The effect of crime on tourists' travel decisions to Malawi

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Abstract

Criminal activities on tourists remain significant in not just disrupting the tourism industry's economic success but importantly in constructing an undesirable destination image for tourists who spend large amounts of money to enjoy a trip abroad. A host of studies linking crime with tourists' travel decisions have shown considerable concern among tourists regarding destinations that are generally prone to criminal activities. A wave of criminal activities in the recent past against tourists in Malawi, thus, remains a possible distracter of tourists' travel plans to the country. Premised on the assumption that criminal activities targeting tourists can effectively affect their travel plans, this paper seeks to establish the link between crime on tourists and their travel decisions to Malawi. A purposively sampled population of foreign tourists, police and private security personnel, owners or managers of resorts and lodges, and traditional leaders participated in the study. Results of the study revealed that the insignificant nature of criminal activities suffered by tourists in Malawi is not enough to prevent them from second or successive visits to Malawi. In fact, most crimes against the tourists appear consistent with similar crimes in many other tourist destinations across the world. The key difference, however, is reportedly concerned with the underlying causes of the criminal behaviour. While high levels of poverty among most local communities in developing countries have been frequently associated with criminal behaviour, this study precludes that correlation by holding that most crimes against the tourists in Malawi are opportunistic or incorrectly reported by the victims due to their own lack of responsibility in their environment.

Key words: Malawi, tourism, crime, security, tourist safety.

Introduction

Foreign tourists are motivated to travel destinations by a range of diverse reasons. Prior to their trip, however, they are considerably challenged by the need to make decisions regarding, for example, choice of destination, mode of travel, length of stay, and accommodation type (Kamlin, 2017), as well cost implications. Tourists' decision-making process is well elaborated in the Tourists' Cognitive Decision Making (TCDM) model by Joseph S. Chen (1998). This model presents five stages, which complete a tourist's choice of a destination: problem formulation, information search, evaluation, implementation, and latent influence. The desire or the intention to travel forms part of problem formulation where push or pull factors or both come into play (Nielsen, 2001). The person's need to move out

of his/her everyday life and the urge to travel pushes the person to find information about possible destinations. The person may also be pulled by the nature of a destination. This process helps the prospective tourist to make critical determination of the attributes from intuition or past experiences (Kamlin, 2017).

The individual, then, searches information of the prospective destination (Chen, 1998). This information, to help in decision-making, is sought from various sources including the media, brochures, friends and relatives, and the internet (Wall & Mathieson, 2006). Thereafter, the individual makes an evaluation of the information against various factors such as risks concerning safety or cost of the trip (Wall & Mathieson, 2006). In the fourth stage, the individual implements his or her decision by making the choice of a desired destination (Chen, 1998). The latent influence comes into play where the decision-making process could be affected by factors such as previous experiences and the media, which are not directly associated with it (Chen, 1998).

TCDM is significant in enhancing perception of risks such as physical threats or personal safety by tourists. With increasing criminal activities against tourists in Malawi, the TCDM model becomes useful in understanding tourists' decisions about visiting Malawi. A number of criminal events that subjected tourists to criminal victimization in the country have been pervasive. Towards the end of 2017, for example, circa six districts in the deeper southern part of Malawi experienced disturbing scenes of mysterious 'blood sucking vampires' (Muheya, 2017). This was followed by a spate of violent attacks by local residents against any person perceived to be a stranger (Malikwa, 2017). The assault by an angry mob on a Belgian couple on a tourism escapade had probably sent strong and unpleasant signals to the tourist community across the globe (Malikwa, 2017).

The consequences of the violence had been enormous. Various activities by foreign development workers who convert to tourists during their free time had been suspended. Many other tourists also fled the area for safety (Malikwa, 2017). The violence also resulted into the cancellation of planned visits to Malawi by many prospective tourists (Malikwa, 2017). Further to this, a series of violent armed robberies targeting tourists and tourism facilities in Mangochi, Balaka, and Rumphi as well as loss of valuables by tourists following property break-ins at many tourist centres across the country remain potentially important in facilitating the alteration of tourists plans to visit Malawi.

