New Zealand travellers' perceptions of safety and security in Papua New Guinea

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Abstract

The paper presents perceptions of safety and security issues in PNG. In the last few years (from 2013 to 2015), the PNG Tourism Promotion Authority has conducted a survey on international tourists' perceptions of destinations in PNG and identified some major issues including safety and security, high cost of goods and services, lack of infrastructure and negative media publicity. The aim of this research is to focus specifically on safety and security issues as it has been identified in the literature as a major constraint to many tourists' travel plans. The study employs a qualitative research approach within the interpretive research paradigm to identify New Zealanders' views, opinions and experiences of safety and security in PNG. Face-to-face in-depth interviews were conducted with a sample of participants recruited from Otago University staff, New Zealand. The data collected were analysed through thematic analysis. This study found that PNG is considered to be an unsafe tourism destination in terms of having a high crime rate. This study's findings add to the literature by offering further insight on tourist perceptions of safety and security issues and their impact on the tourist industry.

Key words: safety & security, tourists, tourism, perception

Introduction

Tourism has seen continued growth and developed to become one of the largest business sectors in the world. Modern tourism is linked closely to development and encompasses growing numbers of new destinations. These dynamics have turned tourism into a key driver for socio-economic development (UNWTO, 2015). The tourism industry is a vital contributor to social and economic development in many nations of the world (Holloway & Humphreys, 2012). Tourism contributes to increasing foreign currency earnings and reserves, provides employment opportunities, and may help preserve cultures and the natural environment. These benefits have been seen in Pacific Island countries, including PNG (Hall, 1997; Rajotte, 1978). However, PNG tourism is encountering a series of constraints within the country such as lack of infrastructure, negative media publicity and safety and security issues.

Literature review

A major travel consideration for tourists is the issue of safety and security. According to Dowling and Staelin (1994), certain groups of individuals feel

that safety and security are key factors that determine the choice of a travel destination. Most research findings state that safety and security of tourists is a requirement for a flourishing tourist destination (Tarlow & Santana, 2002; Sonmez & Graefe, 1998). Sonmez and Graefe (1998) claim that if the destination choice is restricted down to two options which promise similar benefits, the less costly one or the one that is free from threat, the likely choice to be selected is the destination free from safety and security issues. Pearce (1988a) indicates that concern with tourist security is a huge issue in the decision-making process through which tourists make their travel decisions. Furthermore, safety and security is a big issue in some destinations that have high security risks which is a world-wide concern for tourists (Reisinger & Macondo, 2005). This is important in current political and socio-economic settings when tourists are encountering a growing risk when they travel abroad (Reisinger & Macondo, 2005).

However, some research has been undertaken to identify the relationship between tourism and crime, and whether tourism is an activity that promotes or encourages crime (Dimanche & Lepetic, 1999). Studies within this scope have focused on tourist incidents at particular sites (de Alburquerque & McElroy, 1999; Crotts, 1996; Chesney-Lind & Lind, 1986) and were limited to one city or state. They found that tourism does contribute to increased crime rates. However, some literature has identified a complex relationship between crime levels and the level of tourism development (George, 2003). For instance, research into the effect of casino gambling on US locals, conducted by Long (1996), identified that it has led to an increase in crime levels. However, criminal activities increased not only with tourism development but other industries such as mining, agriculture and business (George, 2003; Bhanugopan, 2001). All these activities contribute one way or another to criminal activities. Thus, the tourism industry is not directly responsible for increasing crime incidents (George, 2003).

The overall conclusion is that crime generally has no direct link with tourism and tourism is not supporting criminal activities (George, 2003). According to Imbal (2009), crimes are frequently committed by people who have no jobs, are homeless, or are affected by the high costs of living in some tourist destinations which forces people to engage in illegal activities for their own survival. They generally target locals and not tourists, but if tourists are found in the wrong place at the wrong time, they might also be robbed and so they become victims of crime (George, 2003). Harper (2001) confirms that the crime experience of locals in Miami, USA, was higher than that of tourists. In such destinations, tourists have to take precautions when taking tours, and this comes back to personal responsibility. However, it is the responsibility of the government of respective tourism destinations to address safety and security issues and make the destination conducive for tourism development (George, 2003; Bhanugopan, 2001).

