism Unit, Hospitality Department of Miri Vocational College,
Cawangan Sarawak

²Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management,
Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Selangor

*zuliah954@uitm.edu.my

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Abstract

Risk and tourism are basically related to each other as it involves travelling to unfamiliar destinations; the uncertainty of future conditions; and the possible negative results of making the decision to travel. This study is designed to investigate risk factors on international traveler's destination choice and to examine the relationship between the risk factors towards international traveler's destination choice. The study involved a convenience sampling of 410 international travellers who were travelling to Malaysia. A quantitative approach was applied to measure the respondents' perception of the risk factors including political instability, terrorism risk, physical risk as well as social risk towards the destination choice which is Sabah, Malaysia. The findings revealed that risk perception factors of international travellers have positively influenced the decision-making in choosing Sabah as their destination. Political instability risk attributes have the most influence on the international travellers' choice of Sabah as compared to terrorism risk, physical risk and social risk. International travellers remain optimistic about the safety and security in Sabah, and prefer to choose Sabah as a holiday destination. Implications for future research and marketing are discussed.

Keywords:

Risk perception, Destination choice, Political instability risk, Terrorism risk, Physical risk, Social risk

1 Introduction

Tourism scholars collectively agree that exploring the relationship between attitudes towards a place has become one of the important matters, especially when choosing leisure or holiday travel destinations. (Goodrich, 1978; Matejka, 1973; Scott et al., 1978). As mentioned by Blain, Levy & Ritchie (2005), the destination image is important for the travel destination because it can significantly influence travellers' destination choice. Aschauer (2010) claimed that risk assessment is considerably important in tourism research. Despite the image of the destination choice, there are several factors that influence traveller's decision-making of destinations that have recently faced tragedy. For example, a number of terrorist attacks have occurred in recent years at locations frequently visited by tourists. In April 2015, a car bombing near Chaweng Beach at Koh Samui, Thailand have caused a number of injuries, which was then followed by a bombing attack at the Erawan Shrine in central Bangkok, which killed 20 people in August 2015 (Smart Traveler AU, 2016). Due to these incidents, Thailand's tourism faced a decline in tourist arrivals. As a result, 17% of international travellers cancelled their visit to Thailand (Telegraph, 2015). Another example of declining tourist arrival is seen when gunmen and bombers attacked restaurants, a concert hall and a sports stadium at locations across Paris on November 13, 2015. The incident resulted in 120 deaths and saw a shaken President Francois Hollande calling it an unprecedented terrorist attack (The Strait Times, 2015). Paris, a popular destination choice for tourists was negatively affected by the incident.

Sabah is one of the fastest growing destinations and is popular amongst international and domestic travellers. Since tourism is one of the main contributors to Sabah's revenue, the tourism ministry of Sabah and non-government organizations collaborate actively to attract international and domestic tourists to visit Sabah every year. However, the Sabah Tourism Board (2016) reported that there was a decline in the visitor arrival statistics from January to December in 2015. The study seeks to analyze whether safety and security issues and risk perceptions play a role in the declining arrival statistic. Thus, two major research questions are outlined for the study: (i) What are the most significant risk factors that influence international travellers perceived travel risks? and (ii) What factors influence international travellers to choose Sabah as their travel destination?

Based on a previous study by Yang, Sharif, and Khoo-Lattimore (2015), both domestic and international tourists have voted Sabah as the most dangerous destination in Malaysia. Perception of risk has a greater impact on international tourists than domestic tourists. This notion is supported by previous studies which demonstrated that international tourists were extra vulnerable to safety and security risks than domestic tourists (Barker, Page & Meyer, 2003; George, 2010). In general, there are various types of risk perception factors related with travel destinations. Among the studies on risk perception factors in tourism include terrorism (Aziz, 1995), war and political instability (Gartner & Shen, 1992), health concern/spread of disease (Carter, 1998), natural disasters (Faulkner & Vikulov, 2001), and crime (Pizam &

Mansfeld, 1996). Variables such as political instability risk, terrorism risk, physical risk and social risk are identified as the most significant influences on international travellers' risk perception and destination choice. The main objective of the research is to examine the relationship between risk factors (political instability risk, terrorism risk, social risk, and physical risk) towards international travellers' destination choice of Sabah.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Risk perception

