Attitudes of Potential Inbound Visitors to the Maldives towards an Anti-Tourist Incident

Abstract

Portrayal of anti-tourist incidents in media and its influence on potential tourists’ attitude towards tourism destinations have not been given prominence in tourism research. Using netnography, this paper explores the diverse range of emotions evoked among potential tourists upon viewing online videos and reading news about an anti-tourist incident. The influence it has on potential tourists’ destination image and travel decisions are explored. It is postulated that a third dimension of ‘The Tourist Gaze’ (Urry, 1990) is present when potential tourists are confronted with anti-tourist incidents. Implications and future research suggestions are presented.

Keywords

anti-tourist, behaviour, emotion, tourist gaze, netnography, Maldives

Introduction

‘The Tourist Gaze’ (Urry, 1990) was highly influential in broadening our understanding of how tourists view tourism experiences and their behavioural adaptation towards different representation of cultures and experiences. Maoz (2006) suggests that there is another aspect of the tourist gaze – namely that of the local gaze. This refers to conscious and unconscious images and stereotypes formed by the locals about the tourists which in turn affect the behavioural attitude towards the tourists. Where these two gazes interrelate, she asserts that a mutual gaze is formed. We argue that in practice, this is not as simplistic and one or two-dimensional as they suggest, but are more complex and has a third dimension, i.e. the gaze of potential tourists on tourists as well as hosts, thereby forming behavioural attitudes towards the tourist destination implicated in these relationships.

Consumer perceptions pertaining to a tourism destination image influence their intention to visit or re-visit the destination (Huang & Hsu, 2009). Media and visual images play a central role in how these perceptions are formed and how potential tourists react towards a destination (Pan, 2011). Indeed cognitive science has established that evoked mental imagery strongly affects behavioural intentions. There is extensive research on emotional and psychological aspects of tourist experiences and intention to visit (Hosany, 2011), tourist satisfaction, motivation, loyalty, and travel behaviour (Hsu, Cai, & Li, 2010; Sirgy, Kruger, Lee, & Yu, 2011). However, there is a paucity of research on how different forms of touristic communication are interwoven, how ‘new media’ influence tourism activities (Jansson, 2007); as well as the portrayal of anti-tourist incidents in media and its influence on potential tourists attitude towards tourism destinations.

Using highly publicised YouTube clips and online news sources about an anti-tourist incident (henceforth the Incident) in a Maldivian resort, this paper presents the diverse range of emotions evoked among potential tourists upon viewing and/or reading about this Incident. The first section explores anti-tourist behaviours and the role of media in presenting such incidents and the effect it has on destination image and travel decisions. The context of the Maldivian tourism industry is followed by a description of the methodology and results. A discussion on the influence the Incident has on potential tourists’ destination image and travel decisions are further explored. Implications of these findings and suggestions for future research are discussed.

Anti-Tourist Behaviours

While some authors regard tourism as the world peace industry (Litvin, 1998), anti-tourist behaviours such as harassment, tourism related crime and terrorism are growing problems, (McElroy, Tarlow, & Carlisle, 2008). ‘Harassment’ in this paper is defined as “any annoying behavior which is carried to
extreme” (de Albuquerque & McElroy, 2001, p. 478). Ryan (1993, p. 174) defined tourism related crime as “an action which is contrary to written or case law in either the tourist-generating or tourist-receiving country”. Applying a psychological and behavioural perspective to the definition, Ruby (2002, p. 9) defined terrorism as an act “committed in order to create a fearful state of mind in an audience different from the victims”.

Acts of terrorism, both actual and potential, have severe adverse effects on tourism receipts and demand. For instance, the impact of 9/11 terror attack in the United States sharply declined domestic and foreign travel to the country by 8.4% (Bonham, Edmonds, & Mak, 2006). A similar pattern was seen following the Bali bombings of 2002. Consequent adverse effect on national economy and local livelihoods are well documented as in the cases of Bali (Pambudi, McCaughey, & Smyth, 2009) and Turkey (Yaya, 2009). In the context of Turkey, Yaya (2009) noted that the economic cost of terrorism on tourism cost the country more than $700 million in 2006 alone.