Furthermore, research by Walker and Page (2007) examined different types of crime in Central Scotland regarding residents and tourists. This study found that tourists are more vulnerable to crimes such as motor car theft, pick-

pocketing and robbing of personal items. It was identified that the riskiest times are afternoons and early mornings. Criminals take advantage of tourists as easy targets because they are unfamiliar with the area and it is difficult for the victims to identify their attacker (Haper, 2001). In addition, if the perpetrators are caught and brought to court, tourists do not have the time to deal with police processes and attend a court hearing.

Researchers have generally regarded all respondents collectively as tourists or visitors. In some studies, gender did not appear to be an important demographic factor affecting visitors' perceptions of crime-safety in a tourism destination (George, 2003). For example, Sonmez and Graefe (1998) did not find gender to influence a person's perception of terrorism risk. Similarly, Lepp and Gibson (2003) stated that gender did not influence a tourist's perception of crime-related risk, as did George (2003) who did not find gender to be a factor affecting visitors' perceptions of safety in Cape Town.

Other studies contradict this perception and regard gender as a significant factor affecting female views on safety and security in choosing a tourist destination. Importantly, gender perceptions on safety and security are different (Mattila et al., 2001). Similarly, Carr (2001) mentions that risk perceptions differ with gender while Gibson and Jordan (1998a, 1998b) found that women are an easier target for crime than males. The results indicate that there are some variables for which gender is an important factor which influence safety and security perceptions (e.g., functional, health, physical, hijacking, bomb explosion and biochemical attack), anxiety (e.g., all variables except for feeling scared), safety perceptions (e.g., airport transfer, during air travel, cruising, sightseeing at attractions), and the probability of travelling again (Gibson & Jordan, 1998a, 1998b). Greenberg and Ruback (1992) found that women were more afraid of crime both as a result of being seen as easy targets and at risk of being raped.

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative research approach within the interpretive research paradigm to identify New Zealand travellers' views, opinions and experiences about safety and security issues (Schwandt, 2001; Orlikowski & Baroudi, 1991). Interpretive studies presume that individuals make and link their own personal and interpersonal values as they communicate with the environment around them (Schwandt, 2001).

Qualitative data were collected via a series of interviews conducted at Otago University main campus. Interviews are normally aimed at recognising the experiences and attitudes of participants and trying to answer questions about the what, how or why of a phenomenon (Neuman, 2003; Trauth, 2001; Schwandt, 2001; Walsham, 1995).

The study combined purposive and snowball sampling which are popular sampling techniques in a qualitative approach. The researcher actively chooses the most valuable sample to answer the research questions. These sample

techniques were appropriate for this study as the researcher selected some participants that for whom he has email contacts and others were identified by the participants. The reason for selecting Otago staff is that most staff were between the ages of 45-65 and they had the money to travel during their winter holidays. Thus, some might be potential tourists to the Pacific Islands to spend their holiday. Selection of such inclusion criteria was advised by the literature. Cook and McCleary (1983) have identified that the factors for travel are time, money, age and distance for potential tourists to take into account when assessing a destination. As stated by Tisdell and Collins (2002), older tourists are in the best economic position to travel, because they have fewer debts, their children are grown-up and independent, they have a regular income, and they can afford to purchase a vacation. Similarly, Andreu, Kozak, Avci and Cifter (2005) stated that those aged 45 and over are classified as active tourists with disposable incomes and the motivation to travel in order to relax and escape from routine jobs during their holiday.

