Familiarization and Security in Tourist Destinations: Perception of Visitors in Tijuana (México)

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Abstract

Any region can be affected by some adverse event or crisis. The evidence of hazards and insecurity has undesired consequences on the image of the territory as a tourist destination. This paper discusses how perceptions of security are influenced by two characteristics linked to the emotional bond: the tourist's origin and the experience that tourist has had in the destination. A total of 110 questionnaires to domestic and international tourists were collected in the border city. The paper analyses the perception of security in Tijuana (Mexico) through a double approach; assessing risk perception to the trip to Tijuana and measuring the cognitive and affective attributes related to the perception of security of the destination. Regarding foreign source markets, local tourism entities have little capacity to influence policy areas and the media, so a suitable way to improve the perception of security is to work on the aspects related to familiarization with the destination, specifically by facilitating a first visit whenever possible.

Keywords: security, crime, Tijuana, tourism, familiarization, perception

1. Introduction

Many regions and tourist destinations are associated with insecurity. It's a global issue, not only for specific countries. The evidence of hazards and insecurity in a territory has undesired consequences on the image of a destination (Law, 2006; Levantis and Gani, 2000). Alarming news from the media spreads over time, and the official bodies of the origin countries maintain travel alerts indefinitely, aggravating negative images of the destinations and increasing the perception of risk (Sharpley *et al.,* 1996). Information, safety and perceived risk are decisive factors in travellers' decision making (Fuchs and Reichel, 2006; Law 2006; Mäser, Weiermair, 1998; Sönmez, 1998) and there is a direct relationship between the perception of security of a destination and the probability of that location being visited (Kozak *et al.,* 2007; Sirakaya *et al.,* 1997).

The objective of this work is to assess how two characteristics that are linked to tourists' familiarity influence their perceptions of security: the cultural origin—in particular, the country of origin—and the visitor's experience in the destination, if there have been previous visits. Our hypothesis is that the perception of security is related to the familiarization of the tourist with the destination that in turn influences the image in a positive way.

Specifically, this work analyses:

1. The relationship between the perception of security and the origin of visitors. Domestic tourists have greater knowledge about the crime situation, so they may accept wider risk thresholds and tolerate situations of danger to a greater extent than international tourists.
2. The relationship between the perception of security and the experience in the destination. The experience of previous visits to the destination reduces uncertainty, since the visitor obtains a primary image of the destination. The traveller has more information and less uncertainty, so it is likely that the perception of risk decreases.

To establish travellers' perceptions of safety while considering their origins and experiences, it is necessary to study their primary images, since they represent the last stage in the formation of the image of a destination (Phelps, 1986). Thus, this work analyses *in situ* international and national tourists' images of a destination and the perception of risk. The chosen destination is the city of Tijuana (Mexico), located on the border of the United States, a conflictive enclave due to its relationship with drug trafficking and linked to crime in the collective image.

2. Insecurity in the perceived image by the tourist

Security, crime and terrorist attacks are among the key elements that determine the perceived image of a destination (Beerli and Martín, 2004; Monterrubio, 2013). The perception of insecurity related to a tourist destination can be perceived in different ways relating to the following three factors:

Type of risk. Slevitch and Sharma (2008) point out the multidimensional nature of perceived risk and distinguish eight types of risk: health/life, financial, personal satisfaction, social, time, technical, political and terrorism. The most common risks perceived by travellers are those related to crime, terrorism, health (diseases), accidents and natural disasters (González-Herrero, 1998; Mäser and Weiermair, 1998). Each risk affects destinations in a different way and influences tourists' decision making differently (Law, 2006; Lepp and Gibson, 2003; Mäser and Weiermair, 1998; Moreira, 2008). Law (2006) considers that the three most influential perceived risk factors are epidemics, terrorism and natural disasters, and this risk perception can revert in the short and medium term. Other studies consider that prolonged "stealth risks" have a greater impact on tourists than large risks, which concentrate the impact and subsequent consequences in a short period of time (Moreira, 2008). The main characteristics of stealth risks are constancy and extension over time (for example, something happening in a destination with an underlying level of crime on a permanent basis).

