Navigating Uncertainty: The Perception of Risk in Cruise Tourists' Decision-Making

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Introduction

This presentation will discuss a PhD research study currently in the middle stages. The aim of the research is to examine the influence that perceptions of risk have on consumer decision-making in ocean cruising using a qualitative research design.

Literature Review

There is a ‘culture of fear’ in western societies that is distinct to the 21st century. Although statistically humans are living longer, safer and healthier lives, many people are more concerned about risk than in previous generations (Nakayachi, 2013; Slovic, 2000). Social understanding of risk has become increasingly prominent in the last two decades, reflecting a growing concern with societal and global uncertainty (Gardner, 2008; Korstanje, 2011; Lupton, 1999). Scholars argue that there is a ‘culture of fear’ that is distinct to western societies (Furedi, 1997; Glassner, 1999; Tudor, 2003; Zinn, 2008). Although statistically humans are living longer, safer and healthier lives; certain scholars argue many people are more concerned about risk than in previous generations (Fischhoff et al, 2001; Nakayachi, 2013; Slovic, 2000). There is a narrative of fear (Furedi, 2007); fuelled by media content that often makes the world seem more threatening and dangerous than it actually is and thus influences perception and attitudes towards risk (Ropeik, 2004; Wilkinson & Fletcher, 1995). Understanding how tourists feel about risk is of utmost importance because the presence of risk, whether real or perceived, has the potential to change travel decision-making (Bowen et al, 2014; Sonmez & Graefe, 1998). However, risk is not well understood in travel and the lack of research points to a knowledge gap in understanding the relationship between risk and consumer decision-making in tourism. As risk and uncertainty are ‘inherent’ to tourism, understanding tourist risk perception is central to the decision making process.

There have been many attempts to define, conceptualize and understand the phenomenon of risk. However, defining risk is problematic and there is no universally-agreed upon definition (Aven & Renn, 2009). Risk goes beyond physical harm and includes financial, psychological, social, time-loss, and performance risks (Jacoby & Kaplan, 1972). However, risk is not well understood in tourism and the lack of research points to a knowledge gap in understanding the relationship of risk and consumer decision-making in tourism, and particularly in cruise studies. A cruise holiday is particularly germane for examining conceptualizations of risk due to the complex decision-making involved (Petrick et al, 2007) and complementarity nature of the consumption experience (Gibson, 2006).
Cruise tourism is one of the fastest growing sectors of the global tourism industry (Hunter et al, 2015; Jones, 2011; Papatheanasssis & Beckmann, 2011; Sun et al, 2011; Weeden et al 2011). While the cruise industry has enjoyed sustained growth for the past decade, there has been increased attention recently on possible risks related to cruising (Baker, 2013; Bowen, Fidegon & Page, 2014; Lois et al, 2004; Wang et al, 2014). Recent events illuminate risk in cruising, including the sinking of the Costa Concordia with 32 deaths (Alexander, 2012), and multiple outbreaks of norovirus onboard cruise ships (Wikswo et al, 2011), resulting in cancelled sailings, limited passenger services and widespread illness onboard. The conceptualization of risk in the decision-making process for ocean cruising has been limited to a narrow application of risk related to terrorism (Bowen et al, 2014; Brosnan, 2011), safety (Baker, 2013; Lois et al, 2004), dangers of polar cruising (Luck et al, 2010; Stewart et al, 2007; Stewart & Draper, 2008) and health outbreaks such as H1N1 and norovirus (Liu et al, 2016). However, little is known about whether risk influences tourist decision-making for a cruise holiday. This research will apply the consumer risk typology set out by Jacoby and Kaplan (1972) to decision-making for a cruise holiday. This typology is widely recognized and used for consumer decision-making, yet limitations exist for application to experiential tourism products such as a cruise.

Methodology

The research is conducted through a constructivist lens, which accepts that knowledge is socially constructed and there are multiple interpretations and realities (Schwandt, 2015). Reflexivity and positionality are woven through the research to give a voice to the researcher’s own experiences and relationship with cruising. Data was collected in the UK in 2016 using focus groups. Image elicitation was used to explore thoughts and feelings regarding perceptions of risk in a cruise holiday, including both researcher-elicited and participant-elicited images. Further data collection will occur in 2017 using an adapted form of the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (Zaltman, 1996) in personal interviews to further explore the conceptualization of risk in cruise holidays.

Results

Preliminary findings indicate that the perception of risk in cruising differs between participants who have cruised and participants who have not cruised. Consumer risk as noted by Jacoby and Kaplan (1972) was found to be a concern for the non-cruising group. However the cruising group had very little concern with consumer risk for a cruise holiday. Data collection and analysis is ongoing through 2017.

Conclusion and Discussion
Understanding the influence of risk on the decision-making process will help marketers and the tourism industry to better understand the consumer and the consumer decision-making process. This research will provide deeper understanding of consumer risk in tourism products that are experiential and complementarity such as a cruise holiday.

References