As Altindag (2014) and Holcomb (2004) observe, these criminal incidences can create resentment among the tourists towards the destination as well as their entire experience. The prevalence of crime can, thus, buttress tourists' aversion of a certain destination and, in extreme cases, it can also reinforce their decisions against any future excursions (Holcomb, 2004). But given Malawi's relative stability in terms of the frequency and depth of criminal activities in comparison to other African countries, the attribution of a positive imagery to tourists' travel decisions cannot be ignored. But as Michalko (2003) warns, it is imperative to deconstruct a generalized picture of public safety in terms of tourists' vulnerability to crime since the internal structure of crime varies from one country to another. In addition to providing an outlook of Malawi regarding the safety of tourists, this study is also helpful in contributing to academic literature on the less ventured domain of criminology in the tourism industry in Malawi. It is, therefore, against this background that this paper seeks to understand the role of crime in shaping tourists' travel decisions to Malawi.

Crime and tourism

There is significant correlation between crime and tourism. Studies by Schiebler, Crotts, and Hollinger (1995), Demos, (1992), and Chesney-Lind and Lind (1986) show that tourists are

more vulnerable to criminal victimization than local residents. These studies and many others linking tourism and crime have dominated the tourism and hospitality literature for decades (*see for example* Barclay, Mawbay, & Jones 2014; Altindag, 2014; Crotts, 1996; Ryan, 1993; Allen; 1999; Chesney-Lind & Lind, 1986). Moreover, 'the [tourists'] purchase of comprehensive travel insurance, use of traveller's cheques, and adoption of other personality security measures indicate the types of precautions commonly taken to protect [themselves] against crime' (Prideaux, 2003:86). In the same vein, cautionary advice on tourists' safety in their destinations abounds on various websites of foreign embassies (Crotts, 1996). All these reveal the significance of crime in the tourism industry.

An attempt to define crime needs to be made with considerable caution since it lacks precise meaning (Tibbets & Hemmens, 2010). Although Newburn (2007:8) suggests that a 'straightforward way is simply to view crime as being offences against the criminal law,' such simplistic conceptualization can be misleading for it can defy the prevailing difficulty in criminalizing certain acts of human behaviour. For certain acts such as murder or armed robbery, their severity as well as the shock which they generate require little effort to universally interpret them as crimes. But as Newburn (2007) argues, certain acts become crimes only under the proscription of the law, which makes their application relevant only in certain contexts. This, according to Ryan (1993:174), is 'particularly pertinent to some types of crimes commonly associated with tourism.' Nonetheless, Tappan (1947) suggests that crime constitutes an intentional act in violation of the criminal law committed without defence or excuse and penalized by the state. In this paper, Brás'(2015) proposition of two forms of crime i.e. planned and opportunistic crimes as being common to tourists suitably envelops Tappan's definition.

Terrorism activities constitute a key form planned crimes against tourists. While tourists have not suffered any terrorism related incidents in Malawi, terrorism remains significant in causing extreme fear to the victims' (tourists) audience, which, in most cases, includes the host government as well as the tourists' home government. According to Crelinsten (2009), terrorism is used as a strategy for gaining publicity in the promotion of political cause. Indeed, 'it is not so much the tourism associated with the events that attracts terrorist attention, but rather, it is the 'news value' of the attack' (Ryan, 1993:179). The (Islamic) terrorist attack on tourists at a concert in Paris on 13 November 2015, for example, epitomises the terrorists' desire to publicise their radical views as well as to confirm their own importance in a society that appears to relegate Islam to its margins (Southers, 2016).