Table 1. Summary of research participants

No	Pseudonym	Age	Sex
1	Kange	45-55	Male
2	Kumbu	35-45	Female
3	Poks	45-55	Female
4	Komb	45-55	Female
5	Aklimb	35-45	Female
6	Palex	30-35	Male
7	Owa Kanges	45-55	Male
8	Hap Wara*	30-35	Male
9	Beni	45-55	Male
10	Kulimb*	45-55	Female
11	Kipeng*	35-45	Male
12	Kaprila	45-55	Female
13	Oamug*	26-30	Female
14	Sinsbai	45-55	Male
15	Karapia	45-55	Male
16	Kamaga	45-55	Male
Note: Names with asterisk (*) are participants who have been to PNG.			

The data for the study were analysed using thematic analysis. It is a method used for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data. It normally organises and describes data in detail as well as interprets different features of the research subject. Thematic analysis is the simplest method and has a ranking procedure for qualitative data (Roulston, 2001; Boyatzis, 1998).

Findings and discussion

In the process of data analysis, a number of major themes were identified. These themes are now reported and discussed. Based on previous studies by Bhanugopan (2001) and Milne (1990), PNG is considered as an unsafe tourist destination due to violent crime. These studies were based on data collected by the PNG Tourist Promotion Authority (PNGTPA), using observations and interviews. They point to PNG being an unsafe tourist destination with reported cases of armed robbery, rape, murder and car hijacking. The effect of lawlessness in the country has resulted in fewer tourist arrivals and has affected tourism businesses such as tour companies, hotels, restaurants and attraction sites (Imbal, 2009).

Most travellers consider safety and security as an important factor that influences their choice of travel decisions (Dowling & Staelin, 1994), and decide not to travel to a destination that is considered to be unsafe. These tourists are known as psychocentric travellers according to Plog (2001) and they tend to select a destination that is safe which offers a quality tourism experience (Dowling & Staelin, 1994; Cook & McCleary, 1983). One of the participants in this study, stated that she was preparing to travel to Vanuatu because she heard positive stories about the country from her friends. She said that although the cost of travelling there is expensive, it is "safe to travel with her family" to experience and enjoy a Pacific Island holiday (Aklimb).

The findings from this study are very similar to the studies done by Bhanuopan (2001) and Milne (1990) which show that PNG has a high crime rate and is not safe for tourists. Most people travelling to PNG are on business and do not come as tourists (Imbal, 2009; Bhanuopan, 2001). Business travellers come for different purposes and are well advised to take appropriate precautions to safeguard their well-being. There is a general perception that they might encounter possible danger including robbery, bag snatching, and car hijacking and even in extreme cases rape and murder. The research conducted by Bhanugopan in 2001, is almost 20 years old but the same problems in terms of PNG as a safe tourist destination still exist.

According to Bhanugopan (2001), the lawlessness in major centres is due to a lack of police presence in strategic locations. This has given rise to criminal activities which are opportunistic and still increasing. Thus, the PNG government needs to intervene and increase police presence, logistics and provide training to combat criminal activities (PNGTPA, 2006). The law and order problem in PNG is affecting the tourism industry because in the tourism market this is a negative perception of PNG, generally affecting demand for travel to the destination (Imbal, 2009). It should be noted that there is a flourishing business in PNG for operations of private security companies.

Travellers fear of being raped or sexually assaulted

A similar study conducted by Barker (2000) about perceptions, crime and change, was conducted in New Zealand. It was discussed that women were

more safety conscious than men regarding their personal safety. This is because women are vulnerable to criminal activities and sometimes at risk of being raped. This helps them to take extra precautions to remain safe (Barker, 2000). From the findings of this study, most females fear travelling to PNG for safety reasons. The negative images that participants of this study made reference to are based on documentaries and newspaper reports about domestic issues in PNG.

All participants feel that if the PNG women and girls are not safe in their own country then there is a high risk for foreign female travellers, considering that they are in an unfamiliar environment. If attacked, they would not be able to identify the perpetrators. If the perpetrators were caught and brought to justice, the tourists would not have the time to attend court to wait for the verdict. This was highlighted by one of the participants: "I have seen a high rate of violence against women and tourists, they become victims of rape and physical assault. Thus, as a female, I fear traveling to PNG" (Hap Wara).

