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Ashley Schroeder MS

*Tourism Crisis Management Institute, Department of Tourism, Recreation, and Sport Management, University of Florida*

Lori Pennington-Gray PhD

*Tourism Crisis Management Institute, Department of Tourism, Recreation, and Sport Management, University of Florida*

Kiki Kaplanidou PhD

*Department of Tourism, Recreation, and Sport Management, University of Florida*

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# **Examining whether exposure to external information influences perceptions of increased crime at an Olympic Games host destination: The case of London 2012**

Ashley Schroeder, M.S.  
Tourism Crisis Management Institute  
Department of Tourism, Recreation, and Sport Management  
University of Florida

Lori Pennington-Gray, Ph.D.  
Tourism Crisis Management Institute  
Department of Tourism, Recreation, and Sport Management  
University of Florida

and

Kiki Kaplanidou, Ph.D.  
Department of Tourism, Recreation, and Sport Management  
University of Florida

## **ABSTRACT**

*Risks associated with the Olympic Games have been studied; however, there is a lack of research that empirically examines whether exposure to external information influences prospective tourists' destination risk perceptions. A survey of 1,200 British, Australian, and Canadian residents was conducted to examine factors that influence prospective tourists' perceptions of increased crime in London during the 2012 Summer Olympic Games. The age group 55-64 was a significant predictor, while other age groups, income, and gender were not significant predictors. While controlling for demographics, past experience traveling to London and attending the Games were not significant predictors. Travel advisories and reading about the London riots were significant predictors, while watching television coverage of the riots and reading social media messages related to crises in London were not significant predictors while controlling for demographics and past experience. Lastly, travel risk perceptions were a significant predictor, while controlling for the previous independent variables.*

**Keywords:** *mega sporting events, Olympic Games, destination risk perceptions, media exposure*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Mega-events such as the Olympic Games have a number of positive and negative impacts on the host destination (Kaplanidou & Karadakis, 2010). Many times positive impacts, such as destination image enhancement, can intertwine with negative impacts, such as crime-related risk perceptions (e.g., Barker, Page, & Meyer, 2003; Jennings & Lodge, 2009). While destinations hope to foster a positive destination image by hosting a mega-event (Roche, 2008), high crime-related risk perceptions can ultimately tarnish destination image (Sönmez, 1998). International media coverage is an important characteristic of modern mega-events (Kim, Gursoy, & Lee, 2006; Roche, 2008). Although host destinations seek to enhance their image (Roche, 2008), the

international media seem to have an inclination to disseminate negative stories (Beirman, 2003). Thus, exposure to external information about a destination has the potential to influence the perceptions and behaviors of tourists (Sönmez & Graefe, 1998a). Information Integration Theory suggests that information has the potential to influence judgments, perceptions, and decision-making depending on the valuation and integration of obtained information (Anderson, 1981). Guided by Information Integration Theory, as well as the Model of International Tourism Decision-Making Process (Sönmez & Graefe, 1998a), the purpose of this study was to investigate factors that influence prospective tourists' perceptions of increased crime at an Olympic Games host destination. Utilizing the case of the 2012 Summer Olympic Games in London, particular emphasis was given to whether exposure to external information was associated with crime-related destination risk perceptions.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourists' perceptions of risk are not uni-dimensional. Perceptions of risk can vary depending on the type of risk itself (e.g., Floyd, Gibson, Pennington-Gray, & Thapa, 2004; Reisinger & Mavondo, 2005), as well as the destination (e.g., Germunden, 1985; Sönmez & Graefe, 1998b). Although the likelihood that an individual will actually be faced with a risk is minimal, serious reactions are associated with individuals who possess high risk perceptions (Richter & Waugh, 1986). In fact, perceptions of risk can be more powerful than reality (Sönmez & Graefe, 1998a). Risk perceptions have the potential to affect a variety of travel-related decisions (Kozak, Crotts, & Law, 2007; Sönmez & Graefe, 1998a). High travel risk perceptions can result in extensive information search (Roehl & Fesenmaier, 1992; Sönmez & Graefe, 1998a) and can be integrated into one's image of a destination (Sönmez & Graefe, 1998b).

