Article

An evaluation of the effectiveness of travel advisories with a specific focus on Hong Kong's Outbound Travel Alert system

Abstract

The key objective of this study was to do develop a theory-based understanding of the role that travel advisories play in how tourists make decisions to travel to specific destinations. Many countries issue travel alerts to inform their citizens about potential risks when travelling abroad. The literature has largely ignored this area of travel research despite the potential for tourists to become embroiled in a wide range of crisis events during foreign travel. This study first examined users' perspectives of Hong Kong's Outbound Travel Alert (OTA) system using a mix of focus groups and in-depth interviews. The study found that outbound tourists had a low level of awareness and knowledge of travel advisories and many respondents preferred alternative information sources such as the Internet, social media and commercial news channels. In comparison, representatives of travel agencies and insurance companies reported that the alert system was useful in the pursuit of their business but felt there were shortcomings that needed to be addressed. Based on these findings a model

incorporating elements of the Theory of Planned Behavior and the Protection Motivation Theory was developed to assist in the assessment of travel advisory compliance intention.

Keywords

Outbound travel, travel advisories, Theory of Planned Behavior, Protection Motivation Theory, Hong Kong

Introduction

Tsunamis, floods, earthquakes, riots, invasions, missile crisis, crime, the 2008/09 Global Financial Crisis, mass terrorism incidents, SARS, Bird Flu and Ebola are just some of the events that have dominated the global news services in recent decades. Events of this type have the potential to disrupt travel plans. In response, many countries including Belgium, France, Italy, Netherlands, Switzerland, Norway, United Kingdom, Canada, United States Australia, New Zealand, Hong Kong, Japan and Korea issue travel advisories to warn citizens of threats they may encounter during travel abroad. Government travel warnings, generally referred to as travel advisories, provide an interface between governments and prospective outbound tourists and are claimed by some authors (Beirman, 2006, 2013; Wilks and Moore, 2004) to be a leading source of information for tourists on travel risks. Travel warnings are also claimed to influence destination choices (Beirman, 2006, 2013). Although travel risk

information is provided by governments, travel decisions remain the responsibility of the individual tourists. As a consequence, governments can only remind citizens that they need to be aware of risks and accept personal responsibility, including the purchase of travel insurance, for visits to destinations nominated as having a degree of risk. The UK (FCO, n.d.) for example warns its citizens that 'Any decision to travel to, stay in or leave a country is for you to take on your own responsibility on the basis of the best available information from our travel advice and other sources'.

Travel advisories are not a new concept, however relatively few studies have been undertaken in this area (Beirman, 2006, 2013; Henderson, 2004; Löwenheim, 2007; Sharpley et al., 1996; Tourism Concern, 2003). Although published over a decade ago, Beirman's (2006) paper remains the most authoritative source on this issue. Existing research has either focused on assessing the impact of travel warnings on tourist-receiving destinations (Henderson, 2003; Sharpley et al., 1996) or evaluated the consequences and deficiencies of travel advisories (Beirman, 2006; Tourism Concern, 2003). No attempts appear to have been made to explore how theory may be used to understand how travel advisories are perceived by travellers or how the effectiveness of travel advisories as an official information source may be improved. Existing research has largely focused on travel advisories in Western settings overlooking travel advisories in other countries. Further, little is known about the

usefulness of travel advisories from the users' perspectives, including potential outbound tourists, tour operators, and insurance companies. Other research gaps include the effectiveness of communications channels used by governments to promote the use of travel advisories, how persuasive travel advisories are in changing tourist behavior and how the public measures the worth of travel advisories versus information derived from social media sources. These research gaps prompted the need for this study.

The key objectives of this research are to; investigate the performance of the Hong Kong's Outbound Travel Alert (OTA) system from the perspective of outbound tourists, tour operators, and insurance companies and; to use the findings to identify opportunities to develop a more comprehensive theoretical understanding of the role that travel advisories play in understanding how tourists make decisions to travel to specific destinations. Hong Kong as selected on the basis that it has only recently introduced a system for issuing travel advisories and its OTA system has been criticized as being underdeveloped, inadequate, incomprehensive and in need of review (Hong Kong Apple Daily, 2015; Hong Kong's Information Services Department, 2011; Lai, 2011; Mak and Ng, 2013).

