

Risk Perceived by Local Communities in Emerging Destinations

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ABSTRACT

This paper suggests using risk perception theory to investigate local communities' perceptions of emerging tourism destinations. Bearing in mind previous research on local communities' perceptions in the tourism field, and risk perception in other fields, this research note justifies the value of studying residents' risk perception, and proposes directions for future research.

Keywords: Risk perception theory; Local communities; Residents' perception; Emerging destination, Tourism development

INTRODUCTION

A considerable amount of research on perceived risk has been published in a number of academic disciplines such as economics, psychology, or statistical decision theory. In the field of tourism, research on perceived risk has traditionally focused on various issues related to travel experiences. A significant number of studies focus on risks perceived by tourists, and analyse various aspects of travel; for example, issues related to trip organisation; factors related to possible risks tourists might encounter in particular destinations or health and personal/physical safety. Both, health and personal/physical safety focusing on risk perception have emerged with particular interest regarding COVID-19 pandemic [1-5].

However, risk perception from the viewpoint of the local community where tourism is being developed has not yet been studied in-depth; despite the existence of a broad tradition on the study of residents' perception. This research note, therefore, proposes using risk perception theory to investigate local communities' perceptions of emerging tourism destinations. This is expected to contribute to a better understanding of residents' perceptions in future research [6-8].

TEORETHICAL BACKGROUND

Risk Perception Conceptualization

Several definitions of risk and risk perception stem from previous research on this topic, depending on the field and the

focus of the study. Frequently, definitions of risk relate to the probability of misfortune or occurrences with negative outcomes. Slovic & Weber (2002) point out that defining the term 'risk' is a challenging task due to the multiple meanings associated with it, and the fact that it can also be interpreted as a hazard, a probability, a consequence, or a potential adversity or threat. In the tourism field, risk is linked to misfortunes that can occur during the trip, or at the destination [9,10].

All domains of research conceptualize risk perception as a subjective assessment of the probability of encountering a specific hazard. This includes evaluations of both the probability and the consequences of a negative outcome, and involves feelings of fear, anxiety and dread. Thus, risk perception is an inherently subjective phenomenon. Points out, "risk does not exist 'out there', independent of our minds and cultures, waiting to be measured. Human beings have invented the concept risk to help them understand and cope with the dangers and uncertainties of life". A sociological approach to risk claims that undesired events, uncertainties, and reality itself is a social construction consequently, risk is socially constructed; In this context, information sources and mass media play a significant role in generating a social amplification of risk. In the same vein, and later, affirm that repeated exposure to mass media or other information sources (e.g., opinion leaders, activists, social organisations and public agencies) influence individuals' risk perception and behaviour [11-15].

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Risk Perception and Local Communities

Research on risk perception within local communities has been carried out in various fields, such as sociology, psychology, health studies, economics and political sciences. These studies mainly focus on determining risk perception from a collective point of view; thus, directing a social gaze at the issue. In these studies, the individual's perception of risk takes second place, and a perception related to the physical integrity and general well-being of the society living in a particular place takes precedence. These studies focus on analysing the risk perception of the local community when faced with various possible misfortunes such as natural disasters, poor health, diseases, financial crisis, or crime, using traditionally the psychometric paradigm [16-20].

Analysing risk perception within a local community is crucial for several reasons: to understand residents' behaviour and attitudes; to anticipate public response to hazards; to determine what information is needed to be communicated, and how and by whom this information should be communicated to the public [21- 25].

Local Communities' Perceptions of Tourism

Local communities' perceptions have been studied for over 35 years in the tourism field, and this "has undoubtedly contributed to a wider understanding and knowledge of the phenomenon". In particular, previous studies have mainly focused on two approaches. The first analyses the consequences of tourism development related to the positive and/or negative impact it has on the environment, the local economy, or the local culture; and more recently, a wide range of studies focusing on the negative consequences of tourism have emerged; these include over-tourism, tourism-phobia and gentrification. The second approach is to attempt to understand the way in which local communities support tourism by analysing residents' perceptions. These studies are traditionally underpinned by Social Exchange Theory, and consider that perceived benefits must be higher than perceived cost in order to obtain the support of residents. Notes that many studies remain 'atheoretical', and remarks that even these use a theoretical framework, stating that "the contribution of these studies to explaining or understanding residents' perceptions remains unclear".