Characteristics associated with the receiver. The type of tourist also influences the perception of risk, so both family tourists and tour packages organized by tour operators take into account the risk factor in the destination decision (Cavlek, 2002; Lepp and Gibson, 2003). Tourists' safety perception thresholds vary according to their culture, knowledge, information and psychological influence factors (Aschauer, 2009). Experienced tourists usually have short-term horizons, so they are quicker to assimilate risk experiences and consider these experiences unlikely to occur in the same area (Pechlaner *et al.,* 2007), and travellers from different cultures perceive different levels of risks (Chang, 2012; Kozak *et al.*, 2007; McCartney, 2008).

Media and promotion policies. Policies developed by the public administrations of origin countries and news are key instruments in the propagation of image attributes, negative as well positive (Slevitch and Sharma, 2008; Soto, 2005). Uncertainty is a factor that generates mistrust and insecurity and has a strong impact on destinations (Pike, 2004). Uncertainty and perceived risk decrease when the amount of available information increases, especially if the quality of the information improves, since an excess of information can generate unnecessary alarmism (Slevitch and Sharma, 2008). Therefore, tourism promotion organizations should manage the information that is offered both in the destination and in the origin markets to eliminate uncertainty and, in some ways, recover control over the destination (Fink, 2002).

2.1. Image and familiarization with the destination

A traveller's knowledge of the destination can improve his or her perception of security; that knowledge may come from access to accurate information or personal experience. From the perspective of the formation of the image, visiting the place constitutes a source of primary information that familiarizes the tourist with the destination and supposes the opportunity to confirm or discard the image formed through secondary sources of information (Phelps, 1986). After visiting a tourist destination, the perceived image is usually more realistic (Beerli and Martí, 2004a), and positive changes have been found in the perceptions of specific groups of tourists after visiting a destination (Pearce, 1982).

There is a relationship between the familiarization of a person with a place and the type of images that are formed in that place; the emotional bond can influence the image, making it more personal. The individuals most familiar with the destination have perceptions linked to the holistic, psychological and unique, while the perceptions of the less familiar travellers are centred on attributes, functional aspects and common features (Echtner and Ritchie, 1993).

Previous visits to the destination and length of stay influence the configuration of perceptions and perceived attractiveness (Beerli and Martín, 2004a; Fakeye and Crompton, 1991; Hu and Ritchie, 1993). As tourists move from awareness to familiarization, they acquire more positive images, which increases their interest in the destination and their probability of returning (Milman and Pizam, 1995). Few studies have included safety factors in the scope of familiarization or changes in the perception of risk for tourists with experience in the destination in comparison to those travelling for the first time (Chon, 1991).

3. Methodology

First, the research makes a geographical and tourist contextualization of Tijuana and analyses the insecurity that affects Tijuana as a tourist destination. The target population of the study are the national and international tourists that visit the city of Tijuana.

The survey prepared for this purpose consists of three parts:

1. Sociodemographic characteristics: sex, age and academic formation
2. Tourist habits: number of visitors in the group, length of stay, motivation and sources of information
3. Attributes related to the perception of risk and image

Crompton (1979: 18) presents the destination image as "the sum of beliefs and ideas and impressions that a person has of a destination". The paper carries out a double approach in order to bring together the different ideas and impressions on the perception of security of visitors. On the one hand, this part of the questionnaire addresses risk perceptions to the trip to Tijuana (Table 1). Questionnaire items assessed two behavioural domains: overall risk perceptions and the main range of risk-taking situations encountered by travellers (Slevitch and Sharma, 2008; Sönmez and Graefe, 1998). A five-point Likert scale was used to measure perceived risk, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Table 1. Attributes related to the perception of risk

1. It is safe to travel and move around Tijuana.
2. Tijuana is safer than other cities in Mexico.
3. I consider Tijuana suitable to visit with the family.
4. I worry about the risk of crime.
5. Drug trafficking has harmed tourism.

In addition to this, from the perspective of the formation of the image, the paper measures the cognitive and affective attributes related to the perception of security of the tourist destination. The cognitive component of the image comes from the individuals' beliefs and knowledge about the attributes of the

destination, while the affective component corresponds to his or her feelings towards the place (Pike and Ryan, 2004; Baloglu, 2000; Baloglu and Brinberg, 1997; Walmsley and Jenkins, 1993).