Literature review

Travel advisory

While the earliest government outbound travel advisory was issued by the United States in 1914 (Löwenheim, 2007), a widely accepted description of travel advisories did not emerge until 2006 when Beirman (2006) described them as having three characteristics: 'It is a security and safety assessment issued by the government of a travel-generating country to its citizens applying to specific destinations'; 'it incorporates a wide range of information, including information and advice on legal, cultural, religious, and social mores, which may apply to the destination, as well as relevant contacts, such as diplomatic legation and the services that the legation can provide while a citizen is in a foreign country' and, 'government travel advisories are an extra-territorial security measure designed to protect travellers when leaving their country of citizenship' (Beirman, 2006: 309). While Beirman's (2006) paper provided a useful summary of travel advisories, clear definitions have yet to emerge for terms such as 'travel warnings', 'travel alerts', and 'travel advice', all of which are used interchangeably in relation to travel advisories.

In spite of limited research, a number of problems related to how governments use travel advisories have been identified. Mansfeld (2006) questioned the credibility of travel advisory information by proposing that the real intention is to protect the governments of tourist-

generating countries from possible future liability lawsuits. The criteria for imposing and lifting travel warnings has also been questioned. Sharpley et al. (1996) observed that travel advisories could be used as a political or retaliatory tool to inflict damage on target destinations. Even where there was no deliberate attempt to inflict damage, warnings sometimes cover an entire country even when they relate only to a specific destination within a country (Beirman, 2006). From a consumer perspective, Tourism Concern (2003) stated that travel advisories should be transparent and warnings should be appropriate in scale. Finally, the decision to impose warnings is made by government. A more appropriate approach might be needed to ensure open communication among governments, travel industry associations, and professionals to ensure that the interests of different parties involved are considered (Beirman, 2006). One example of this approach is Australia's 'Charter for Safe Travel' based on an agreement between the government and the national travel industry (Beirman, 2006, 2013). The agreement stated that industry would pledge to inform its customers about government travel advisories for international destinations, encourage tourists to refer to the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade Smartraveller website and provide feedback from tourists on how travel advisories met their needs.

The tourists' perspectives

From the tourists' perspective, travel advisories provide information to assist in the identification of potential threats in destinations they are planning to visit. Threats may include criminal behaviour towards tourists, terrorism, health risks, natural disasters and political issues. However, because individuals also have access to travel information from other channels including print, electronic and social media, not all intending tourists take advantage of official government travel advisories.

To date, the academic literature has not examined the level of trust consumers place in travel advisories or the percentage of tourists who consult official travel advisories when planning travel. This is not the case with the non-academic literature and a number of reports have appeared about the use of travel advisories. For example, in Australia research undertaken by totaltravel.com found that up to half of all outbound tourists ignore official travel warnings and a further one-fifth indicated that they rarely followed travel advice because they believed in their own ability to look after themselves (The Australian, 2006). In the United Kingdom, similar research found that nine out of 10 British respondents were unaware of government issued travel warnings while half of the respondents stated that they would continue with their holidays even if a warning had been issued (Paris, 2013). Further, Paris (2013) found that violent incidents and protests followed by severe weather and natural

disasters were more likely to lead to travel cancellations than adverse travel advisories. In the United States, a recent study (Global Sources, 2014) of Americans' awareness of and tendency to consult travel advisory information found that nearly one-fifth of respondents completely ignored official travel advice and about half of those who did look at warnings were unlikely to cancel travel if there was adverse advice. Collectively, these findings provide tentative, non-academic sourced evidence that many tourists do not take government advisories seriously raising concerns about the effectiveness of travel advisories and raising doubts about the validity of Beirman's (2006) view on the importance of travel advisories. Confirmation of Beirman's views on the importance of travel advisory will require additional multi-national testing.

Tour operators' and travel agents' perspectives

Major crisis events such as terrorist attacks, wars and natural disasters have an immediate impact on destinations usually leading to a significant fall in demand (Cavlek, 2002; Qiu, 2005). One of the first groups to experience this impact are outbound tour operators, particularly those that specialize in the affected destination. From the viewpoint of this group, travel advisories can be useful in determining the destinations they promote, or do not promote.

Travel agents often act as mediators between the government and tourists by providing travel advisory information to clients. In Hong Kong, the Travel Industry Council of Hong Kong (TICHK) has developed guidelines requiring travel agents to advise clients of the latest OTA on the destinations they are visiting, in part as a strategy to reduce potential conflicts and disputes (On.cc, 2010a). Travel agents are also required to provide a standardized range of transaction fees for tour cancellations and refunds (Lam, 2009) and have developed contingency plans if an OTA is imposed either prior to the commencement of travel or while the person is travelling. These guidelines were designed to protect the interests of both the individual tourist and tour operators.