In the early 1980s Pizam (1982) suggested that relative contribution of tourism to crime was insubstantial. This study may have not disclosed the full picture of anti-tourist attitudes towards tourists as the study presented data collected in 1975 from the United States only. Evidenced through more contemporary research are clear indications that tourism contributes to an increase in crime levels (Michalkó, 2004). Indeed, anti-tourist behaviours such as crime against tourists are daily occurrences throughout the world (Pizam & Mansfeld, 2006). Some researchers suggest that this is because of the tourists’ desire to seek authentic tourism experiences which leads them to face anti-tourist behaviours.

For instance, a study in India (Chiu & Lin, 2011) elucidates that sightseeing tourists were more likely to become victims of anti-tourist behaviours including harassment, fraud and theft. Prior studies in the context of Ghana (Boakye, 2010) indicates that home stay with local hosts, travelling independently, and making own travel arrangements within the destination increased tourist’s vulnerability to anti-tourist behaviours such as theft, verbal and physical assault. Pizam and Mansfeld (2006) also confirm that tourists going into areas where locals consider as unsafe increases the tourist’s chances of facing such anti-tourist incidents. Other authors such as Harper (2006) and Michalkó (2004) postulate that the outwardly appearance of the tourists, i.e. dress, communication, and behaviour, signposts them as a foreigners who are perceived among locals to be wealthy, which in turn makes them soft targets of anti-tourist behaviours.

Harassment, although subjective among varying cultures, is a pervasive anti-tourist behaviour found in tourism destinations. A broad search of academic literature indicates that there are five types of harassment faced by tourists. These include harassment by vendors, peddling of drugs, sexual harassment, verbal abuse, and physical abuse (de Albuquerque & McElroy, 2001; Kozak, 2007; McElroy et al., 2008). While some authors infer that the nexus between tourist economy and level of poverty within the destination is the reason behind tourist harassment, Kozak (2007) propose that communication and cultural differences are the source problem of tourist harassment.

This view is endorsed by Reisinger (2009) who allege that conflict of cultural values is a fundamental reason behind anti-tourist attitudes among hosts. For example, Kamaki (Greek analogy for sexual ‘fishing’) is evident among tourists visiting Greece, resulting in destruction of social fabric of the destination (Andriotis, 2005). To level the playing field, hosts espouse anti-tourist behaviours. This scenario also exists in Phuket where perpetrators rationalise their acts of anti-tourist behaviours, and local community largely condone their deeds, citing indecent behaviour of tourists and disrespect to local customs justify their actions (Cohen, 1982). Regardless of where anti-tourist incidents occur, such incidents are easily disseminated though media and can evoke negative sentiments about these destinations among potential visitors.

**Media, Images and Emotions**

In today’s connected world, media sources such as social, print, visual, and audio play a central role in influencing travel decisions. Davin (2005, p. 178) allege that “as the spread of the entertainment
industry continues unabated across the globe, as entire regions are being turned into giant theme parks, as the world becomes a complex web of intertexts and hypertexts, reality, media and tourism are more and more closely intertwined”. In this context, Jansson (2007) concur that globalised media culture enables people to travel mentally and emotionally. However, a key challenge he notes is that such tourism experiences can blur the boundaries between physical and imaginative mobility. Thus, perceptions about a destination can be given a heavier importance than the actual reality on the ground.

Following this discourse, Tasci (2009) and Pan (2011) have established that visual media, including movies and television influence destination image and subsequently affect tourist behavioural intentions to visit a destination. For example, films such as the Braveheart and Lord of the Rings are known to have increased international visitations to destinations where these films were shot. In addition to increasing visitor numbers, Tasci (2009, p. 494) asserts that “positive reflections in the visual media might help reduce the perceived cultural and social differences” among tourists and local residents. In contrast, where negative imagery is portrayed about a destination, viewers take up defence mechanisms and negative psychological emotions are evoked. Moreover, negative images caused for example, through acts of terrorism create negative sentiments, and tarnishes the destination image of safety and attractiveness (Sönmez, Apostolopoulos, & Tarlow, 1991). Consequently, as the authors note, until these negative images fade from public memory there will be reduced tourism numbers to the destination concerned.

