

Prospective Tourists' Apparent Risk Perception and Intentions to Travel to a Mega-Sporting Event Host Country

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Aim

Mega-sport events such as the Olympic Games attract international media attention and as a result tend to be more prone to terrorism attacks and violence (e.g., 1972 Munich massacre). The host country of the 2018 Winter Games, South Korea has historically experienced the threats of violence from the neighboring country (e.g., 1987 airplane bombing by North Korea prior to 1988 Olympics). Studies that deal with the perception of tourists and their intention to visit Olympic host countries with less imminent threats of terrorism and violence are well-established in the sport management context (e.g., Athens, Beijing and London). However, there is little empirical evidence that focuses on potential tourists' perceptions and behavioral intentions to visit an Olympic host country when it possesses apparent perilous risk of terrorism and political instability (e.g., PyeongChang and Sochi). Given this gap, this study aims to examine the relationship between tourists' risk perceptions and their intention to travel to an Olympic host country with apparent risks. The research questions are as follows: 1) does perceived terrorism and political instability influence tourists' intention to visit an Olympic host country? and 2) how does tourists' perceived anxiety and safety influence their intentions to travel to a host country when the country has apparent risks? To accomplish these goals, this study focused on the case of South Korea.

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

Risk is an important factor in international tourism because a sense of travel anxiety is generated when individuals perceive risk toward the destination (Dowling & Staelin, 1994). On the contrary, a feeling of travel safety develops when a favorable environment for tourists is established. Both perceived anxiety and safety have a great influence on intentions to travel as the destinations perceived as risky could generate a feeling of anxiety for tourists and thus may be more likely to become undesirable and eliminated from potential destination options (Sonmez & Graefe, 1998).

Cities and countries around the world have strategically considered and implemented sporting events as means to attract tourists and visitors (Kaplanidou, 2006). As a significant sporting event, the Olympic Games have played a vital role in marketing strategies of the host country as a destination for international tourists (Jago et al., 2003). Nonetheless, risk factors associated with mega-sport event tourism have recently received significant attention, and terrorism and political instability are regarded as two of the major risk types that may impact prospective tourists' decisions to travel (Kozak et al, 2007).

Following Reisinger and Mavondo (2005), the current study modified their framework to assess the relationship between tourists' risk perceptions and their intentions to travel to the Olympic host country with apparent risks. Particularly, the impact of risk perceptions (i.e., terrorism risk and political instability) on intention to travel and the mediating effects of travel anxiety and travel safety were conceptualized in this study.

Methods

Data were collected before the 2018 Winter Olympics using a convenience sampling technique via online survey software. The final sample comprised 571 college students. The survey included items to measure perceptions of two travel risks (i.e., terrorism risk and political instability), perceptions of travel anxiety and safety, and intentions to travel to South Korea using a 7-point Likert scale. A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to evaluate the measurement model and a structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis was followed to test the proposed conceptual model.

Results

A CFA with a total of 23 items showed an acceptable fit ($\chi^2/df = 3.298$, CFI = .94, RMSEA = .063) and reliability and validity estimates (Cronbach's alpha, factor loadings, and factor correlations) fell within the acceptable ranges. The structural model also indicated a satisfactory fit to the data ($\chi^2/df = 3.404$, CFI = .94, RMSEA = .065). The influence of terrorism risk perception on travel anxiety, travel safety, and intention to travel were statistically significant ($\gamma = .23$, $\gamma = -.15$, and $-.43$ respectively). However, political instability was not significantly related to travel anxiety, safety, and intention to travel.

Discussions and Implications

Perceived threats of terrorism in an Olympic host city/country negatively influence intention to travel to the host city; increased anxiety and lower safety perceptions lead to lower intentions to travel. However, unlike the threat of terrorism, political instability may have less or even no influence on tourists' intention to visit.

The findings are especially important for future host countries with apparent perilous terrorism risks as they will need to make heightened efforts to provide a safe destination image in order to prevent the loss of prospective tourists. To attract a higher number of visitors during and around the Olympics, organizations in charge of destination (host) management must set crisis management strategies to minimize the potential threats. Future research should focus on additional host cities with apparent risks of terrorism and political instability for further refinement and transferability of the findings.

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