

Tourists' Perception of Crisis and the Impact of Instability on Destination Safety in Sabah, Malaysia

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Abstract: The repeated kidnapping incidents in Sabah had negatively impacted Malaysia's tourism sector, especially in the number of tourist arrivals. An immediate survey with international tourists upon their perceptions toward the embedded risks visiting Sabah after six months of the incidents had been conducted. A total of 224 complete questionnaires were collected. The results showed unexpected findings that the respondents do not have a strong life-threatening perception on Sabah. The correlations of safety perception and precaution taken during the traveling were not statistically significant. The major reason is that tourists view the incidents as transitory and independent of tourism activity. This study further shows the pattern of risk tolerance with different tourists' behavioral and demographic profiles. Multivariate regression was conducted to examine the major determinants of tourists' risk perception. Ultimately, the study provides useful implications toward the sustainability of the tourism industry over a crisis period.

Key words: Tourism Crisis • Destination Safety • Sabah • Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

The burning discussion of tourism in recent years is associated with tourists' safety while traveling. To avoid an unfavourable traveling experience, tourists nowadays are particularly sensitive about their personal safety when choosing a tourist destination. Online social media and electronic news have facilitated tourists in assessing the embedded risks of the tourist destinations before making the traveling decision. The risks which may hinder tourists from traveling to a destination could be coming from various types of incidents such as terrorism [1], war/political instability [2], health threats [3], natural disasters [4] and crimes in or around tourist destinations [5]. Thereby, investigating tourists' safety perception towards a destination has become a subject of research in tourism [6, 7].

This study investigates safety perception of international tourists towards tourism in Sabah, Malaysia. The rationale for selecting Sabah for the investigation is that it was affected by a series of tourist-kidnapping

incidents in 2014. Within half a year of 2013-2014, there were four terrorism activities occurred in the east coast of Sabah where a number of tourist attractions are located. Two of the incidents involved victimization of tourists [8, 9]. These have attracted the attention of international media, especially in the local media of the origin country of the tourists being kidnapped. The continuous incidents which had threatened tourists' safety eventually led to boycott among China's travel agencies following a China's tourist kidnapping incident in Sabah, as reported in the news [10].

The tourist-kidnapping incidents had decreased the number of tourist arrivals in Malaysia significantly. This was evident by tourist arrivals in December 2014 which decreased by 12.8 percent, or 358,720 number of arrivals, relative to tourist arrivals in November 2014, according to Tourism Malaysia's Official Corporate Website [11]. Looking at the trend of tourist arrivals prior to December in that year, it was still in the up-ward pattern. This may lead us to think that the tourist-kidnapping incidents were the key contributing factor to the decline in arrivals.

From the geographical point of view, Brunei is in proximity to Sabah and tourists from Brunei make up a significant contribution to Sabah's inbound market. However, its arrivals decreased dramatically in December, i.e. 49,954 or 27.8 percent if compared to the preceding month's figure according to [11]. The other top generating markets for Sabah's tourism, i.e. Singapore and China recorded decline in arrivals during the same period [11].

This study mainly assesses the safety perceptions of international tourists toward Sabah, the easternmost state of Malaysia. The survey questionnaire attempts to assess tourists' perception on life threatening crises in Sabah and their views on the kidnapping incidents, such as to what extent they knew about the incidents and whether they viewed them as independent or tourism-related.

The Case of Terrorism in Sabah: There is a series of kidnapping cases in Sabah in the recent years. Early on 15 November 2013, a Taiwanese man was killed and his wife was kidnapped by a group of unidentified gunmen after being attacked in the resort of Pom Pom Island off Semporna, east coast of Sabah. The Taiwanese tourist was rescued by Philippines security forces later on 20 December 2013 [9]. The tourist kidnapping incident occurred again on 2 April 2014, of which a Chinese tourist and a Filipino hotel employee from Singamata Reef Resort in Semporna, Sabah, were kidnapped. This incident led to a dramatic decline of Chinese tourist arrivals into Sabah [8].