Among 21 attributes that measure the cognitive components of the image comprehensively (Hsu *et al.,* 2004; O'Leary and Deegan, 2003) (Annex 1) three attributes related to the types of insecurity that most affect Tijuana were analysed: drug trafficking (item 7), crime (item 12) and earthquakes (item 15). To measure the affective attributes of the image, a semantic differential scale was used. The set of bipolar descriptors is presented in Annex 2 (Pike and Ryan, 2004; Walmsley and Jenkins, 1993), and from this set the dangerous-safe continuum was analysed (item 9).

The self-administered questionnaires were distributed at different points of the open areas of the Tijuana Cultural Centre (CECUT, Paseo de los Héroes, Zona Río), between 25 and 26 May, 2015, where the 17th International Dance Expo Tijuana took place. A self-administered questionnaire (with anonymous answers) was chosen due to its high level of accuracy and cost-effectiveness (Malhotra, 2004). The field work was done on the Saturday (morning, afternoon and evening) and the Sunday (morning and afternoon). This also ensured that the sample would not be biased towards a particular time of the day. Systematic random sampling ensured that each sample unit represented an equal share of the total population (Jawale, 2012). Therefore, every three people participating in the main activities were asked to complete the survey. A total of 110 usable questionnaires were collected.

4. Results

Tijuana is one of the five municipalities that make up the state of Baja California. The municipality is located to the north of the peninsula that bears the same name and has a territorial extension of 1,234.5 km², which represents 1.53% of the total area of the state. The population of Baja California is 3,315,766 inhabitants, of which 1,641,570 reside in the municipality of Tijuana, the third largest population of the United Mexican States (Instituto Nacional de Geografía y Estadística [INEGI], 2015).

Tijuana is a border town with the United States, and its geographical situation has a clear influence on the arrival of tourists from the United States: San Diego is 32.2 km from Tijuana, and Los Angeles 257 km away. Tijuana-San Diego is the main border crossing between Mexico and the United States. San Ysidro is the point of entry with the greatest movement, having registered in one year 31.7 million passenger crossings via automobiles and 7.2 million pedestrians (Frontera Norte, 2007). Mexico received 24.1 million international tourists in 2013, 29.3 million in 2014 and 32.1 million in 2015 (World Tourism Organization [WTO], 2016). In 2014, the number of domestic tourists visiting the main tourist destinations of the country exceeded 48.9 million people, 4.1% higher than in 2013 (Secretaría de Turismo México [SECTUR], 2014a).

Mexico has seen its national security compromised due to socio-political problems, mainly related to drug trafficking and organized crime that coexist in different areas of the country. The country has an extreme criminality rate, the third in the world after Afghanistan and Guatemala (Verisk Maplecroft, 2016). The number of homicides in Tijuana reached 674 victims in 2015, 918 in 2016 and in the first four months of 2017, it experienced a dramatic upturn to 452

victims (Ministry of Public Security, 2017). Forty-one per cent of crimes in the state of Baja California are committed in Tijuana (Table 2). The results of a survey show that 58.8% of Mexicans consider insecurity the problem that most affects the state of Baja California (INEGI, 2014).

Table 2. Offences committed in the municipality of Tijuana and the state of Baja California in 2015, 2016

	2015			2016		
	Tijuana	Baja California	%	Tijuana	Baja California	%
Thefts	17,908	47,398	37.8	19,184	47,629	40.3
Aggression injuries	2,975	7,220	41.2	2,682	6,110	43.9
Murders	674	909	74.1	918	1,257	73.1
Crime against property	4,937	10,367	47.6	3,670	8,216	44.7
Kidnappings	9	11	81.8	13	14	92.9
Rapes	344	687	50.1	294	600	49.0
Other offences	13,943	34,812	40.1	11,987	31,109	38.5
Total offences	42,927	104,653	41.0	40,337	97,368	41.4

Source: Ministry of Public Security (2017)

Characteristics of the sample

Of the total number of respondents, 47.3% are women. Fifty-one per cent are between 25 and 44 years old and 29% are between 45 and 65 years old. Almost 42% of respondents have higher education. Most respondents visited the city accompanied by one or two people (59%) or alone (22.7%), and the average stay is 4.4 days. The main travel motivations are visiting friends and relatives (VFR) (31%), professional reasons (22%), leisure (14%) and sun and beach (12%). The main source of information for tourists are friends and relatives (39%), previous visit to the destination (22%) and the Internet (19%). Of the surveyed tourists, 23.6% were visiting Tijuana for the first time, 36.4% had been to Tijuana between two and four times and 40% had been more than five times.