Tourists perceived risks depend on specific type of risks (Floyd & Myron, 2004; Reisinger & Mavondo, 2005). There are six categories of risk identified in consumer behavior studies which include equipment, financial, physical, satisfaction, social, and psychological risk (Cheron, 1982; Jacoby, & Kaplan, 1972; Kaplan, Szybillo, & Jacoby, 1974; Reisinger & Mavondo, 2005). Many scholars agreed that risk has become a significant factor for tourists who want to consider traveling (Kozak, Crofts & Law, 2007; Lepp & Gibson, 2003; Reisinger & Mavondo, 2005; Sönmez & Graefe, 1998a, 1998b). Apart from risk, feeling safe for some individuals or groups was an important factor that affected the destination choice itself.

2.1.1 Political Instability Risk

Political instability could influence the risk perception towards international travellers' decisions in choosing destinations. Sönmez and Graefe (2003) defined the concept of political instability risk as the chance of becoming concerned in the political chaos of the visited country. Political instability is considered as a barrier for international tourists and gives negative perception towards the destination image. As mentioned by Hamzah Rahmat, the president of Malaysia Association of Tour & Travel Agents (MATTA), tourist arrivals were affected by political instability and this made tourists avoid visiting Malaysia. Based on the Tourism Malaysia Statistics, there were 610,000 less tourist arrivals in year 2015 as compared to 2014 (Free Malaysia Today, 2015).

2.1.2 Terrorism Risk

Apart from political instability risks, terrorism has also become a main factor of risk that can influence tourists to choose their holiday destination. Terrorism risks have become a continued safety concern (Sönmez & Graefe, 2003). Radu (2002) defined terrorism risks as change or divert political decisions that are influenced by threat of attack or any attack, against unnamed targets. Sönmez & Graefe (1998) claimed that terrorism could be defined as the possibility of being involved in a terrorist act and that terrorism plays main challenges to the tourism industry, as the threat of terrorism gave the same effect to Malaysia. The study on risk and tourism became increasingly important after the event of the 9/11 terrorist attack in 2001, and as a result, this gave ruthless impacts on international tourism (Kovari & Zimányi, 2011; Shin, 2005). Other

researchers have concluded that terrorism is one of the political violence incidents that always has a harmful impact on tourist arrivals since tourists are willing to change their decision to travel, as they feel that the destinations are affected due to any incidents involved (Neumayer, 2004). There was also a report by Al Jazeera (2016) that claimed imminent terrorist threat to Malaysia as world leaders, including US President Barack Obama, gathered at ASEAN regional summit to discuss the issue. Based on the reported news, the images of Malaysia as a travel destination has been affected negatively. Apart from negative publicity for Malaysia, Sabah was one of the states gravely affected; going through plenty of negativity as international tourists avoided the destination.

2.1.3 *Physical Risk*

Sönmez and Graefe (2003) postulated physical risk as the chance of physical danger or injury harmful to health such as accidents. The meaning of risk to tourists as physical wellbeing was essential when travelling with traffic accidents being a specific threat in many parts of the world. For example, accidental injuries or deaths are common amongst hikers, skiers, and other mountain-related sports, or among enthusiasts of kayaking, rafting, scuba diving, and other water-related sports. Physical risks are connected with physical danger and injury as it is related to crimes and natural disasters (Sönmez & Graefe, 1998). In the area of study, the crimes that happened in Sabah have brought negative impacts on the tourism industry, such as several series of kidnappings of foreigners and criminality on the eastern coasts of Sabah (Osborne, 2014). Natural disasters are also the indicated elements of physical risks, where it can influence tourists to have risk perceptions on destination choices. Past researches have claimed that natural disasters give a significant impact on tourism industries. The statement was supported by Vincent (2013), claiming that natural disasters bring to mind the images of destruction, death and tragedy. In addition, natural disasters caused a decrease of tourist arrivals in the affected area and created a negative image to visitors, thus demotivating them to visit the destination (Zhang, 2005). The safety/risk perception of Sabah was affected by the earthquake tragedy which killed 18 climbers atop the Mount Kinabalu, with a 5.9 magnitude, the strongest recorded in the history of natural disasters in Malaysia.

