An Assessment of Perceived Risk, Mitigating Factors, and Travel Intentions: The Case of the Pyeongchang 2018 Olympic Winter Games

Brian Yim, Kent State University
Mark Lyberger, Kent State University
Miran Jang, Kent State University
Kyoung-Sik Kim, Hoseo University
Larry McCarthy, Seton Hall University

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There has been increased attention on risk associated with sport tourism (Qi, Gibson, & Zhang, 2009). Often the threat of terrorism has been identified as a risk to mega sport events such as the Olympic Games or the World Cup (Taylor & Toohey, 2006). The Olympic Games have suffered in this regard and are regarded as an attractive target (Neirotti & Hilliard, 2006). Research has shown that the perceived risk of the travel destination has become an important factor in international travel decision making (Kozak et al., 2007). This is of particular interest to host countries when there are perceived risks involved (Qi, Gibson, & Zhang, 2009).

South Korea hosted the 2018 Winter Olympic Games in Pyeongchang, however due to tension between North Korea and South Korea countries such as France wanted to reconsider participating in the Pyeongchang Olympics (Bonesteel, 2017). Both the host country and the IOC want to present a successful event, and a key criteria is having the maximum number of countries’ participating. Due to the perceived risk there may be sport tourists who do not wish to travel to the destination. The proposed study examined the risk factors that influence sport tourists’ travel decision making and investigated the factors that helped travelers (those who attended) to overcome the risk factors.

Data (N = 323) were collected from those who showed an interest in sport tourism but did not travel to South Korea (n = 213, via Qualtrics recruitment pool), and from sport tourists who attended the Pyeongchang games (n = 110). Descriptive statistics were calculated for demographics, international travel experience, and perceived risks. Independent samples t-tests were conducted. Open ended questions, such as “what concerns you about travel to Pyeongchang Olympic Games” and “what would eliminate your concerns?” were asked.

Results showed that the non-travel group identified a higher perception of travel risk, such as a threat of war and terror, political situation, language barrier, cultural differences, food, high-prices, sanitation concerns and lack of information. The travel group showed significantly lower perceived risk. In the open ended questions, the non-traveler responded that the threat of North Korea, high prices, language barrier, and the long travel distance, while the travel group answered that cold weather and transportation from airport to Pyeongchang, were the principal concerns. Factors to mitigate the risk, the non-travelers suggested a peace deal between South and North Korea, more military force, a unified Korean team to ensure no war during the event, and reasonable prices for accommodation and food. Interestingly the travelers who came to Pyeongchang responded that internet/webpage and willingness to travel to a new place made them overcome the risk.

The results suggest several marketing implications for mega events and the tourism industry. When there are safety concerns, that risk has to be minimized, e.g., South Korea and North Korea having a unified team to reduce political tension. Another strategy to relieve concern would be utilizing social media to share accurate information so tourists feel more prepared to deal with risks.