Risk assessment based on experience and origin

The analysis of the three cognitive attributes related to the most frequent types of insecurity in Tijuana reflects that tourists see crime (average 3.11 out of 5) and drug trafficking (average 3.05) as the main dangers of Tijuana; the image of Tijuana as a city of strong seismic activity only reaches 1.84 on average. Regarding the affective attribute of the image, the results of the semantic differential type descriptor show that tourists are closer to the image of safety than of danger in the dangerous-safe continuum (3.21 out of 5).

Table 3 presents an assessment of the tourists and the results of the variance analysis of the five attributes of risk perception related to whether the destination had been visited more than once. The values obtained are presented on a scale of 1 to 5, from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'.

Table 3. Assessment of risk attributes according to the destination experience

	First visit	Previously visited	F value

	(mean)	(mean)	
It is safe to travel and move around Tijuana	4.00	3.62	2.886*
Tijuana is safer than other cities in Mexico	3.77	3.85	0.138
I consider Tijuana suitable to visit with the family	4.04	3.75	2.058
I worry about the risk of crime	3.50	2.76	12.200***
Drug trafficking has harmed tourism	3.42	2.87	4.843**

Note: *p< .1; **p< .05; ***p< .01

For tourists visiting Tijuana for the first time, both their concerns about the risk of crime (F: 12.2, p <.01) and their perceptions of the damage that drug trafficking causes to tourism (F: 4.843, p <.05) are significantly higher than those who visited the destination previously. Likewise, the cognitive attributes of perceived images (see Annex 1) in relation to the main types of insecurity (drug trafficking and crime) show slightly higher values for tourists visiting Tijuana for the first time (3.19 vs. 3.00 in drug trafficking and 3.19 compared to 3.08 in crime) but these differences are not significant. As for the affective attribute, measured by the dangerous-safe continuum, tourists who visited Tijuana for the first time have a similar perception of risk than those who had visited it previously (3.15 vs. 3.22).

Table 4 represents the assessment of the same attributes according to the origin of the tourist. Twenty-one per cent of the respondents came from Mexico City, followed by the state of Jalisco with 11%. International tourists represent 28.2% of the total, all North Americans except for 4 tourists from Argentina, Israel, Panama and Uruguay.

Table 4. Assessment of risk attributes according to the origin of the tourist

	Domestic tourists (mean)	International tourists (mean)	F value
It is safe to travel and move around Tijuana	3.59	4.00	3.686*
Tijuana is safer than other cities in Mexico	3.71	4.13	4.948**
I consider Tijuana suitable to visit with the family	3.77	3.94	0.731
I worry about the risk of crime	3.04	2.68	3.015*
Drug trafficking has harmed tourism	3.13	2.68	3.528*

Note: *p< .1; **p< .05; ***p< .01;

The international tourists present higher scores in the security assessment of the destination, show less concern about the risk of crime and consider the damages of the drug trafficking on tourism lower than domestic tourists. For international tourists, Tijuana is safer than other cities in Mexico (F: 4,948, p <.05). These assessments are consistent with the results of the cognitive attributes of the image, since Tijuana's connection with the main types of insecurity is significantly lower for international tourists than for domestic

tourists, both in the case of drug trafficking (2.81 vs. 3.14, p <.1) and in the case of crime (2.74 vs. 3.25, p<.05). Similarly, in the affective attribute, international tourists are a little closer to the safe side of the dangerous-safe continuum than domestic tourists (3.35 vs. 3.15), but in this case is not significant.

5. Discussion

The results show that the level of perceived risk is greater in travellers visiting the destination for the first time; and regarding the cognitive components of the image they exhibit a greater fear -but not significant- of the effect of crime and drug trafficking. With successive visits to the destination, the tourist becomes more familiar, and the image of danger is softened and the uncertainty lower.

