Disaster Risk Communication in Japan: Increasing Preparedness, Maintaining the Appeal for Tourists

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Synopsis

A successful disaster management plan includes efficient risk communication to both residents and tourists. In this study, we use Risk Information Seeking and Processing (RISP) and Mental Model approaches to investigate tourism-oriented risk communication in Japan. The study identifies gaps and misperceptions during the risk communication process. Results recommend cross-country tailor-made risk communication and offer suggestions for a more efficient communication between tourism-stakeholders such as tourists, academics, tourism suppliers and government.

1. Introduction

An essential component of implementing disaster-related risk management is the clear communication of the risk to all stakeholders in order to ensure that appropriate and effective steps are taken to reduce and mitigate the risk (Yamada et al., 2010). Particularly referring to Japan, tourists need to be included as stakeholders. During the last two decades, inbound tourism has been increasing going from 4.5 million travelers in 2000 to 24 million in 2016 (Japan National Tourism Organization, 2017). People exposed to local natural hazards consequently increases. Tourists usually face several barriers such as different languages, different traffic rules, and low connection with the local communities. They are mobile and difficult to reach with warnings. Their predisposition toward receiving information related to natural hazard is influenced by the will to receive only positive information. Consequently, often, tourism suppliers fear that providing risk-related information to tourists would influence tourists' behavior and undermine their business (Rittichainuwat, 2013). The result is that tourists are often found to be inadequately informed about risks and warning systems, and the tourism industry tends to be unprepared for disasters. A successful tourism-risk communication will increase tourists' preparedness, maintaining a high appeal of the tourism destination.

2. The study

The study builds on the premise that even if tourism-oriented risk communication has been strongly investigated (Mair et al., 2016), most of the studies have been focused on residents' information seeking process. Tourists' risk-information seeking process has been under-investigated (Cahyanto and Pennington-Gray, 2015). There is the necessity to focus on the analysis of appropriate communication strategies, including the selection of suitable messages and media, taking in consideration the characteristics of each category of stakeholders (Mair et al., 2016).

From this perspective, psychology, consumer behavior, and decision-making theories represent underestimated research opportunities (Mair et al., 2016).

3. STUDY 1: Focus on tourists

In order to investigate the tourists' perspective, we adopted the RISP model. RISP-variables may vary depending on the culture of the participants to the study, where the culture is intended as the collective mind-set that distinguishes one group of people from another (Hofstede, 1993). In Japan, a cross-cultural analysis seems to be particularly important due to the presence of two different main tourist flows. Tourist flows to Japan are mainly from Asian countries such as China, and Western countries such as the United States (US).

Participants to the survey were contacted during summer 2018 in Kyoto. A total of 364 respondents, evenly divided in Chinese (184) and American (180) tourists, participated to the survey. The analysis of tourists' risk information seeking and processing suggests the necessity to develop tailor-made risk communication strategies taking in consideration cross-country behavioral differences of the audience. In particular, risk communication to Chinese tourists should consider the central role played by informational subjective norms. For American tourists, the effectiveness of risk-information campaigns seems to be linked to their ability to influence the emotions of the travelers.

4. STUDY 2: Focus on other stakeholders

This study is currently ongoing. This study compares local authorities', academic experts', and tourism suppliers' perspectives towards providing tsunami risk-information to tourists. Previous studies highlight that local authorities are often in charge to develop tourism-oriented risk communication plan; academic experts are recognized to having a more in-depth understanding of the technical aspects of a risk, as well as the hazard development and the potential effects; and

tourism suppliers play a fundamental role during the risk communication process due the direct connection with the tourists. We use the Mental Models approach (Boase et al., 2017) aiming at analyzing the communication between the above-mentioned categories of stakeholders. We carried out interviews and participated to field trips in Japan since April 2018 to December 2019. Preliminary results highlight an increased general awareness regarding tourists' preparedness. The paper will be completed in April 2019, showing gaps and misperception during the communication process.

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