Besides incidents affecting foreign tourists, there were cases that involved local residents as victims. On 16 June 2014, a 32-year-old Malaysian fish breeder and his Filipino employee were abducted by gunmen from their farm in Kampung Sapang, West of Timbun Mata Island, Semporna, Sabah [12]. On 12 July 2014, a group of armed men fought with Sabah's policemen at Mabul Water Bungalow Resort on Mabul Island, off Semporna. A policeman was killed in the fight and another one was abducted. The kidnappers later contacted the police in Sabah asking for Ringgit Malaysia 10 million in ransom for the abducted policemen.

Majority of the kidnapping incidents was concentrated around the east coast of Sabah and islands close to the Sulu Archipelago in the Southeast Philippines, such as Lankayan, Mabul, Pom Pom, Kapalai, Litigan, Sipadan and Matakang. Eastern Sabah Security Command's intelligence director clarified that there were 14 kidnap-for-ransom groups from southern Philippines and at least four of them had carried out kidnapping in Sabah's east coast [8]. Abu Sayyaf group is among the

largest groups which kidnapped 21 people in Sipadan, Sabah in May 2000. The Abu Sayyaf Group is the most violent Islamic separatist group in the southern Philippines, claiming to advocate an independent Islamic state in western Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago. This group currently engages in kidnappings for ransom, bombings, assassinations and extortion [13].

Following a series of tourist kidnapping incidents in Sabah, Malaysia's tourism sector had been adversely affected. A sharp decline in the tourist arrivals, especially from China was significantly viewed after the incidents. Malaysia's Tourism and Culture Minister had spoken to the public that the impacts from the kidnapping incidents were worse than the disappearance of Malaysian Airlines Flight MH370 [14]. [14] further documents that the negative impact brought by the Chinese-tourist kidnapping incidents resulted in cancellation of flights from China to Kota Kinabalu, the state capital. As of April, 76 flights from China to Kota Kinabalu were cancelled. Among the 76 cancelled flights, 10 were Malaysia Airlines flights from Shanghai, 22 were China Southern Airlines flights from Shenzhen and 44 were Spring Airlines flights from Shanghai.

Malaysian government had taken several measures to reduce a massive loss due to the kidnapping incidents in Sabah. According to the news reported in [8], Tourism and Culture Minister conducted tourism campaigns in other markets like Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei, the Philippines, India, Bangladesh, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Australia and New Zealand. Also, a crisis management committee was established to specifically tackle China's tourism market in order to rebuild the confidence of China's tourists to visit Malaysia.

Studies on Tourist Safety Perceptions: Risk is defined as an individual's perception toward the possibility of exposing to uncertainty or injury [15]. How does a tourist perceive the potential risk of a destination would influence his/her traveling decision [16]. [17] and [18] have shown the risk-averse behaviour of tourists and their reluctance to travel to an unsafe destination. The tourists' risk perception of a destination is significant to form a destination image [7]. The negative tourist destination image formed due to the lack of safety in the destination may harm the development of the tourism industry [19, 20]. [6] documented that high crime rates constitute to negative images formed by travelers and subsequently lead to the decline in tourist arrivals. This is supported by the previous studies, like [21] and [22] showing that the crisis has a significant negative relationship with the number of tourist arrivals.

The potential of committing a crime in a tourist destination is one of the perceived risks in tourism. Investigating the issue of crime has become a subject of interest of research in tourism literature. It can be shown from the previous studies, like [23], [24] and [5] which have looked into the relationship between crime and tourism demand. One of the research perspectives on crime in tourism emphasizes on tourism-crime victimization at tourist destinations, i.e. involvement of tourist as a crime victim [25]. [26] find that tourist destinations are the hot spot for conducting a crime and consistently, [27] further documented that tourists who show certain behavioural characteristics are prone to be a victim of crime.

The safety perception of tourists may be shaped by the mass media [28]. The news reported in the media could attract people's consciousness to a crisis event. It could influence the image of the destination perceived by the tourists via the reports in the media. For instance, as reported by [10], the photos of the incident on the kidnapping of a China-tourist in Sabah, Malaysia by a group of terrorists had spread like wildfire on social media such as Sina Weibo. The power of social media in spreading the bad news to the world has increased the sentiment of international tourists in re-evaluating destination when traveling to Sabah. In sum, a crisis or an unfavourable incident happening in a destination could negatively influence tourists' choice of destination selection [29].

