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Perceptions of International Travel Risk: An Exploratory Study of the Influence of Proximity to Terrorist Attack

This study explored the influence of the ‘proximity’ (defined as an attack on homeland soil) of a terrorist attack upon the perceptions of international travel risk. Opportunity samples of US (n=39) and UK (n=59) citizens responded to a questionnaire that sought their opinions on international travel risk and the perceived safety of a set of vacation destinations. The study found that while ‘proximity’ to a terrorist attack may increase the general negative perceptions of the safety of international travel, when purpose of travel is for a vacation the influence of ‘proximity’ weakens. International vacation travel may therefore be particularly susceptible to the influences of a terrorist attack, wherever the attack occurs. Differences in perceptions of three vacation destinations (France, Spain and UK) between the US and UK respondents indicate that variables other than proximity to attacks influence perceptions of the safety of vacation destinations. Past experience of a destination and media coverage of the aftermath of terrorist acts may better explain some of the recorded differences surrounding the three vacation destinations.

Keywords: International travel risk, terrorism, perceptions of vacation destination safety

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Introduction

Acts of terrorism targeted at ‘principles’ of the tourism industry are assumed to have a considerable impact on the perceptions of the safety of international travel, a view supported by consumer trends immediately following terrorist incidents. For example the terrorist attacks of September 11th 2001 on US soil brought air travel to and within the United States of America to a halt (Floyd *et al.* 2003), with no flights departing or arriving to and from the United States for several days. However, the relationship between a terrorist attack and disruption to actual travel patterns can not necessarily be extended to include perceptions of international travel risk. Indeed the relationship between a terrorist attack and medium to long-term perceptions of international travel risk is subject to a whole range of intervening variables; proximity to the attack, previous travel experience, media reporting, and government advice. In this study an attempt was made to test the influence of the first of these variables, ‘proximity’ to terrorist attack. The concept of proximity goes beyond mere spatial definition because the processes of globalisation have compressed time and space. Media images of terrorist attacks are communicated within minutes of the event across the globe. Economic migration to major cities, often the sights of terrorist attack, means that the victims are just as likely to be from a country other than the one in which the terrorist act is perpetrated. Proximity is therefore a spatial and emotional concept. In this study proximity was defined by the presence of a direct attack on homeland (i.e. within the boundaries of the nation state) and a distinction drawn between direct and indirect affects of terrorist acts. Therefore, the study reported here investigated the differences in perceptions of the safety of international travel between those who have been directly and indirectly affected by terrorism. The presumption made prior to the investigation conducted between September 2004 and March 2005 was that US citizens have been directly affected by terrorism as September 11th 2001 was an act of terrorism on American soil whereas British citizens had been only indirectly affected by terrorism, notwithstanding the Irish Republican Army bombings that took place throughout the United Kingdom between 1971 and 2001 (Guardian Unlimited 2004). In this study therefore, directly affected by terrorism, was defined as a citizen who had experienced an act of terrorism of a large scale on their homeland, whilst residing in their country of origin. Those indirectly affected, were citizens who had experienced an act of terrorism of a large scale, however it was not an act of terrorism on their

homeland, whilst residing in their country of origin. Of course, following the events of July 7th 2005 in London, this distinction of proximity to terrorist attack between the United Kingdom and the United States of America has collapsed.

Method

A questionnaire was developed and administered to a non-probability sample using an ‘*opportunity sample*’ (Bell 2000, p.126) of sixty British citizens who resided in the United Kingdom (UK) and worked in service industry occupations and sixty American citizens who resided in the United States of America (US) and were members of the same mid-west church congregation. The questionnaire sought information on respondents’:

Frequency of international travel in previous 24 months; opinions on the extent to which the risks associated with international travel have increased; the most and least feared elements of risk when travelling internationally to include crime, terrorism, war, kidnappings, natural disasters; opinions on the extent to which international travel risks have increased post September 11th2001; opinions on the extent to which the imminent threat of a terrorist attack in a tourist destination would dissuade a citizen from travelling there for the purposes of a vacation; perceptions of safety of a set of as an international travel destinations to include Afghanistan, Algeria, Canada, France, Indonesia, Iraq, Israel, Lebanon, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan, Spain, Sudan, UK, US.