Travel insurance companies

Insurance companies also have a major interest in travel advisories. Since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack on the USA, the imposition of travel advisories has proliferated, forcing insurance providers to reassess insurance plans (Beirman, 2006). For example, the term 'general exemption' used by insurance providers to explain refusals to compensate clients who had suffered injury, loss or death because of political violence has undergone an extensive review (Beirman, 2006). Most insurers now consider government travel advisories in their risk assessments. Although it is not a universal practice, insurance companies

generally do not provide travel insurance for high risk destinations. However, as some insurers believe that travel advisories often exaggerated the degree of threat to citizens in certain destinations, there is an emerging trend of assessing travel insurance cover to destinations subject to government travel advisories on a case-by-case basis (Beirman, 2006).

Hong Kong's OTA system

Hong Kong's OTA (Outbound Travel Alert) system commenced operations in October 2010 and covers 85 countries. Assessments are made by the Hong Kong Security Bureau which considers the nature, level and likely duration of the threat as well as the probability of tourists becoming victims. The OTA system uses three symbolic colours (amber, red, and black) to indicate the level of risk with black indicating the highest level of risk.

   As part of the OTA system, Hong Kong residents are encouraged to purchase travel insurance before travelling abroad. If a destination covered by a tourists' insurance plan is under considerable threat or has an OTA imposed, compensation becomes a major concern for affected tourists and insurance companies. A report attributed to the vice president of AIG Insurance Hong Kong (Metro, 2015) indicated that there had been an increase in the number of travel insurance policies issued following the introduction of the OTA system. One outcome has been an increase in the number of complaints related to misunderstandings

about the terms and level of compensation of travel insurance. Many of these misunderstandings reflect the changes that many insurance companies have made in their travel insurance policies following the introduction of the OTA system. A review of travel insurance policies by the Hong Kong Consumer Council in 2010 found that six out of the 21 randomly sampled insurance packages did not allow the insured to cancel travel plans because of adverse OTAs while eight policies provided varying levels of compensation (On.cc, 2010b).

Table 1 compares the features of Hong Kong's OTA system with the travel advisories issued by the so called 'five eye' group of countries (Australia, New Zealand, Canada, United Kingdom and the USA). These countries have an intelligence sharing agreement that among other things, provides information on potential threats to travellers.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Objectives of research

The literature review has highlighted significant gaps in our understanding of the value of travel advisories and in particular, the level of importance tourists ascribes to official travel advisories. Given the significance of the tourism industry for many economies and the

potential for major events such as a terrorist attack or natural disaster to affected tourism arrivals, there is a strong case for developing a more detailed understanding of how travel advisories are used by tourists. The global nature of travel advisories and how they are used suggests the need for either a multi-national study involving a number of economies or a number of studies undertaken in individual economies that can then be compared. This research adopted the second approach and elected to focus on one economy and undertake exploratory research, the results of which could then be used for theory building followed by theory testing in later research. Based on this understanding of the need for research, the objectives of this study are twofold: to investigate the performance of the Hong Kong's OTA system from the perspective of major users including outbound tourists, tour operators, and insurance companies, and; to use the findings to identify opportunities to develop a more comprehensive theoretical understanding of the role that travel advisories may play in understanding how tourists make decisions to travel to specific destinations. Based on the preceding discussion, three research questions were developed:

Research question 1. How importance is Hong Kong SAR's OTA system as a source of information for outbound Hong Kong tourists, outbound tour operators, and insurance companies?

Research question 2. Do various user groups view Hong Kong SAR's OTA system as an

effective source of travel information?

Research question 3. Can a theory based model be developed to examine the role of travel

advisories in tourist destination selection?

Methods

The authors adopted an inductive qualitative approach based on the view that relatively little

is known about the reasons why tourists use or do not use travel warnings. The advantage of

an inductive approach is that it enables previously unknown issues and relationships to be

identified and from this understanding new theory may be postulated or existing theory

applied to gain greater insights (Eisenhardt, 1989). To develop an understanding of how

consumers perceive, access and use official travel advisories a qualitative approach based on

focus groups and in-depth interviews was adopted. This approach enabled previously

unreported issues to be identified and explored in greater depth than is possible in qualitative

research (Remenyi, 2011; Gaskell, 2000). The findings were then used to develop a model to

assess travel advisory compliance behavior.