2.2.4 *Social Risk*

Sönmez and Graefe (2003) classified social risk as a possibility affecting individuals' opinions, which brought disapproval of vacation choices or activities by friends, families or associates. Based on previous studies, prior knowledge, information, skills or expertise, were stored in as consumers' long-term memory through ongoing informational gaining, formal or informal education, and training (Ratchford, 2001). People were dealing with severe information sources as they were looking for information pertaining to risks within the destination through different sources (Carey, 2002; Shklovski, Palen, 2008; Taylor, Gillette, Hodgson & Downing, 2005). Social media was one of the emerging information sources that was very famous as individuals used

it to look for the latest information (Procopio, 2007). Meanwhile, Austin, Fisher Liu, and Jin (2012) claimed that social media was not perceived to be more credible than traditional media. Hence, social media plays an important role in the tourism industry as a communication tool to share information for tourists to make decisions for their destination choices. Travel advisories also play an important role that can influence tourists to change their decisions to choose the destination. Sönmez and Graefe (2003) claimed that governments that issued travel advisories had the potential to influence tourism in a negative way. This was supported by Beirman (2003), whereby travel advisories could impact tourist arrivals as the government would advise tourists not to visit the affected destinations.

2.1.4 *Destination Choice*

Assael (1984) claimed that destination choice is viewed as a cognitive process involving perception of stimuli, which was associated with needs, evaluating alternative, and assessing whether the expectations have been met. Next, it has been perceived as an action determined by attitude about the action and by the influence of social community (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). The scholars agreed that the tourist arrival statistics within the world obviously suggested that the risk perceived by tourists related to a destination increased as tourism demand was decreasing (Floyd, 2004; Sönmez, Apostolopoulos & Tarlow, 1999). This was supported by Mawby (2000) who stated that the presence of risk, no matter if it was real or perceived, influenced the decision-making process. It is significantly found that the majority of travelers were likely to change their travel plans due to risky destinations (Kozak, Crofts & Law, 2007). There are some tourists who might postpone their visit and some of them would eliminate the destination within the process of decision-making due to the costs and perceived risks (Sönmez & Graefe, 2003).

3 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study is designed to investigate the level of risk perception factors on international travellers' destination choice and to examine the relationship between risk factors towards international traveler's destination choice of Sabah. The study was conducted using quantitative data collection and convenience sampling.

3.2 Population and Sample size

The sample of this research is the international travellers. The reason why the researchers chose the sample is because it is supported by previous studies that international travellers are more exposed to danger and any contact of risks as compared to domestic tourists (Barker, Page & Meyer, 2003). It focuses on the potential tourist arrivals to Sabah as the targeted respondents. 424 questionnaires were

distributed among arriving international tourists at Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA) and Kuala Lumpur Sentral. A total of 410 questionnaires were used for the analysis.

3.3 Research Instrument

A pilot survey involving 30 respondents (tourists) were conducted at Kuala Lumpur Sentral. After that, all data were analyzed and a reliability test was conducted using IBM Statistical Package for the Social Science software (SPSS). Self-administered questionnaires were used in data gathering. Since the respondents are international travellers, the survey questionnaires were written in English and suitable for their level of thoughts (Sekaran & Bougies, 2010; Czaja & Blair, 2004). Other than that, the questionnaire items were clear in wording and relevant to the research context.

4 Findings

Data analysis is organized into four parts. First, the demographic profile of respondents is provided. Second, the measures followed by the data distribution and amount of data gathering are verified with validity and internal consistency. Then, descriptive statistics are used to answer the research questions and the objectives of the study. Finally, the relationship between variables answer the hypotheses of the study by applying inferential statistics particularly on the correlations and standard multiple regressions.

4.1 Hypotheses testing

Four hypotheses were analyzed in this section. The main objective of the study is to determine the relationship between the risk perception factors and the international travellers' destination choice of Sabah. The first hypothesis was used to determine the relationship between political instability risks and international travellers' destination choices. The second hypothesis was used to determine the relationship between terrorism risks and international travellers' destination choices. The third hypothesis was aimed to determine the relationship between physical risks and international traveler's destination choices. Finally, the fourth hypothesis was to determine the relationship between social risks and international travellers' destination choices.