Bethmann (2013) also sees terrorists as being motivated by a desire to preserve their societal heritage. This is particularly true when the goals of ethno-nationalist terrorists are examined. According to Ryan (1993:179), tourism represents 'a threat to a valued pattern of life' through its promotion of foreign cultures. But also the perceived wealth of the tourists makes their presence to be conceived as a representation of cultural and economic exploitation. Tourism, thus, presents itself as a 'visible form of the consumer society that is short lived, irritates the working class and makes it to react in a way that the bourgeoisie define as crime' (Pizam & Mansfield *in* Nkosi, 2010:78). As such, the victimization of tourists is considered a 'necessary evil' and serves as a justification for their struggle for economic parity.

Terrorism on tourists has also been used as a tool for political revenge. This is particularly apparent when tourists of particular states become targets of attacks. For example, the Hutu militants' singling out of American and British tourists from a group of tourists of diverse nationalities on a Ugandan Safari resulted from the apparent support of the Tutsi ethnic minority by the two global powers (Hannan, Buncombe, Sengupta, & Loughl, 1999). Similarly, the random killing of 38 tourists on a beach at Sousse Hotel in Tunisia in 2015 can

be argued to have been encouraged by the overwhelming presence of British tourists who numbered 30 among those killed (Farmer, 2017).

On the other hand, opportunistic crimes include a second typology of crimes against tourists. Unlike planned crimes which require premeditation, opportunistic crimes are simply facilitated by the perpetrator's realization of an opportunity to commit the crime. This, perhaps, explains why most tourists become victims of crimes associated with activities such as prostitution; pickpocketing; confidence schemes (fraud); fencing of stolen property; gambling; burglary of holiday homes; robberies at bars and other businesses; and mass-transit crimes such as those at bus or airport terminals, on subways or trains (Glensor & Peak, 2004).

While some of these crimes appear to possess less impact on the tourism industry for their lack of the necessary gravity to physically or psychologically injure the victim as well as to attract considerable media attention (Glensor & Peak, 2004), their prevalence is rather extensive and enormous in the tourism industry. Moreover, the manner in which some of the crimes occur remains critical in affecting the tourists' future decision about a particular destination (Holcomb, 2004). For instance, where a crime involves the invasion of personal space, the likelihood of grave physical or psychological injury cannot be overruled. This corresponds with an observation by Altindag (2014:4) that 'violent crimes, compared to crimes against property (such as theft) pose greater threats to the wellbeing of an individual.' This can be exacerbated by the severity of the crime measured by dollar value of the items stolen or damaged. The gravity of these effects is, however, lessened in the case where the crime results from the tourists' own negligence and/or the insignificance of the lost or damaged property.

Opportunistic crimes are well supported by the Routine Activities theory. According to Shiebler, Crotts and Hollinger (1996), this theory is moulded within the rational choice theory through its consideration of a criminal as a rational being who seeks possession of something of value from victims. This, according to Felson and Cohen (1980:390) constitutes 'predatory violations,' which include 'illegal acts in which someone definitely and intentionally takes or damages the person or property of another' (Glaser in Felson & Cohen, 1980:390). This sort of behaviour is rightly supported by the existence of 'interdependence among people, other species, and the physical environment, especially as people seek to gain sustenance from their environment' (Hawley in Felson & Cohen, 1980: 390).

Through this theoretical perspective, a suitable target or victim; a motivated offender; and the absence of effective guardians capable of preventing the interaction between offender and victim constitute the conditions under which a criminal activity would take place (Felson & Cohen, 1980). The suitability of tourists as targets can be explained by a number of variables. In the first place, tourists are deemed valuable targets as they are often perceived to possess items of wealth such as cameras, cash, and credit cards (Ryan, 1993). But again, tourists appear to be characteristically visible due to factors such as casual dressing and the types of places they visit such as forests, mountain areas, and isolated places. They, too, use cameras frequently, appear to be lost, and often ask directions from strangers, or use rented marked vehicles. On the other hand, tourist destinations also play a role in facilitating tourists' criminal victimization. Thus, environments that lack proper security measures including for example, those with insufficient lighting or enough security personnel can increase chances of tourist's criminal victimization (Glensor & Peak, 2004; Crotts, 1996).