Given the exploratory nature of this research and the limited extent of previous studies, a

three stage research approach was adopted. In the first stage academic literature and

government reports as well as press releases and news reports were reviewed. Issues related to the OTA were identified and used to develop the questions posed to the focus groups in stage two and interviews in stage three.

Focus groups

Eight focus group sessions were held with Hong Kong residents who had travelled overseas during the last five years, the period during which the OTA system had been operating. Each group consisted of five to six participants. As Remenyi (2011) observed, six participants are preferable to larger groups that may become difficult to manage. Since the purpose of this study was to generate understanding rather than to generalise findings to a large population, a purposive sampling method was adopted (Saunders et al., 2000). To ensure broad representation, a list of possible participants was developed that included a wide range of demographic characteristics (e.g., gender, age, income level, etc.) and travel patterns (e.g., purpose of travel, travel experience, etc.). Forty-six invitations were accepted. Age was used as a measure to group participants in the expectation that participants of similar ages would find it easier to understand each other and be more willing to express their thoughts (Rabiee, 2004). The ratio of females to males was approximately equal. The profile of the focus group participants is outlined in Table 2.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

Open-ended questions were used in the focus group sessions to initiate discussion. This approach allowed the researchers to explore a range of views on the OTA while ensuring that the conservation did not range beyond the core area of research. Participants in this stage of the research were assigned numbers to ensure anonymity. The questions used in each session were:

1. What do you know about the OTA system?

2. Do you typically consult OTAs before travelling?

3. Have OTAs affect your previous travel plans?

4. What do you think about the current OTA system?

5. From your perspective, what makes a good OTA system?

6. How could the system be improved?

Interviews were transcribed in Chinese and translated into English by an academic staff member fluent in both Chinese and English. The transcripts were then manually content

analysed to identify key words and phrases. These were then grouped into thematic categories rather than by specific questions. This approach allowed the researchers to identify and group similar expressions, patterns, and relationships. This method has previously been used by Murphy (2001).

Interviews with outbound tour operators and insurance companies

In-depth interviews were employed for the other two stakeholder groups based on the view that these interviewees may be unwilling to disclose information on issues pertinent to company policy in a focus group setting (Parasuraman et al., 1985). Interviews were undertaken over a three-month period, commencing in May, 2015. Each interview session lasted between one and one and a half hours. Cantonese, the first language of all interviewees, was used to facilitate a mutual understanding and exchanges of ideas. Each interview was digitally recorded and notes taken. Eleven interviews were conducted. At the conclusion of the interviews, transcripts were manually content analysed to identify key words and phrases and grouped into thematic categories.

Participants were chosen using the key informant approach and judgmental sampling technique (Marshall, 1996). Key informants were identified on the basis of their profession, organizational positions, or responsibilities and willingness to share their opinions with the

researchers (Kumar et al., 1993; Warheit et al., 1978). Based on Patton's (2002: 244) advice that 'there are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry', the sample size was determined by the depth of the information they could provide rather than number of respondents. In both target groups, consistent patterns emerged by the third interview indicating that theoretical saturation had been reached (Glaser, 1992). To ensure representativeness, interviewees were selected from well-known travel agencies or insurance companies. The profile of the individual participants is presented in Table 3.

[Insert Table 3 about here]

The following questions were asked:

1. What do you think of the OTA system?

2. Does the OTA system assist your company? In what aspects?

3. Does your company use the OTA system as a reference tool in evaluating travel risks?

4. Does the OTA system affect your company?

5. What do you think are the criteria for an effective OTA system?

6. What improvements should be made to the OTA system?

Results

Results are presented in four sections, the first three of which are based on the views expressed in the stage two focus groups conducted with Hong Kong residents. The fourth section outlines the views of tour operators and insurance agents.

Awareness, knowledge and use of OTAs by Hong Kong residents

During the course of the focus groups, it became apparent that there was a wide spectrum of understanding of the OTA system with approximately a third of the participants appearing to be relatively familiar with it while the remainder had a range of knowledge from some to almost none. Two thirds of the participants did not use the OTA system when planning international travel. While the overall level of knowledge was relatively limited, the responses did generate many useful insights into how the system is currently used, its limitations and ideas how it may be strengthened. These views are outlined in the following discussion and provide useful clues for how future quantitative research may be used to probe specific issues in more depth.