Table 1: Summary of the hypotheses results of multiple regression

Indicator	Statement of Hypothesis	Remarks
H ₁	There is significant relationship between political instability risk and international travelers' destination choices.	Supported
H _{1a}	There is significant relationship between terrorism risk and international travelers' destination choices.	Supported
H _{1b}	There is significant relationship between physical risk and international travelers' destination choices.	Supported
H _{1c}	There is significant relationship between social risk and international travelers' destination choices	Supported

4.2 Analysis of findings

Findings are organized according to four risk factors: political instability risk, terrorism risk, physical risk, and social risk.

4.1.1 Political Instability Risk

Table 2 shows exhibits the level of perception of the respondents on political instability risk. The highest mean shows that respondents were neutral about — “Despite of political instability, I still decide to choose Sabah as a destination choice for travel” (M=3.74, SD=0.86). Meanwhile, the lowest mean shows the respondents disagreed about — “In general, political risk does not affect the tourism industry in Sabah” (M=2.99, SD=1.03). The overall mean political instability risk is 3.385 and the standard deviation is 0.55. This shows that the respondents were neutral about political instability.

4.1.2 Terrorism Risk

Table 3 exhibits the level of perception of the respondents on terrorism risk. The highest mean shows respondents were neutral about — “Tourists feel terrorism gives impact on their holiday planning” (M=3.61, SD=0.98). Meanwhile, the lowest mean shows the respondents were also neutral about — “Rare kidnapping cases does not jeopardize Sabah tourism receipt” (with a mean of 3.03, SD=1.10). The overall mean terrorism risk is 3.36 and the standard deviation is 0.58. This shows that the respondents were neutral about terrorism risk.

4.1.3 Physical Risk

Table 4 exhibits the level of perception of the respondents on the physical risk. The highest mean shows respondents were neutral about — “Tourist should avoid the destination that experience physical risk” (M= 3.62, SD=0.80). Meanwhile, the lowest mean shows that the respondents were also neutral about — “Tourist feels nervous about travelling to Sabah due to physical risk” (M=3.2, SD=0.92). The overall mean of physical risk is 3.42 and the standard deviation is 0.56. This shows that the respondents were neutral about physical risk.

4.1.4 Social Risk

Table 5 exhibits the level of perception of the respondents on the social risk. The highest mean shows respondents were neutral about — “Despite of social risk, I still want to visit Sabah because I believe it’s still safe and secure for travel” (M=3.64, SD=0.85). Meanwhile, the lowest mean shows the respondents were also in disagreement about — ‘In general social risk does not affect the Sabah tourism industry” (M= 2.95, SD=1.02). The overall mean social risk is 3.339 and the standard deviation is 0.63. This shows that the respondents were neutral about social risk.

Table 2: Political Instability Risk

Political Instability Risk	Mean	SD
Tourist perceive a high degree of risk in travelling due to political instability in Sabah	3.39	1.017
Tourist feels that political instability give impact on their holiday planning to Sabah	3.49	1.134
Political instability countries should be avoided by tourist	3.13	1.086
If the destination is perceived to be unstable, potential tourist may cancel their reservation or change to other destination	3.52	0.848
Intrusion by Sulu militants in Sabah does not totally hit Sabah tourism industry	3.36	0.837
Political instability is just temporary and number of tourist arrival has decreased	3.14	0.917
Despite of political instability, I still decide to choose Sabah as many destination choice for travel	3.74	0.86
Despite of political instability, I still want to visit Sabah because I believe it's still safe and secure for travel	3.71	0.89
In general, political instability risk does not affect the Sabah tourism industry	2.99	1.031

Table 3: Terrorism Risk

Terrorism Risk	Mean	SD
Tourist perceive a high degree of risk in travelling due to terrorism risk in Sabah	3.28	1.048
Tourist feels terrorism gives impact on their holiday planning	3.61	0.984
Tourist should avoid the destination that experience terrorism attacks	3.36	1.04
Rare kidnapping cases does not jeopardize Sabah tourism receipt	3.03	1.098
Airplane crash of MH17 and missing airplane of MH370 only temporarily effect tourist arrival to Sabah	3.57	0.902
Tourist feels nervous about travelling to Sabah due to terrorism risk	3.36	0.848
Despite of intrusion and rare kidnapping cases, I still decide to choose Sabah as my destination choice for travel	3.32	0.878
Despite of terrorism risk, I still want to visit Sabah because I believe it's still safe and secure for travel	3.49	0.931
In general, terrorism risk does not affect the tourism industry	3.2	0.892