A number of factors have been found to have an effect on tourists' perceptions of risk. Past experience with travel or a destination (e.g., Kozak et al., 2007; Sönmez & Graefe, 1998a) and mega-events (Boo & Gu, 2010; Kim & Chalip, 2004) can influence risk perceptions. The risk perception literature has not reached a consensus on the influence of demographic factors on risk perceptions. Further, Sönmez and Graefe (1998a, b) suggested that information acquired from external sources can affect tourists' travel and destination risk perceptions. The sentiment that the mass media plays a vital role in molding tourists' destination risk perceptions, especially when unfamiliar with the destination, has been supported by other researchers (e.g., Cavlek, 2002; Rittichainuwat & Chakraborty, 2009; Rowe, Frewer, & Sjöberg, 2000; Sönmez, 1998). Destination risk perceptions influenced by the mass media could result in tourists perceiving a destination or geographic region to be particularly risky (Sönmez, 1998).

Perceptions of increased crime associated with mega-events (Barker et al., 2003; Burns & Mules, 1989; Hall, Selwood, & McKewon, 1995; Jennings & Lodge, 2009; Kelly, 1993) may not be unfounded. Crime rates tend to rise during mega-events (Barker et al., 2003; Burns & Mules, 1989; Hall et al., 1995; Kelly, 1993). Jennings and Lodge (2009) suggested that the actual surge in criminal activity may be due to crowds at the destination. Nevertheless, intensification of crime-related risk perceptions can contribute to negative destination image (Kim et al., 2006).

## METHODS

The data was collected through an online panel of leisure tourists in August 2011, as part of a larger study conducted by a private national research company. Prior to data collection, a university institute wrote and purchased risk-specific questions related to the 2012 Summer Olympic Games. At the time of data collection, London experienced several days of riots which gained international media attention. The authors thought that it was pertinent to include a question about media coverage to measure whether exposure to external information had an influence on perceptions of risk associated with an Olympic Games host destination. A total of 1,200 residents of the United Kingdom (n=400), Australia (n=400), and Canada (n=400) participated. The sample was unique in that it included tourists from the host country, as well as Commonwealth nations. Thus, the nations have a shared heritage and culture.

Perceptions of increased crime at a host destination, the dependent variable, was operationalized by the likelihood that London would experience some increased crime during the 2012 Summer Olympic Games (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree). The independent variables were age, annual household income, gender, past experience traveling to an Olympic Games host destination, past experience attending an Olympic Games, exposure to external information about an Olympic Games host destination, and travel risk index. Exposure to external information about an Olympic Games host destination was measured, on a scale of 1-5 where 1= strongly disagree and 5= strongly agree, by four items: (1) "I read what is going on in the media surrounding the riots in London," (2) "I read government issued travel advisories surrounding the UK," (3) "I watched what was going on via television surrounding the riots in London," and (4) "I read social media messages related to crisis and disasters in London." Travel risk index was measured by six items focused on travel in general (e.g., "Traveling is risky right now"). Multiple hierarchical regression was utilized to investigate the potential drivers of perceptions of increased crime at an Olympic Games host destination. Based on a review of the tolerance and variance inflation factor (VIF), multicollinearity issues were not detected.

## FINDINGS

The results of the multiple hierarchical regression utilized to examine drivers of perceptions of increased crime at an Olympic Games host destination are provided in Table 1. In the first step, only the age group of 55-64 ( $\beta = 0.123$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) was significantly, positively related to perceptions of increased crime at an Olympic Games host destination. In the second step, past experience traveling to an Olympic Games host destination ( $\beta = -0.021$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ) and past experience attending an Olympic Games ( $\beta = 0.071$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ) were not significantly related to perceptions of increased crime at a host destination ( $\beta = -0.021$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ). In the third step, reading government issued travel advisories surrounding the United Kingdom ( $\beta = 0.119$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and reading about the London riots in the media ( $\beta = 0.118$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) were significantly, positively associated with perceptions of the likelihood that London would experience increased crime during the 2012 Summer Olympic Games. The third step accounted for 5.8% of the variance in crime-related destination risk perceptions ( $p < 0.01$ ). In the fourth step, it was found that those with high travel risk perceptions had a high perception of the likelihood that London would experience increased crime during the 2012 Summer Olympic Games ( $\beta = 0.243$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). The final step accounted for 5.2% of the variance in the dependent variable ( $p < 0.01$ ).