The use of the OTA system versus other information sources of information was of particular interest. For most respondents, the most common sources of information on safety

and security issues were news reports on television, online platforms, or mobile apps rather than the OTA system. Even after being informed about the functions of the OTA system as part of the focus group process, many participants indicated that they were unlikely to consult travel advisory information prior to their next trip.

One of the key intended features of the OTA system was to provide users with a simple warning system that used colours to indicate the levels of threat. Many participants reported being unaware of the symbolic colours of OTAs and their implications indicating another weakness in the current system.

Effectiveness of the OTA system

Six distinct themes regarding the perceived effectiveness of the OTA system were identified from the focus groups. These were; perceived purpose, attitudes, quality of OTA information, destination coverage and geographical specificity, timeliness, and credibility of OTA information.

Purpose of the OTA. Amongst participants who recognized that the purpose of the OTA was to provide travel safety information and perceived this function as useful, support for the OTA system was high. For example, P29 stated 'The OTA system is useful…I would not

travel to a destination if there was a warning'. In a similar manner, P45 observed that 'The OTA system is useful…at least you could know whether or not it is safe to travel'. This group of respondents were also aware of the intent of the OTA system to provide a mechanism for dealing with travel compensation particularly after an outbreak of a crisis in a travel destination. For example, P45 stated 'You can cancel the tour that you have booked with the travel agency…this matters most'.

However, not all participants were convinced that the OTA was weighted in favour of the tourists with P16 stating that 'It facilitates the business operations of the corresponding parties, like tour operators, hotels, and airlines…and the top priority is not travellers' safety'. Other participants thought that the OTA system provided a mechanism for travel intermediaries and the government to negate potential liabilities. P36 stated that 'The function of OTA is not for the general public…but insurance companies and tour operators…to help them and to disclaim from potential liabilities'. Some participants expressed the view that the OTA system could be used for political purposes. P27 stated that 'A lot of things that the government did were to protect itself. If the government does not issue a travel alert…Once tremendous incidents happen, Hong Kong people would pursue the matters through, particularly when it involves casualties of Hong Kong travellers…so the government wants to protect the residents as well as itself'. P14 concurred, 'It is politically

driven…like the case of the Philippines [Manila hostage crisis] …Many Hong Kong people bear animosity towards the Philippines…Therefore, the government issued an OTA towards the country because of public pressure…If [the government] removed it…would be blamed…so the government just left it there'. Finally, a few participants viewed the system in a broader perspective and stated that the purpose of the system is to establish a relatively objective framework for people to follow. Nonetheless, they also shared the view that many loopholes still exist in the current system.

Attitudes to the OTA system. Some participants thought that the system was useful as indicated in the previous section while others regarded it as unnecessary, redundant, and not performing well. The latter belief was corroborated by the following comments. P2 stated 'It is an alert system…but it has never performed in the way that an alert system should be'. P27 supported this view 'An OTA is only issued when an event has already occurred most of the time…However…[if] an incident happened, I do not need this OTA. It is now used as a reference rather than warning or alert. They are different'. P7 had a similar view 'The OTA system is indeed redundant…because when a serious incident happens I could watch it on the news…so why should I check the OTAs?'.

The findings also reflect the misconception that OTAs are only applied to non-mainstream and presumably dangerous destinations. Since many of the participants claimed that they were unlikely to visit such destinations, they saw little need to consult travel advisories. For example, P11 stated that 'In general, I would not go to destinations imposed with an OTA…not because of obedience…it's because I would not plan to visit those less developed destinations… [The OTA system] usually involves destinations that I would not plan to visit'. P19 shared this view, 'I think it is about perception…If you have heard a place is dangerous since you were small, like the Middle East and Syria…Even if the government did not issue [an OTA], you would not go there'.

Many participants also felt that OTAs could have a negative impact on the economy of the tourist-receiving destinations, may be directly associated with diplomatic relationships and in some cases may reflect the attitude of the government towards the travel destinations in question.

Quality of OTA Information. Nearly all participants did not support the OTA system to include too much detail on issues such as special laws, local culture and climate. For example, P30 stated 'If I plan to visit a destination, I will find out more by myself…If the information is too meticulous, I think Hong Kong people would lose interest and patience in reading it'.

P37 had a similar view 'It is useless to invest in this area…If people are interested [in knowing more], they would look it up by Googling it'.

When asked how the system could be improved, many expressed the view that information could be included about dealing with emergency situations and the extent that the government could assist. For example, P2 asked 'What could I do if I were in trouble?' while P5observed 'I don't know where to get help if I encounter an incident abroad'.