Tribal fights pose a threat to tourism development

A study was conducted by Imbal (2009) about tourism development in PNG, which revealed the issue of tribal fights in some parts of PNG. This gives a negative image to PNG's international source markets and tourists consider PNG as a very dangerous destination in the Pacific (Imbal, 2009; Bhanugopan, 2001). Most participants stated that they had seen documentaries about tribal fights in PNG and ethnic clashes in urban settlements. They explained that the tribal fights and urban ethnic clashes erupted due to murder, rape, theft and other reasons. They further expressed that the victims of criminal activities take the law into their own hands and fight the criminals who were implicated in the crime which often result in loss of life, destruction of property worth thousands of dollars and school children affected.

One of the participants shared his experiences about watching documentaries about tribal fights in PNG: "I have seen documentaries about tribal fights in PNG and consider it as a dangerous place to visit" (Owa Kanges). He further mentioned that there is a lawlessness in PNG and that it seems from the reports that PNG police do not have the skills, staff levels or logistics to contain such situations which makes PNG destinations unsafe for visitors.

Some participants, who had been to PNG, confirmed that tribal fights and ethnic clashes occur and are regularly reported. The consequences are severe and include loss of life and destruction of property. They further mentioned that the cause of tribal fights could be minor but could lead to significant damage, which police are unable to contain. It was also mentioned that sometimes civilians use high powered firearms in the tribal fights and PNG police do not have the resources and logistics to contain the situation from further escalation. This poses a threat to the safety of travellers, tourists and to the tourism business (Imbal, 2009).

Riot and civil unrest

Political and civil unrest have been experienced in PNG since independence in 1975 and the country has faced a lot of internal issues. The civil war on the island of Bougainville received a great deal of media coverage and deterred many potential visitors (Milne, 1990). This study's results show similar negative media coverage of the university students' protest regarding the PNG government's poor management of economic issues which resulted in riots, looting and destruction of property in 2016. One of the research participants lived in PNG from 1994-1997. He stated that the country still had the same problems of "corruption, mismanagement, law and order issues and misuse of public funds" (Kipeng).

According to the New Zealand High Commission in PNG's travel warning (2016), Bougainville is still a very dangerous travel destination today due to civil unrest. The peace process in Bougainville is ongoing but new issues with other mining companies are experienced. Production at the Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) project in the highlands' Hela Province was interrupted after the landowners petitioned the government for their royalties. Thus, PNG is still politically unstable and safety and security for travellers are not guaranteed (Imbal, 2009).

Conclusion

The study found that PNG is perceived by participants as an unsafe tourist destination in terms of crime, tribal fights and ethnic clashes. Most participants indicated that they have seen and heard about PNG being an unsafe tourist destination. From this research, it was found that potential tourists are exposed to media sources and are well aware of tourism issues in PNG. This was also mentioned in previous studies done in PNG (Imbal, 2009; Bhanugopan, 2000; Milne, 1990). PNG is not considered to be a safe tourist destination for tourists. Reports of opportunistic hold-ups, car-jacking, attacks, rape, theft and murder are major barriers to tourism development.

That the tourism industry in PNG survives at all is quite remarkable. The country has friendly people, fantastic scenery, wonderful markets and spectacular crafts, but travellers need an intrepid spirit to experience it. For tourism to grow and prosper, it needs friendly and safe tourism destinations because travellers consider safety and security as important for their travel decisions (Dowling & Staelin, 1994).

In this study, the sample size was small and did not allow for the gender aspect to be investigated more fully, but, from the data collected, most female participants mentioned that they fear travelling to PNG because of negative media publicity about murder, rape, robbery and bag snatching. These factors are widely reported both in the domestic and international media. Thus, most potential travellers have a negative perception of PNG.

While the PNGTPA and tour operators advertise the potential of PNG as an attractive tourist destination, it is critical for growth of the tourism industry, that the problems of safety and security are addressed.

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