The routine activities theory, thus, suggests that crime is a 'normal phenomenon' and is dependent on available opportunities to offend (Crotts, 1996). The absence of guardians such as police or private security personnel as well as opportunities to offend increases the

chances for a motivated offender to commit a crime. Hence the choice of suitable targets is influenced by the offender's perception of the vulnerability of the target and the overall opportunity to commit the crime. This, however, contradicts the common belief that offenders are less likely to commit crimes if they can achieve personal goals through legitimate means; leading to the conclusion that criminal motivations can be reduced if offenders perceive the presence of alternatives to crime.

Methodology

To understand the effect of crime on tourists' travel decisions, information was sought from foreign tourists, police and private security officers, tourism officials, managers of resorts and lodges, and traditional leaderships in Mzuzu, Nkhata Bay, Salima, Mangochi, Lilongwe, and Mulanje. The choice of these localities was largely necessitated by their significance to tourism activities. In particular, the areas play host to exciting tourist attraction sites, resorts, and abundant conference facilities.

The key informants to the study were purposively sampled and they were deemed useful because of their critical roles in the industry and the society. For the foreign tourists in particular, their insights were deemed to be helpful based on the assumption that they move out of their environmental bubble into a different environment. As such, they were thought to be better placed to express their experiences on crime than how domestic tourists could have done. Moreover, foreign tourists are likely to be suitable and easier targets for criminals due to their lack of familiarity with the environment, culture, and the risks they take as part of the 'tourist culture' (Glensor & Peak, 2004:5).

Secondary information on crime and tourism both in general and specific (to Malawi) contexts was derived primarily through literature review of relevant journal articles, books, policy documents, and selected newspaper articles.

Results and discussion

The exploration of crimes and their effect on tourists' travel decisions resulted into five thematic issues namely; the vulnerability of tourists to crime; the underlying causes of criminal behaviour against tourists; the nature of crimes against tourists and security measures; and the extent to which crimes affect tourists' travel decisions.

Vulnerability of tourists to crime

During the study, service providers, security agents (police), and the tourists were asked to locate factors that subject tourists to criminal victimization. Negligence by both facility owners and the tourists themselves emerged as one of the dominant factors that subject tourists to considerable vulnerability. For facility owners, they are often blamed for operating with loose security system. This is seen in their hiring of untrained security personnel. While most security personnel is locally sourced thereby complementing the national drive for the empowerment of the rural masses, its lack of security skills often results into skewed intelligence gathering. Furthermore, facility owners have also often failed to provide adequate lighting on their facilities and have at times failed to issue security tips or guidelines to their clients. This was corroborated by a Police officer in Salima who indicated that 'most of the times, tourists are on their own. If they are not criminally victimized, it is only because most communities around are relatively peaceful.' The tourists themselves also expressed lack of knowledge of such a procedure at the country's tourists' centres although they admitted the sight of security guards.

Facility owners have also been blamed for failing to adequately light the buildings and the business premises. Nonetheless, the negligence of tourists reigned supreme. This is indeed true when during the study it became established that some tourists tend to leave their rooms unlocked with their valuable items such as cameras or smartphones lying about:

> ..mostly tourists leave valuable things exposed and unattended to and so offenders take advantage of that negligence and steal from the tourists. (*Police Officer Nkhata Bay*).

Tourists' negligence is well captured by Glensor and Peak (2004) who indicate that such behaviour accords significant advantage and opportunity to the locals to invade tourists' resting places, especially when they are away for meals or games at the beach. Although some sort of security is made available by service providers, the negligence factor accounts for most criminal victimization of tourists.