However, a group of scholars finds that tourists' choice of destination selection may not be influenced by the possibility of crimes in the destination. For instance, [30] show that knowing a theft or someone who is the victim of theft does not affect the likelihood of visiting the destination. The study further shows that the responsibility of the authorities in handling the crime would increase the likelihood of tourists to visit the theft-affected destination. [31], [6] and [32] consistently show that tourists who experience theft would still return to the destination. Nonetheless, these studies merely focus on non-life-threatened case of theft. The safety perception of tourists in a life-threatening crime-afflicted destination may leave for a research gap to be investigated in the tourism literature.

Research Methodology: A survey targeting international tourists visiting Sabah was undertaken in June 2014. Visitors to Sabah were surveyed at popular attractions such as Semporna, Mabul Island and Kota Kinabalu. A total of 224 pieces of completely filled questionnaires

was collected from international tourists who were in Sabah during that time. The study excluded domestic tourists as they may generate biased results to the research due to several factors such as patriotism and etc. The questionnaire of this study is separated into three parts: perception on destination safety, demographic profile and traveling behaviour of the respondents. In the first part of the questionnaire, it contains their perception of safety in Sabah and other states of Malaysia, knowledge about the recent kidnapping incidents in the state, their perception on the incidents and their relation to Sabah's tourism and their image on the state's tourism. This part of the questionnaire is evaluated on a 5-point Likert scale, by which "1" represents *Strongly Disagree* while "5" represents *Strongly Agree*. Besides giving the direct questions upon respondents' view of safety, this part of questionnaire also assesses the satisfaction level of their trip in Sabah, as well as their intentions to recommend Sabah to their friends and family. The second part of the questionnaire covers respondents' age, gender, education level, origin country, number of visit to Sabah, the main purpose of traveling to Sabah, source of information on Sabah, traveling companions, types of traveling packages and the types of accommodation in Sabah. With regards to reliability for all surveys, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient of tourists' safety perception on Sabah is 0.63.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of the demographic profile and traveling behaviour of the respondents. 56.7 percent of respondents were male and 43.4 percent of respondents were female. The respondents originated from 48 countries from various part of the world, namely the United Kingdom, Australia, U.S.A., Germany, France, Netherlands, Ireland, China, Denmark, New Zealand, Brunei, Canada, Finland, Philippines, Singapore, Russia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Hong Kong and etc. More than 50 percent of the respondents were within the age group of 20-40 years old. A relatively small portion of the respondents are aged below 20 and over 60. About three quarter of the respondents visited Sabah for the first time. 77.2 percent of the respondents traveled to Sabah for leisure, which implies that majority of the respondents were willing to travel to Sabah even though there were still embedded with safety threats in Sabah, when the news of the kidnapping incidents were still fresh.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Respondents' Demographic Profile and Traveling Behaviour

Demographic Profiles/Traveling Behaviour	Criteria	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	127	56.7
	Female	97	43.3
Age	20 and below	13	5.8
	21-30	83	37.1
	31-40	55	24.5
	41-50	30	13.4
	51-60	26	11.6
	Over 60	17	7.6
Number of Visit	1st Visit	167	74.6
	2nd Visit	27	12.1
	> 2nd Visit	30	13.3
Purpose of Traveling	Leisure/recreation	173	77.2
	Visiting friends and relatives	13	5.8
	Business	12	5.4
	Others	26	11.6

Table 2: Tourists' Safety Perception

		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I generally perceive Malaysia as a safe destination	N	2	11	31	133	47
	%	0.9	4.9	13.8	59.4	21
I perceived Sabah as a safe tourist destination	N	1	6	40	142	35
	%	0.4	2.7	17.9	63.4	15.6
In comparison to other destinations in Malaysia, Sabah is relatively a safer destination	N	1	17	115	70	16
	%	0.4	7.6	51.3	31.3	7.1