Table 4: Physical Risk

STATEMENT	MEAN	SD
Tourist perceive a high degree of risk in travelling due to physical risk in Sabah	3.42	0.915
Tourist feels that physical risk (natural disaster and Zika virus) give impact on their holiday planning	3.6	0.893
Tourist should avoid the destination that experience physical risk	3.62	0.801
Epidemics such as Zika virus only temporarily reduced the number of international tourist to Sabah	3.47	1.07
The tragedy of earthquake only temporarily effect tourist arrival to Sabah	3.33	0.985
Tourist feels nervous about travelling to Sabah due to physical risk	3.2	0.924
Despite of physical risk, I still decide to choose Sabah as many destination choice for travel	3.34	0.896
Despite of physical risk, I still want to visit Sabah because I believe it's still safe and secure for travel	3.44	0.993
In general, physical risk does not affect the Sabah tourism industry	3.34	0.944

Table 5: Social Risk

STATEMENT	Mean	SD
Travel advisory can negatively influence other people' opinions to choose the destination	3.32	1.014
Social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc) can negatively influence other people' opinions to choose the destination	3.2	1.139
Mass media (newspaper, magazines, radio, television, and internet) can negatively influence other people' opinions to choose the destination	3.53	0.984
Word of mouth can negatively influence other people' opinions to choose the destination	3.3	0.895
Family and friends can negatively influence other people' opinions to choose the destination	3.26	0.936
Tourist feels that severe information sources regarding the risk of destination give impact on their holiday planning	3.28	1.005
Despite of social risk, I still decide to choose Sabah as many destination choice for travel	3.57	0.795
Despite of social risk, I still want to visit Sabah because I believe it's still safe and secure for travel	3.64	0.851

5 Conclusion

Understanding the risk perception and travellers' destination choice has a number of implications. Marketers and the tourism providers can encourage potentials travellers to travel by managing the destination's risk perception. Tourism marketers should effectively promote the affected tourist destination with travel products that are seen as safe and secure. The efforts of the marketers should improve the perceptions of safety and focus on travellers to their safety needs accordingly. This study revealed that political instability as a crucial factor which influences the international travellers' risk perception to choose Sabah as a travel destination. The findings in this study clearly recognized a large portion of the international travellers were more likely to agree that political instability has a significant impact towards tourist arrivals in Sabah. It is considered as a barrier for international tourists and gives a negative perception towards the destination image as supported by Sönmez and Graefe (2003).

The Malaysian government and authorities have made an effort with the initiative to introduce the Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM) to ensure the Eastern Sabah Security Zone (ESSZONE) is safe from any terrorist threats. However, there should be more effort and improvement as incidents of murders and kidnappings of tourists are still happening and this could negatively affect the safety risk perception among the travellers (Vanar and Golingai, 2017; The Star, 2017). Travellers should be encouraged

to look for information from a variety of sources such as mass media and social media as this could help them to have better picture and information about the safety of the destination especially on political instability. Subsequently, this information search behavior could reduce their anxiety and increase their sense of safety when deciding to travel to a destination.

6 Contribution

The contribution of study is highlighted from theoretical and practical perspective. From the theoretical perspective, the study may contribute to a better understanding of the risk perceptions related to international travels, particularly Sabah as the context of the destination choice. The study shows that the political instability risk, terrorism risk, physical risk and social risk played important roles that could influence the risk perception among the travellers. The result of the study may serve as theoretical guidelines for academicians and students in area of risk perceptions, as well as contribute to the body of knowledge in tourism marketing research. Further research on risk perception should be further expanded as to it could help destinations to understand risk perception and image of destination.

7 About the authors

Izyan Dahlia binti Supani currently holds a position as the Head of Programme in the Tourism unit and a lecturer of tourism studies at Miri Vocational college since 2017. She has a Master's Degree in Tourism Management from UiTM. Currently, she is one of the Curriculum Review Panels appointed by the Technical and Vocational Education Division under the Ministry of Education, specializing in tourism management studies.

Zuliah binti Abd Hamid has vast experience in the tourism management industry for over 25 years. She has been living abroad for 15 years in countries such as France, the United Arab Emirates, Japan and the United States. She has a Master's Degree in Tourism Management and is currently a PhD candidate at Universiti Putra Malaysia. She holds a position of senior lecturer at the Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Puncak Alam. The author has several winning innovation awards related to services and products as well.

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