The study has also revealed that some tourists tend to seek cheaper accommodation in 'simple and insecure' lodges (Police Officer Mangochi, 2017). This is supported by the fact that some tourists have literally sought accommodation in private local homes located deep in traditional villages. One respondent corroborated:

> Many tourists put up with us in our homes. The community is ready to host them because they leave (give us) money and sometimes they have even built houses for their friends who accommodate them. It is a great thing for a foreigner (white person) to choose to live with us. *(Traditional leader, Nkhata Bay)*

While one can possibly argue that the tourists indeed seek to experience the traditional (African) life and that they are greatly enthused by the friendliness and hospitality of most Malawians, their conspicuousness due to racial differences as well as their being associated with material wealth serve to increases their risk of criminal victimization. This is further compounded by their oblivion to environments that they are totally unfamiliar with.

At times, tourists have reported criminal victimization to police even after forgetting their own items on the beach or any other places (Police officer, Mangochi). However, there reporting is usually meant to facilitate the acquisition of a police report to support their insurance claims back home. This, however, unjustifiably, projects an image of being criminally victimized.

While Michalko (2003:66) relates tourists' careless attitude to 'the fact that they come from places where levels of public safety are higher and they are not warned about the status of crime' in the destination, the scenarios above create considerable opportunities and motivation for a criminal activity given the interaction in a particular place and time of the availability of a suitable target and the absence of capable guardians (Clarke & Felson, 1993).

The study has also revealed that the tourists' reluctance to report criminal victimization increases their vulnerability to crimes as alluded to below:

> …those that lodge complaints to security authorities only do so to acquire legal documentation for insurance processes back home and not necessarily to bring the culprits to justice. The knowledge of this phenomenon by potential offenders, thus, increases their motivation to criminally victimize the tourists. *(Tourist, Mangochi).*

While considerable apathy in reporting crimes prevails in Malawi due to the locals' lack of confidence in the country's criminal justice system, the desire to avoid disrupting their holidays with court appearances and other criminal investigation procedures prevents from reporting their criminal victimization to authorities. In line with this view, Brás (2015) sees an apparent desire in tourists to avoid the complexities associated with court proceedings. A case which may require them to return at a later date to the crime scene or to the court for testimonies against the perpetrators may not only be financially unsustainable but also time consuming. This is perhaps supported by the fact that tourists usually operate within tight and busy vacation schedules and would hence want to maximize their available leisure time for relaxation other than to spend their days at the court. But again, language barriers as well as unfamiliarity with the local criminal system may discourage them from pursuing the cases further.

Underlying causes of criminal behaviour against tourists

The prevalence of crime in a place is usually perceived through an interplay of factors such as high levels of income inequality, rapid and uncontrolled urbanization, high unemployment among the youthful population, poorly resourced criminal justice system, proliferation of firearms, just to name a few. Indeed during the study, poverty prevailed as one important factor that drives people to commit crimes against tourists. In general, however, the common reason and as supported by respondents during the study is that individuals at the lower end of the socioeconomic status scale are more likely to participate in criminal activities albeit minor in nature. Yet a closer inspection of the respondents' inference of poverty particularly that by members of the local community reveals speculative tendencies most people choose to grow when avoiding the reality. While most Malawians are indeed poor, the revelation that most perpetrators travel long distances to tourist destinations defies the poverty factor.

Moreover, because crime frequently leads to arrest and imprisonment and this, in turn, reduces an individual's employment prospects, it is possible to argue that crime leads to poverty and unemployment rather than vice versa (Weatherburn, 2001). The role of poverty in driving criminal behaviour against tourists has been astutely challenged by various scholars including Weatherburn (2001:5):

> most studies examining the relationship between poverty, unemployment and crime have examined crime rates in areas marked by poverty and unemployment rather than rates of participation in crime by individuals who are poor and/or unemployed. The trouble with this kind of research is that, on its own, it cannot tell us whether it is the poor and unemployed who are committing crime. The tendency to draw unwarranted inferences about who is involved in crime from information about the characteristics of crime-prone places is sometimes referred to as the ecological fallacy.