Table 3: Awareness of the Crises by Gender, Age and Education Level

	I am aware of recent crises that occurred in Sabah (invasion from the Philippines, kidnapping etc.)				
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Gender (%)					
Male (N=124)	10.48	12.10	14.52	44.35	18.55
Female (N=96)	7.29	13.54	13.54	47.92	17.71
Age (%)					
20 and below (N=12)	8.33	8.33	16.67	41.67	25.00
21-30 (N=83)	12.05	14.46	16.87	39.76	16.87
31-40 (N=53)	0.00	18.87	11.32	56.60	13.21
41-50 ((N=30)	13.33	10.00	13.33	46.67	16.67
51-60 (N=25)	4.00	4.00	8.00	56.00	28.00
Over 60 (N=17)	23.53	5.88	17.65	29.41	23.53
Education (%)					
Primary/Elementary School (N=4)	0.00	25.00	0.00	75.00	0.00
Secondary school (N=23)	13.04	13.04	17.39	43.48	13.04
Diploma (N=35)	5.71	14.29	11.43	51.43	17.14
Degree (N=88)	10.23	11.36	20.45	40.91	17.05
Post Graduate Degree (N=56)	7.14	8.93	5.36	53.57	25.00
Others (N=14)	14.29	28.57	14.29	28.57	14.29

Table 2 presents the statistics of respondents' safety perception in Sabah. It shows that 80 percent of the respondents view Malaysia as a safe tourist destination and 79 percent of the respondents view Sabah as a safe tourist destination in Malaysia. However, around 50 percent of the respondents stand neutral to comment whether Sabah is a relatively safe tourist destination in Malaysia if compared to the other destinations in the country. This may be due to the lack of knowledge of the

international tourists on the safety issues in other states of Malaysia. Nonetheless, only a small portion of the respondents view Sabah as a relatively unsafe destination. The overall statistics in Table 2 demonstrate that majority of the tourists does not have a negative safety perception of Sabah.

Table 3 presents cross-tabulation of crisis awareness upon different demographic profiles of the respondents, including gender, age and education level.

Table 4: Cross-tabulation of safety perception upon the view on the kidnapping incidents and the trust of the local authorities

		I believe the crises are isolated and temporary					Coefficient of Correlations
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	
<i>Panel A</i>							
I perceived Sabah as a safe tourist destination	Strongly Disagree	0	1	0	0	0	0.284**
	Disagree	0	2	3	1	0	
	Neutral	2	10	18	10	0	
	Agree	3	10	66	52	8	
	Strongly Agree	0	2	13	13	7	
<i>Panel B</i>		I believe the relevant authorities have taken necessary action to prevent future crises					
I perceived Sabah as a safe tourist destination	Strongly Disagree	1	0	0	0	0	0.305**
	Disagree	0	1	4	1	0	
	Neutral	1	3	26	9	1	
	Agree	2	6	80	45	6	
	Strongly Agree	0	1	17	11	6	

Table 5: Correlations

		1			2		3	
1	I perceived Sabah as a safe tourist destination	Pearson Correlation	1.000					
		Sig. (2-tailed)						
2	I always take extra safety precaution when I travel in Sabah	Pearson Correlation	-0.126		1.000			
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.139					
3	I usually avoid risky areas while traveling in Sabah	Pearson Correlation	-0.039		0.426**		1.000	
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.653		0.000			

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 6: Regression on the relationship between willingness of recommendation with gender, age and educational level

Dependent Variable: I will recommend highly of this tourist destination to my friends/family	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
	(Constant)	2.99	0.41		7.3
I am aware of recent crises that occurred in Sabah (invasion from the Philippines, kidnapping etc.)	-0.088	0.04	-0.151	-2.199	0.029**
I believe the crises are isolated and temporary	0.26	0.062	0.297	4.187	0.000***
I believe the relevant authorities have taken necessary action to prevent future crises	0.17	0.07	0.17	2.434	0.016**
Gender	-0.081	0.097	-0.058	-0.834	0.406
Age group	0.073	0.038	0.14	1.95	0.053*
Highest Educational Level	-0.091	0.046	-0.136	-1.977	0.050**
Number of visit to Sabah including this trip	0.03	0.045	0.048	0.68	0.497

The table shows that majority of respondents visiting to Sabah are aware of the incidents. Among the respondents, the percentage of male and female respondents who are aware of the kidnapping incidents is almost similar, i.e. 62.9 percent and 65.63 percent respectively. Respondents from the age group between 31-60 years old have the greatest awareness towards the incidents. This group of respondents is dominant in the sample distribution, which implies that majority of the respondents are aware of the incidents in Sabah. Respondents from different level of education show the

awareness of the kidnapping incidents in Sabah, especially for those who possess postgraduate certification.