Similarly, research also indicates that Internet communications and technology mediated interactions among virtual community members’ results in changes in attitudinal and behavioural intentions (Chan & Li, 2010). Travel websites such as TripAdvisor where a previous traveller leaves commentaries has thus become a powerful source of information, and one which influence behavioural intentions of potential travellers to the destination (Jecacle & Carter, 2011). This is because “Online communities are contexts in which consumers often partake in discussions whose goals include attempts to inform and influence fellow consumers about products and brands” (Kozinets, 2002, p. 61). Campbell (2006, p. 277) identified various techniques used by virtual community members in influencing others such as through “selection of specific words which expressed subtly in feeling, the use of uppercase letters to denote anger or shouting, and the more explicit use of emoticons”. Thus, technology mediated evaluations of tourism products and services have now become commonplace, influencing tourists’ travel decisions (Månsson, 2011) which has significant implications for tourist destinations.

Background to the Study

Tourism in the Maldives began in 1972 with the opening of two resorts with 280 beds and 1,079 international tourist arrivals (Ministry of Tourism, 1998). The Maldivian tourism industry embodies the classic ‘pleasure periphery’ (Turner & Ash, 1975), and its attendant hyper-dependency on tourism. Despite the financial crisis affecting the global tourism industry, in 2011 Maldives received 931,000 international arrivals, an 18% increase from 2010 (Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture [MTAC], 2011a). Currently there are 104 resorts, 145 tourist vessels, 60 guest houses, ten hotels, two yacht marinas, and two strata resort villas with a total bed capacity of 27,000 (MTAC, 2012b) in operation. An addition 67 new resort islands with a bed capacity of 12,000 are being developed (MTAC, 2012a). The country’s high reliance on tourism is manifest in the tourism industry’s contribution to GDP (36%) foreign currency earnings (70%) (MTAC, 2011b) and employment. By comparison, the second largest foreign exchange earner, and traditionally the largest employer, the fishing industry, contributed only one per cent to GDP during this period.

The Maldives is one of the few countries that practice ‘enclave tourism’, under which islands developed for tourism are “off-limits to the local people” (UNWTO, 1997, p.13), who are mostly Muslims. Resorts are developed one per island, and each generates their own electricity, desalinates water, and has arrangements for sewage and waste disposal. Although the geography of this coralline island destination has compelled enclave resort development, up until recently the government also pursued the enclave tourism policy to mitigate negative impacts of tourism development.
Sathiendrakumar and Tisdell (1989) note the success of this policy in reducing socio-cultural cost of tourism, yet failed to identify the negative cost of enclave resort employment on locals (Shakeela & Cooper, 2009).

During the early years of tourism, a few guesthouses did exist on locally inhabited islands, which were closed with new regulations to control negative socio-cultural impacts on local communities; and government allowed guesthouses and hotels only on the capital island Malé. The government also regulated safari boats to operate within demarcated zones. Thus, the government policy was to locate tourist resorts on uninhabited islands as this was considered to be “effective in limiting the influence of tourism on local communities” (Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation [MTCA], 2007, p. 58). Nonetheless, in order to stimulate local island economies, in 2008 the enclave resort and safari operation policy has been changed to allow for guest house and hotel development on inhabited islands, as well as safari boat operation throughout the country.