The destinations included above were derived from advice and travel warnings from the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the US Department of State. The list contains both ‘at risk’ and popular destinations. This was achieved by identifying a set of countries that had travel warnings against them from both UK and US government agencies on the grounds of a high threat of terrorism. Additional to the set of ‘at risk’ countries, six destinations representing the most popular destinations for UK citizens (France, Spain and USA) and US citizens (Canada, Mexico and UK) were included. The overall response rate was 82% and 98 questionnaire responses (59 UK and 39 US) were analysed using SPSS 11.5. Descriptive statistics were used to report the results and Chi-square and Spearman's ranked order correlation coefficient were used as statistical tests of associations and correlations between the variables.

Findings

Travel Characteristics in the samples

The international travel patterns of the two samples indicated that experience in the past 24 months was somewhat higher in the UK sample (81%) than the US sample (64%). Furthermore the UK sample respondents were more likely to have been frequent international travellers, with 75% recording between 2-4 trips as compared to the US sample at 56 %.

Generic Perceptions of the Risks of International Travel and Terrorism

Respondents in both samples agreed that the risks associated with international travel have increased. However the US sample indicated a significant proportion who thought the increase considerable (US 72 %, UK 42 %). A similar pattern was observed when respondents were asked about the extent and nature of change in perception of the risks associated with international travel post 9/11. Respondents in both samples agreed that risks had increased but US respondents thought that international travel was ‘much more risky’ (US 28%) than the UK respondents (UK 12%). Both samples agreed that the most feared risks were, in rank order; terrorism, crime, war/natural disaster and kidnapping. Of these, terrorism was the most frequently recorded as the ‘most feared’ (US 68% UK 51%). These data would seem to suggest that the proximity of an attack has a greater negative influence on perceptions of the risks associated with international travel.

Generic Perceptions of the Risks of International Vacation Travel and Terrorism

However, when the respondents were asked about the extent to which an imminent threat of a terrorist attack in a tourist destination would dissuade them from travelling there for the purposes of a vacation, responses from both samples were remarkably similar with 46 % of each sample both ‘strongly agreeing’ and ‘agreeing’ with the statement and thereby not significantly different. This would suggest that perceptions of risk for vacation travel, as opposed to general travel, is less susceptible to the effects of ‘proximity’ as defined in this study. Vacation travel may therefore be overall more susceptible to the effects of terrorism where ever it occurs.

Destination specific perceptions of Risk

Significant differences (confirmed as statistically significant using Pearson Chi-square at 100 % confidence level) between the US and UK samples' perceptions of safety at the selected destinations were found for the countries of France, Spain and the UK. For example 68 % of UK respondents perceived France to be 'very safe' compared to 28% of US respondents. Similar results were found for the UK as a destination with 64% of UK respondents perceiving the UK to be 'very safe' compared to 26% of the US sample. In the case of Spain the differences were even more dramatic with 56% of UK respondents perceiving Spain to be 'very safe' compared to only 10% of US respondents.

Conclusions

This exploratory study suggests that while 'proximity' to a terrorist attack may increase the general negative perceptions of the safety of international travel (i.e. the closer one is to an attack the more negative are the perceptions), when purpose of travel is for a vacation the influence of proximity weakens. The data suggests therefore that negative perceptions of international travel for vacation purposes are common to all travellers regardless of their proximity to the terrorist act. Vacation travel may therefore be particularly susceptible to terrorist attack, wherever it occurs. The differences in perceptions of three vacation destinations between the two groups indicate that variables other than proximity influence perceptions of the safety of destinations. It would seem that past experience of a destination (France and Spain are among the most popular destination for UK residents) is particularly influential and although we only have anecdotal evidence to support our assertion, media coverage of the aftermath of terrorist acts may explain some of the recorded differences surrounding Spain as a vacation destination. Press coverage of the trials of the terrorist suspects involved in the Madrid bombings of March 11th 2004 was notably more extensive in the US than in the UK. Why this was the case is open to speculation but the possibility of political influence over media coverage of the arrests and trials, given the importance to Spain's economy of UK tourists, should not be dismissed.

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