What is the rationality of the tourists travelling to Sabah during uncertainty and post-crisis period? Table 4 demonstrates that the majority of the tourists view the kidnapping incidents as isolated and the probability to recur is small. Panel A of Table 4 shows that tourists who have a positive view on safety perception in Sabah agree that the crises are isolated and temporary. A significant positive correlation of 0.284 has consolidated this view

from the statistical perspective. It indicates that, from the respondents' point of view, the incidents of tourist-kidnapping in Sabah are individual incidents which do not correlate with tourism in Sabah. In other words, the intention of the kidnappers is not focusing on destroying the tourism industry in Sabah and is due to other factors which do not have correlation with tourists visiting Sabah. Also, the respondents trust the local authorities in protecting the safety of the tourists in Sabah. This can be shown in Panel B of Table 4 demonstrating that only a few respondents worried about the failure of the authorities in preventing the crises to occur in future. A significant positive correlation of 0.305 between safety perception and the trust on the relevant authorities in tackling the crises has further proved the findings that international tourists trust the local authorities in protecting tourists from the incidents.

Table 5 shows the correlations of tourists' safety perceptions of Sabah and the precautions when traveling in Sabah. The results indicate that the link between safety perception of Sabah and precaution taken during traveling in Sabah is shown negative coefficient, although it is not statistically significant. The insignificant correlation may give the notion that tourists are less sensitive towards the safety precaution when traveling in Sabah, because they perceive Sabah as safe. The results may be supported by Table 4 on the view of tourists towards the crises as independent cases rather than tourism-related crises. Nevertheless, the precaution of tourists during traveling in Sabah is positively correlated with the action of avoiding going to risky areas in Sabah, with the coefficient of correlation of 0.426 which is statistically significant at 1 percent level. It indicates that tourists tend to avoid risky areas during their travel to prevent unfavourable traveling experience.

Table 6 shows the results of regression on the relationship between safety perception and the view of the kidnapping incidents, by controlling the factors of respondents' demographic profile and traveling behaviours. The results demonstrate that the awareness of the kidnapping incidents in Sabah is significant to explain the safety perception. However, the negative coefficient indicates that the more aware of the tourists towards the incidents, the more negative of the safety perception. This has implied the power of media reporting news of the kidnapping has a negative influence on the safety image of Sabah. However, the view of tourists toward the incidents as isolated and temporary has significantly facilitated the forming of positive safety

perception of the destination. Also, the actions of the local authorities are significant to increase the positive safety perception of tourists.

CONCLUSION

This study conducts a survey with foreign tourists traveling to Sabah immediately after six months of the tourist-kidnapping incidents. During the post-crisis period, there are tourists who are still willing to travel to Sabah. It creates a research value by investigating the safety perception of this group of tourists. It may provide more insights into how tourists perceive the embedded threats when visiting crisis-prone destinations, which could certainly enrich findings of this study.

The results imply that Sabah is still viewed as a safe destination as tourists are aware of the kidnapping incidents. The rationale is that tourists perceive the kidnapping cases as isolated incidents, which are not directly related to tourism in Sabah. Regression results of this study further shed light on the importance of the government effort in minimizing the negative impact of crisis on tourism demand of a destination. The government should focus on necessary steps to ensure tourists' safety at destinations and the measures should be informed to all to create a positive image to tourists, both local and foreign.

As Sabah has plenty of nature attractions, the findings of this study may imply the sustainability of nature-based tourism over a crisis period. It can be assumed there are nature lovers' tourists who would go for vacation in Sabah, without being influenced by the emotion of the public on the crisis incidents, under the condition that they are aware of the unfavourable incidents when making traveling decision. In short, by taking tourists' safety as a priority concern, it is suggested that the state government and industry players undertake proactive approaches to crisis and disaster management and establish a crisis communication center to disseminate truthful information about destination safety.

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