The Incident

In late October 2010, a YouTube video of a ‘marriage ceremony’ conducted at a Maldivian resort was uploaded by a resort employee. A replicated copy of this video, together with an embedded English translation of what was being said in the local Dhivehi language was uploaded by a local media source. By August 26, 2012, the video (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i5H64OOkeXA) was visited 447,602 times and attracted 2,504 comments, 221 likes and 526 dislikes. The Incident showed a couple who believed that they were having their wedding vows renewed in a local cultural ceremony at a Maldivian resort. The ‘celebrant’, however, was a local employee who was actually reading an employment contract interjected with abusive and abhorrent language, including religious bigotry and sexual profanity. Other employees are seen expressionless and apparently complicit.

A personal apology of the country’s president to the embarrassed couple (The President’s Office, 2010) reveals awareness of the potentially serious economic consequences of the Incident. More broadly, strong and diverse reactions among local and international viewers were elicited in various media soon after the posting. These reactions provide an appropriate database for gaining insight into behavioural intentions and attitudes of the virtual community members who are potential tourists to the destination and for learning how media can influence behavioural intentions.

Methodology

Netnography (Kozinets, 1997, 1998), or ethnography adapted to study communications of virtual communities offers a naturalistic, unobtrusive and interpretive methodology to study emotions. A key distinction between netnography and traditional ethnography is that netnography is based primarily upon observation of textual discourse (Kozinets, 2002). The primary researcher adopted the role of a ‘lurker’ (Kozinets, 2002) observing the on-going online communications but did not contribute to the discussions. This assured that the virtual community dynamics and behaviours were not influenced by the researcher’s presence.

Procedurally, all relevant commentaries (or postings) from on-line media sources published locally and internationally between 24 October and 10 November 2010 were identified. This 18-day extraction period resulted from the dramatic erosion of commentaries after the first 12 days, with the first, second and third six-day cohorts accounting respectively for 59%, 40% and 1% of all international commentaries during the period. Altogether, 1,317 and 11,305 commentaries were obtained respectively from 43 local and 120 international sources. This consisted of 75 newspaper articles, 50 blogs, 21 discussion boards, and 17 videos. Second, 11,664 commentaries (92% of the total) assumed to have been posted by international commentators (a person or group identified by a unique on-line profile name) were isolated. This also includes 268 commentaries left in the Maldivian local media by non-Maldivians. These commentators were identified mainly by their indicated location. Where no location was provided, statements such as “I went there on our honeymoon” or
“I’m sorry but how the hell do we know that this is what they are really saying?” were coded as non-Maldivian.

‘Flamers’ (a person who attacks another online participant in overly harsh, and often personal terms, [e.g. “I think you are a moron” (secaedu on CNN)], ‘trolls’ (a person who deliberately posts derogatory or inflammatory comments in order to bait other users into responding [e.g. “hopefully the sea rises and wipes these pig […] off the face of the earth” (Sinist3r666 on YouTube Video13)] and ‘spammers’ (a person who posts unrelated text messages [e.g. “OMG JUSTIN BIEBER!! (rythemandthebeat on YouTube Video 9)”] were eliminated. This accounted for 6,478 (56%) of total postings. A further 189 (2%) comments in foreign languages and postings from local Maldivians were also eliminated so that coding could be performed.

Third, coding procedures were used to identify the attendant themes in the commentaries. Discourse analysis, which emphasises socially interactive aspects of written and spoken language as the primary context for extracting meaning (Fairclough, 2003), was utilised to generate data. Manifest and latent coding were applied to extract and organise comments (discrete reactions). With the assistance of NVivo, manifest codes were derived as quantifiable key words and phrases. Latent content analysis was subsequently applied to interpret the implicit meaning of the material. Ultimately, 7,187 comments extracted from 5,623 individual international commentators were organised into 91 manifest sub-themes, and ten latent super themes. Figure 1 illustrates the coding process.

(FIGURE 1 HERE)

Limitations

A limitation of netnography is that based on commentaries posted, the age, gender, education level etc. of the commentator or authenticity of commentator location cannot be established. This omission by commentators thus precludes us from indicating this information with quotations, as per convention, and we are unable to identify differences in responses based on demographic profile of the commentators. Generalisability of the findings beyond the virtual community is another limitation of this method. Also, while traditional ethnographic studies permit researcher to pick on nonverbal cues, netnography does not allow interpretation of visual and auditory cues. Finally, the need to set a cut-off date for comments means that the ‘long tail’ of residual comments that continues to develop long after the Incident is omitted from the analysis.