**Table 1**  
**Drivers of Perceptions of Increased Crime at an Olympic Games Host Destination**

Variable	Standardized coefficients B	Sig.
<b>Step 1</b>		
Age 25-34	-0.016	0.79
Age 35-44	0.013	0.83
Age 45-54	0.071	0.25
Age 55-64	0.123	0.03*
Age 65 or older	-0.028	0.61
Annual household income \$25,000-49,999	-0.080	0.14
Annual household income \$50,000-99,999	-0.068	0.24
Annual household income \$100,000 or more	-0.079	0.13
Gender	-0.042	0.30
<b>Step 2</b>		
Age 25-34	-0.016	0.79
Age 35-44	0.023	0.71
Age 45-54	0.071	0.25
Age 55-64	0.128	0.03*
Age 65 or older	-0.021	0.70
Annual household income \$25,000-49,999	-0.087	0.11
Annual household income \$50,000-99,999	-0.076	0.19
Annual household income \$100,000 or more	-0.087	0.10
Gender	-0.050	0.22
Past experience traveling to an Olympic Games host destination	-0.021	0.62
Past experience attending an Olympic Games	0.071	0.09
<b>Step 3</b>		
Age 25-34	-0.028	0.64
Age 35-44	0.019	0.76
Age 45-54	0.042	0.49
Age 55-64	0.077	0.18
Age 65 or older	-0.058	0.29
Annual household income \$25,000-49,999	-0.063	0.24
Annual household income \$50,000-99,999	-0.075	0.18
Annual household income \$100,000 or more	-0.077	0.14
Gender	-0.033	0.40
Past experience traveling to an Olympic Games host destination	-0.058	0.17
Past experience attending an Olympic Games	0.028	0.50
I read what is going on in the media surrounding the riots in London	0.118	0.04*
I read government issued travel advisories surrounding the UK	0.119	0.03*
I watched what was going on via television surrounding the riots in London	0.097	0.09
I read social media messages related to crisis and disasters in London	-0.061	0.24
<b>Step 4</b>		
Age 25-34	-0.048	0.40
Age 35-44	0.000	1.00
Age 45-54	0.020	0.73
Age 55-64	0.055	0.32
Age 65 or older	-0.052	0.33
Annual household income \$25,000-49,999	-0.047	0.37
Annual household income \$50,000-99,999	-0.050	0.36
Annual household income \$100,000 or more	-0.035	0.49
Gender	-0.027	0.49
Past experience traveling to an Olympic Games host destination	-0.039	0.35
Past experience attending an Olympic Games	0.038	0.35
I read what is going on in the media surrounding the riots in London	0.106	0.06
I read government issued travel advisories surrounding the UK	0.064	0.22
I watched what was going on via television surrounding the riots in London	0.096	0.09
I read social media messages related to crisis and disasters in London	-0.070	0.16
Travel risk index	0.243	0.00**

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ;  $R^2 = 0.026$  for step 1,  $p = 0.06$ ;  $\Delta R^2 = 0.005$  for step 2,  $p = 0.24$ ;  $\Delta R^2 = 0.058$  for step 3,  $p = 0.00$ ;  $\Delta R^2 = 0.052$  for step 4,  $p = 0.00$

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

A main contribution of this research was that information sources were not homogenous in their effects on destination risk perceptions. Rather, exposure to external information through reading the media and government issued travel advisories resulted in increased destination risk perceptions associated with crime at an Olympic Games host destination. On the other hand, exposure to information through television coverage and social media did not significantly affect perceptions of increased crime. As a result, Information Integration Theory (Anderson, 1981, 1982) was partially supported within the context of tourism and mega-events. Particularly, leisure travelers who were exposed to external information through reading the media and government issued travel advisories made judgments about the information, incorporated the information with their previous perceptions, and, as a response, their destination risk perceptions were reshaped. This particular finding also provides empirical confirmation of the role that information obtained from external sources has on destination risk perceptions (Avraham & Ketter, 2008; Brunt, Mawby, & Hambly, 2000; Butler, 1990; Ehemann, 1977; Faulkner, 2001; Rittichainuwat & Chakraborty, 2009; Sönmez, 1998; Sönmez, Apostolopoulos, & Tarlow, 1999; Sönmez & Graefe, 1998a, b). Accordingly, tourism stakeholders in the host destination should monitor the information being disseminated through these sources. However, a majority of the attention should be focused on written media and travel advisories which were found to be influential in reshaping destination risk perceptions. Given the global reach of mass media, international media coverage should be monitored in addition to local and national media.

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