TOURISM RISK PERCEPTION OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Risk perception can be acknowledged as being an antecedent to the perception of impacts of tourist activity in a particular place, bearing in mind that risk can be regarded as a hazard, a probability, a consequence, and a potential adversity or a threat before tourism impacts have materialised [26-30].

In fact, there is a general assumption that tourism development is positive and brings new opportunities; but not all the local communities only see the potential benefits of tourism. In a particular place, the novelty of tourism might generate uncertainty, fear and anxiety in its local community. Therefore,

as in other fields, tourism is likely to generate a perception of risk in its residents, and this needs to be analysed and understood in order to be managed. For example, the study carried out by Joo et al. (2021) focusing on how residents perceive risky the arrival of tourists in COVID-19 pandemic times has showed the relevance of this approach [31-35].

As such, research in this area should focus on using risk perception theory as a way to deepen and better understand residents' perceptions. In particular, research should centre on three main axes. Firstly, understanding the type and patterns of tourism development risks the local community perceives before the impacts of tourism are evident. Considering preceding research in residents' perception, this might include economic, socio-cultural and environmental risks; secondly, understanding feelings of fear, anxiety and dread felt by local community towards tourism development in their city or region; and thirdly, influencing factors such as gender, age, personal background, etc. This approach enables the following questions to be answered: Does the arrival of tourists provoke feelings of fear, anxiety or dread in the local community? Is the arrival of tourists perceived as a threat by the local community? Is the development of physical infrastructure perceived as a danger by local community? What type of risks is perceived by the local community regarding local tourism development?

Traditionally, risk perception has been studied by means of psychometrics, using hazard taxonomy to understand and predict responses to risk. Although, it could be useful the development of a measurement scale to evaluate judgments on tourism development within a destination; here, it is proposed to focus on the roots, in order to get an in-depth comprehension of the phenomenon.

As noted above, risk perception is highly subjective, and it can vary from person to person. In order to understand risk perception from the point of view of a population living in a destination, firstly, it is necessary to understand the particular elements that affect individuals emotionally and cognitively; as well as, the dimension of social construction risk perception when the individual belong to a community. In this sense, it is necessary to be able to go further and use qualitative methods that allow this complete understanding. Therefore, an inductive qualitative approach to study local community's risk perception is proposed. This research approach will allow a complete and in-depth understanding of the phenomenon, considering the research questions pointed out above. In this sense, ethnography and personal in-depth interviews could be highly useful to collect relevant information; and narrative analysis can be appropriate considering the nature of this topic to emerge the main elements that characterise risk perception of residents. In this sense, narrative analysis includes "a set of methods of inquiry that focuses on the study of narratives, namely representations of realities that can assume different written and oral forms [...]; (thus,) narratives should be regarded as constructs representative of individual or collective meanings". In any case, this proposal is open and aims to discuss and reflect about ways to study risk perception of local communities where tourism is becoming a new phenomenon [36-40].

CONCLUSION

This paper calls for the need to study perceptions of local community living in an emerging tourist destination using risk perception theory. As Sharpley (2014) argues, studying residents' perceptions requires greater clarity and theoretical focus. Using risk perception theory to study residents' perceptions may shed more light on this topic, and provide greater insights into risks stemming from tourism in emerging destinations that local communities consider to be possible dangers or misfortunes, and the feelings associated with them. Particularly, during the recovery period after the COVID-19 pandemic might be crucial to inquiry risks perceived by local community, especially in destinations that are still in an initial development stage. Probably health risks will play a very important role that must be analyzed and considered [41-44].

Empirical research on this topic has clear, practical implications for destination managers and decision-makers, as demonstrated in other fields which have applied this theory. Hence, obtaining a deeper understanding of residents' risk perception gives four main outcomes: firstly, understanding the feelings (fear, anxiety, etc.) and attitudes of the local community regarding tourism; secondly, understanding critical aspects of tourism development; thirdly, establishing policies that pacify the local community regarding possible negative effects of tourism development, thus reducing fear, anxiety and other negative emotions associated with perceptions of high level risk; and finally, designing strategies to avoid perceived risks having a tangible, negative impact [45-48].

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