During the study, it transpired that the majority of tourists lose property to the very same local people that socialize with them. As corroborated by one Police officer:

> …most perpetrators of criminal activities have been boys, commonly known as 'beach boys' who serve as tour guides. Thus, tourists have often lost their 'valuables such as smartphones or ornaments to this group of people. (*Police officer, Nkhata Bay*).

The tourists are placed in a vulnerable spot due to their location i.e. a holiday resort, which is a common place for any person. But again, the association with the tourists regardless of the length of time, creates considerable opportunities for criminal victimization to occur. Thus,

the routine activities theory, other than poverty, remains significant in explaining the underlying causes of criminal victimization of tourists.

Nature of crimes against tourists and security measures

The study established that the types of crimes against tourists prevalent in Malawi are opportunistic. These include petty theft of electronic gadgets including cell phones, cameras, laptops; money theft; break-ins in tourists' lodging areas; and robbery. Albeit in few cases, sexual harassment of female tourists was also reported during the study. This occurs mainly when most tourists are drunk. This follows what Kennedy and Forde (1990) and Messner and Blau (1987) argued that people who frequent bars, parties, shopping centres become prone to criminal victimization. What has not been common are planned crimes against tourists. Although some tourists have lost property at gun point, for example (this one in Mangochi) it cannot be necessarily concluded that such crime was organized. Accordingly, crimes against tourists in Malawi are more opportunistic than planned.

Despite these crimes, efforts to prevent them are undertaken by a number of stakeholders including the service providers, police, local communities, and even tourists themselves. Most service providers have security guards to safeguard their various establishments, in addition, they civic educate the locals on the importance of tourism for their communities and how best they can take care of the tourists when they are visiting. Service providers also provide more information to the tourists about the destination. Police officers also do community policing through engagements with the local authority. Additionally, police conduct sweeping exercises to reduce criminals. Moreover, tourists themselves avoid leaving cash in the rooms or moving around with cash rather they use cards. They also take caution when they are visiting places of entertainment in how they interact with other people.

The extent to which crimes affect tourist's travel decisions

The main theme of the study was to investigate the extent to which crimes against tourists affect their plans to travel to a particular destination. According to the findings, the study concluded that the nature of crime is one key factor that can affect tourists' travel decisions to a destination. In general, petty crimes have little or no effect on travel decisions, while big crimes have an impact on travel decisions. One respondent who was once a crime victim indicated:

> I have been a victim before, at the beach my valuables were stolen in the room, but that really cannot stop me to visit the destination next time, because I know it can happen anywhere. *(Tourist, Mangochi)*

Referring to the typologies of crime alluded to by Brás (2015), it is possible to conclude that planned crimes have a direct impact on tourists' travel decisions as they are big in nature and the impact on the victims is huge as compared to the opportunistic crimes. Furthermore, it is difficult to avoid planned crimes, while with opportunistic ones, preventive or precautionary measures can be taken by different players including the tourists themselves, service providers, security agencies as well as the local communities. In addition, Holcomb (2004) indicates that the manner in which some of the crimes happen remains critical in affecting the tourists' future travel decision to a particular destination. Moreover, studies have shown substantial evidence that high crime incidences committed against tourists, as well as the negative press associated with it, can discourage tourists to travel to a particular destination (Crotts 1996; De Albuquerqu & McElroy 1999; Ferreira 1999; Michalko 2003; George 2010). The more prevalent crimes are, the more likely they are to affect tourists'' travel decisions.

Conclusion

Security remains one important factor that influences tourists' travel decisions. For a tourist to travel to a destination, he or she has to ascertain his or her safety. Safety is the basic need according to Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Having looked at different crimes committed against tourists in Malawi, the study established that there are only petty crimes that affect tourists in the country's tourist destinations. Nonetheless, security measure, albeit unreliable and insignificant at times, are being employed in preventing possible criminal victimization of tourists in the country. This study has, however, not considered tourists as perpetrators of crime. It is, therefore, suggested that future research need to investigate the role of tourists in orchestrating criminal activities in their destinations in the country.

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