Results

In today’s socially connected world, potential tourists base their decision on virtual experiences. The Incident provoked various gazes related to the couple (1,549 comments), the Incident itself (1,527 comments), destination (1,061 comments), hosts (907 comments), religion (814 comments), and media (200 comments). Additionally, views on extrapolation (90 comments), and general observations on tourism (52 comments) were revealed. For the purpose of this paper, themes related to the destination, hosts, and extrapolation are presented, and only subthemes with at least 50 comments are presented due to the large volume of the data.

Gaze on the Destination

The gaze on the destination itself indicated an altered behaviour among commentators (509 comments).

I always wanted to go to the Maldives and have been positively cured of ever going there - thanks to these idiots (Dianna on IOL).

The above behavioural intention was linked to calls to boycott the Maldives (211 comments).

Boycott, Take their dollars away….. (Micheal57 on CNN);
Two hundred and four comments also pointed out the consequent negative impact of the Incident on the Maldivian tourism industry, without implicating their own personal intentions.

I am sure this is going to hurt tourism on a country that heavily relies on it (KraftwithaK on YouTube video 14).

While 61 comments indicated diversion to other destinations, 58 comments showed no altered behaviour and showed comments promoting the destination.

The Maldives should be on your holiday list. It is breathtaking and remains the best place I have ever been. The people are so welcoming, friendly and incredibly polite it’s sad that just one individual can ruin the reputation of an entire nation (Sara White on The Independent).

Gaze on the Hosts
The potential tourist gaze on the hosts indicated that the employees were seen as despicable for doing this to the couple (382 comments).

What do people expect from scum of the earth sand niggers. Even their skin colour looks filthy... (Kelbert88 on YouTube video 9).

Tourism dependency was also seen in 87 comments.

I wonder what the celebrant-victims here would be doing if they didn’t work in the tourist industry? (Florence5 on The Guardian).

A similar number (81 comments) opined that hosts resent tourists.

The hotel employees are obviously so contemptuous of the lifestyles of their guests, they sink to despicable levels to act that out (Simon on Mail Online).

However, 74 comments called for readers not to generalise the Maldivians and Muslims as a result of the Incident.

I don’t understand the hatred being written here or the condemnation of a whole country or religion. All countries, religions and races have bad people. You don’t condemn the whole for the actions of a few (carolyn18 on YouTube video 7).

Sixty-five comments focused on why other employees did not intervene.

The celebrant’s behaviour is disgusting but so is the fact that the numerous members of staff standing around appear to hold the same opinions. Otherwise someone would have stopped it happening. Surely someone there felt it was wrong(!!) (celebritystains on YouTube video 6).

Extrapolation Views
This largely showed distrust (63 comments).

If they do this to your face - they’re also spitting and pissing in your food behind your back (Kevo216666 on YouTube video 9).

Discussion and Conclusions

This research illustrates the power of social media images influencing potential tourists’ formation of destination images. As such, this Incident has evoked negative psychological emotions among potential tourists. Depending on the personal cognitive interpretation of the viewer, this anti-tourist Incident can be termed a harassment, crime or terrorism. This research indicates that the mediated experiences in the virtual world significantly influence emotions (negative in this instance). Online community members also influence how these emotions are formed and expressed.
The research also indicates that a third dimension of the tourist gaze (Urry, 1990) is present in tourist encounters in the virtual world. The visual media creates a third dimension of the tourist gaze, i.e. that of the potential tourist on a tourist destination and the hosts. As such, this research shows that the gaze on the destination among potential tourists has altered as a result of this Incident. This is because in today’s mediatised world, those who are viewing a movie, video clip, or reading an online newspaper are travelling mentally and are placing themselves within the context of what they are witnessing in the media world. The viewer’s thus establish an emotional link with the content portrayed. As Jansson (2007) has established, this blurs the boundary between what is the reality, and viewers take the media portrayal of the incident as a given. This research demonstrates that media influences potential tourist’s behavioural intentions and perceptions of the destination. As the Incident was highly negative, this has resulted in potential tourists calling for boycotting of the destination.