Concerning the perception of risk and the tourists' origins, the results show that international tourists, mostly Americans, have more benevolent visions of the destination than domestic tourists. These differences are significant in the two approaches used in the methodology. A priori, it could be expected that the cultural proximity of the nationals to Tijuana would yield a greater acceptance of risk; however, this is not the case. A plausible explanation is that domestic tourists see Tijuana as a border city within their country and therefore more dangerous. For Americans, Tijuana is the Mexican city closest to the United States, and in this sense, familiarization is understood to be more physical than cultural; for example, San Diego (US) borders on Tijuana, compared to being 2,302 km away from Mexico D.F. or 1,893 km from Jalisco, the main issuing cities of Mexican domestic tourism.

In order to rule out that other variables may have affected the results, the paper checks that there are no significant differences in the sources of information used by national or international tourists (McCartney, 2008), the motivation for travelling or the type of tourism practiced. In addition, the paper calculates the Pearson correlation coefficient between the variables tourist origin (international/domestic) and visit experience (first/previous) to rule out correlation, and no correlation is found ($r = 0.0156$).

It has been seen that the perception of security can improve with experience, making it important to adequately manage the information that is offered to visitors during their first visit. These tourists become good prescribers in their country of origin, as word of mouth from friends and relatives is a key information source influencing travel decision behaviour (Bieger and Laesser, 2004). The figures of criminal activities project a negative image of the destination that can be aggravated by news from the neighbouring country's media. Local tourism organizations should concentrate their efforts to overcome the initial barriers and encourage international tourists to visit the destination for the first time by enhancing the attractions of the area (gastronomy or popular customs). Campaigns carried out in recent years, such as the sponsorship of the TV production *Crossing South*, a travel show that presented Tijuana as a safe city and highlighted its gastronomic diversity (SECTUR, 2014b) are oriented in that direction.

New elements appear on the horizon in the future; US foreign policy, with the proposal of a wall along the Mexican border, may cause concern among American tourists and a change in the attitude of Mexican residents towards tourism from the US. The impact of these new scenarios on the behaviour and attitudes of the different actors should be analysed in subsequent studies.

6. Conclusion

A destination with a high level of delinquency and a bad image due to risks or implicit danger must provide means to reduce the real level of danger and to improve its projected image. Countries that are very dependent on tourism from neighbouring countries, such as Mexico with the United States, may not have the capacity to influence foreign policies that damage the image of the destination. Likewise, the local tourism promotion entities do not have the capacity to control the information disseminated by the media of the issuing markets, and it is difficult to influence the news they broadcast in a way that does not damage the image of the destination.

The perception of risk prompts tourists to opt for more secure destinations. However, an increase in familiarity with conflicting destinations can help foster a sympathetic or, at least, more objective view of security problems. Familiarization can come from experience and knowledge of the destination *in situ*. In this case, the uncertainty tends to decrease, making it easier for the visitor to repeat the trip and become an effective prescriber. Accordingly, the efforts of the Destinations Management Organizations should be aimed at overcoming the resistance to the first visit.

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Annex

1 Cognitive attributes

1. Tijuana is a modern and avant-garde city
2. Tijuana has an attractive nightlife
3. The beaches of Tijuana are attractive
4. Tijuana has cultural sites of great interest
5. Tijuana is the most important border city of Mexico
6. Tijuana has an advanced infrastructure (transportation, access roads)
7. If I think about Tijuana, I think about drug trafficking
8. Tijuana is a multicultural city
9. Tijuana has museums
10. The inhabitants of Tijuana are pleasant and hospitable
11. Tijuana is a business city
12. Tijuana has a high crime rate
13. Tijuana has a variety of activities near the city
14. If I think about Tijuana, I think about the United States
15. Tijuana is a city with strong seismic activity
16. Tijuana has a sound history, like most of Mexico
17. Tijuana is an example of a holiday destination
18. Tijuana has prestigious doctors
19. If I think about Tijuana, I think about the Caesar salad
20. Tijuana is an ideal place for betting games
21. Tijuana has places to hold cultural events

2 Continuum of affective attributes

1. Tijuana is a noisy-silent destination
2. Tijuana is a dirty-clean destination
3. Tijuana is disorganized-organized destination
4. Tijuana is ugly-attractive destination
5. Tijuana is a poor-rich destination
6. Tijuana is a dull-bright destination

7. Tijuana is a distressing-relaxing destination
8. Tijuana is a boring-exciting destination
9. Tijuana is a dangerous-safe destination