The Influence of Prospective Tourist Risk Perception on Travel Intention to Mega Sporting Event Destinations with Different Levels of Risk

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Mega sporting events (e.g., Olympic Games, FIFA World Cup) attract a massive amount of global attention. Moreover, cities and countries aim to achieve social and economic benefits from hosting them (Jago et al., 2003). However, increased risks have produced heightened concern during the event planning and implementation process. Previous research on risk perceptions of tourists and their travel intentions are well established in the tourism literature (Lepp & Gibson, 2003; Reisinger & Mavondo, 2005). Particularly, terrorism risks and political instability are promoted as major concerns in the sport tourism literature (Kozak et al., 2007). Additional studies have also confirmed these concerns in relation to the mega sporting event context (Qi et al., 2009; Taylor & Toohey, 2007). Nonetheless, a gap still exists when mega sporting event host countries have different levels of perceived political and terrorism risks. More specifically, no previous study has examined this relationship across three destination types (e.g., host countries with apparent risk, host countries with less imminent risks, and general destinations with unidentified risks). As risk is a critical factor that dictates tourists’ decisions for international travels (Sonmez & Graefe, 1998), assessing the underlying dynamics of risk perceptions would be necessary. Thus, this study examines and compares the impact of potential tourist risk perceptions on travel intention across destinations with varied levels of risk.

A convenience sampling method was used to collect the data via online survey software. The final sample consisted of 571 participants. The survey included items to measure perceptions of two travel risks (terrorism and political instability) and travel intentions to three travel destinations (i.e., South Korea who hosted the 2018 Winter Olympics, future mega sporting event host countries, and general destinations) using a 7-point Likert scale. A series of confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) were conducted to evaluate the measurement models. Structural equation modeling (SEM) analyses then compared risk perceptions and travel intentions across the three destination types. Three separate CFAs with a total of 11 items for each destination type showed acceptable fit and reliability and validity estimates fell within acceptable ranges. The influences of terrorism risk perceptions on travel intention to three destinations were statistically significant ($\gamma = -.553$, $\gamma = -.353$, and $\gamma = -.216$, respectively). However, political instability perceptions of the three destinations were not strong driving forces for prospective tourists.

The results shed light on the importance of understanding risk perceptions for mega sporting event destinations. Prospective tourists do possess a certain level of risk perception, regardless of the destination. However, these results indicate that while a destination with apparent terrorism risk has a strong negative impact on travel intention, political instability on the other hand was not significantly related to travel intention. Event hosting organizations must put more effort into providing a safe atmosphere for prospective tourists, especially in countries that historically have experienced terrorism and violence. In sum, previous and prospective event host countries should aim finding viable ways to maintain positive and safe destination images in order to attract tourists successfully.