Taking the Incident beyond the situation, some viewers have made some cognitive interpretation of what faces the destination in the future. As such, this gaze relates to the negative economic consequences facing the tourism industry. This relates to findings of Yahya (2009), who confirm the impact of terrorism and negative effect on tourism industry. Interestingly, this research also illustrated that those who have prior experience of the destination did not have an altered gaze on the destination. As such, those who have visited the destination were seen trying to influence others views by presenting a positive image of the destination.

Previous research (Kozak, 2007) establishes the link between communication and cultural differences and cultural values (Reisinger, 2009) as the source of tourist harassment. Further research informs us that the outwardly appearance of tourists makes them targets of anti-tourist behaviours (Harper, 2006; Michalkó, 2004). While this was not manifest in this research, the potential tourist gaze inferred the cultural differences of the employees being one of the facets of this anti-tourist Incident. This gaze was directly related to host resentment towards tourists. This was followed with calls for logic to prevail, and that all cultures and religions cannot be generalised. The potential tourists gaze also relayed to service. In this instance, this largely centred on distrust of service offered.

Sönmez, Apostolopoulos, and Tarlow (1991) found that until negative images related to a destination fade from the public memories, there are reduced tourism numbers to the destination in question. However, in a mediatised world such images and memories are often difficult to be removed. For instance, a Google search of the terms “Maldives wedding” brings up a news article related to the Incident and the first video to appear on YouTube related to the search terms also links to this Incident. Today’s tourists are highly technology savvy and seek information from numerous media sources. For any potential tourist who wishes to have a wedding ceremony (or any other ceremony to that matter), a simple Google search of the destination linked to the Incident can deter them from making a trip to the destination.

With regard to international tourist arrivals to the country, although there has been an increase in visitor numbers, a slight decline from the European market during 2010-2012 periods is noted. However, this cannot be definitively linked to the Incident itself. The slight decline in European market segment is more likely attributable to continuing volatile global economic conditions, as well as to a tourism boycott campaigns carried out by a Maldivian opposition political party in the United Kingdom.

This research however does indicate that the Incident has tarnished the image of the Maldives, as negative emotions about the destination have been evoked. These behavioural intentions are highly evident where there are changes to behavioural intentions to visit the destination (509 comments). The changed behavioural intentions also include defence mechanisms such as boycotting the destination. In a predominantly Islamic country, a Western looking couple requesting to have their wedding renewals in a local wedding ceremony may be seen by the locals as being disrespectful to the local culture and religion. While conflict of cultural values are recognised as a core reason behind anti-tourist attitudes among hosts, we propose that the use of an employment contract as a wedding sermon points towards employee deviance and service sabotage.
This research confirms that media portrayal of a single event can create a diverse range of emotions among potential tourists. This depends on how the story is presented. Online media communications highly influence behavioural intentions of potential visitors. For industry practitioners, social media has to be accepted as a crucial marketing tool but also an uncontrollable and potent tool for sabotaging official marketing efforts. Where the potential wealth of social media sources goes untapped, it can also be used against a destination.
### Commentary =

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A
WOW this is HILARIOUS, but I also feel kinda sad for that couple.

B
...but funny nonetheless!!!

C
Why marry in a language u don’t understand?
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comment</th>
<th>Manifest Codes (Themes)</th>
<th>Latent Codes (Super-themes)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A = Comment 1</td>
<td>Code 1: funny</td>
<td>Visceral reaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B = Comment 2</td>
<td>Code 2: sad</td>
<td>Visceral reaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C = Comment 3</td>
<td>Code 3: language</td>
<td>Cognitive interpretation</td>
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Figure 1: Coding Process
REFERENCES