Perceptions of Destination Coverage and Geographical Specificity. A number of participants questioned the rationale for including 85 countries in the list and also stated that the system was not regularly updated. For example, P13 stated 'I don't quite understand why the Security Bureau placed certain countries on the OTA list but not others'. P14 expressed a similar view 'How they [the 85 countries] were selected is an issue…Are they frequently visited by Hong Kong travellers? I don't quite agree…The government keeps renewing and adding visa-free destinations…However, I think the OTA list did not update accordingly…For examples, Ukraine and Yemen'. A number of participants also raised the issues of geographical specificity. For example, P1 observed 'I think specificity is very important…Right now, it is by country…but it may in fact only refer to a specific area where an incident occurred'.

Timeliness. The majority of the participants agreed that there were often delays in issuing OTAs. When participants were given the opportunity to browse the OTA website, a number of participants expressed surprise that the reason an amber alert had been placed on Russia was because of a 2013 incident. Typical reactions to the timeliness of the OTA system were: 'Hong Kong is typically slow… [An OTA is issued] only when a critical incident occurs'(P34); 'There is always procrastination when the government gives out this kind of information…When you realize that there is an OTA imposed on the destination, the destination maybe in a worse situation already' (P37); 'For the OTA imposed on Russia…It states the event that happened three to four years ago, referring to bomb explosions in a small city…rather than to the clash between Russia and Ukraine recently…It makes me shocked as it is not updated completely' (P14).

Credibility of OTA Information. Participants had conflicting views on the credibility of OTA information. One group felt that OTA information was generally credible. For example, P44 observed 'The government would not lie in giving out OTA information'. P28 made a similar statement 'I do believe in the OTA…It should have its reasons if it is issued'. Other participants were less convinced as typified by P24 'I generally do not rely on this

system…For example…Japan…the OTA just let me know there is now an amber alert…but basically I would not go there…You need to search for information by yourself…and you need to make a judgment about whether or [the OTA] is real and reliable.' This view was further supported by P17 'I would trust my friends in the foreign destinations, rather than the Security Bureau, as I think local residents must be the ones who know best' and P14 'I knew the credibility of OTA is low…Sometimes I just make fun of it'.

Impacts of OTAs on leisure, VFR and business travels. Given that travel is undertaken for a wide range of purposes including leisure, education and business, it is reasonable to expected that OTAs will have a range of affects depending on the purpose of travel. For example, participants with children expressed a strong willingness to follow the OTA system's recommendations. P37 stated that 'When you have a wife and kid…you always place safety as the top priority'. This is consistent with Bywater's (1993) study which found that travellers with children typically placed a higher emphasis on choosing safe destinations than childless travellers.

A number of participants who undertook VFR travel indicated that they were not inclined to rely on the OTA system because of their familiarity with the destination. This echoed Lepp and Gibson's (2003) proposition that tourists feel safer in familiar environments and

supported by P17 who stated 'I am not concerned about the OTA…For my recent trip to the Philippines (Manila), I went there to visit my relatives…As I am familiar with the place, OTA is not my critical concern'.

The focus groups included 12 business travellers many of whom stated that they often had little flexibility in responding to adverse travel advisories. P4 for example stated 'I would not pay attention to OTA when I go on business trip…because, whatever you find, you still need to go there…then it is better not to know anything'. Drawing on a particular example, P1 stated 'I was required to take a business trip to Manila right after the Manila hostage crisis…and I also had concerns about if I should go there…Travel insurance coverage was an issue…The company told me that the insurance was not covered…Still…I was required to fly to there…so I could only go there reluctantly'.

Improving the OTA system

Participants were also asked how the OTA system could be improved. The first group of suggestions related to coverage. P11 felt that 'The government should add some destinations that are getting popular'. P14 concurred with this view 'I think the government may further introduce other countries…There are only about 200 countries around the world…To make it more comprehensive and prevent them from being criticized, the remaining 100 countries

should be included'. Most participants also agreed that mainland China should also be incorporated into the list of OTA destinations given China's vast size and its popularity as a destination for Hong Kong tourists. As some participants noted, crisis events such as floods and earthquakes are localized and timely information on events of this nature would allow tourists to change their preferred holiday location in China rather than cancel their holiday.

Delivery of information was also raised by a number of participants. P7 stated 'I suggest that the government adds a video clip for every destination it covers…so it can raise awareness and make it more fun…Hong Kong people place high levels of emphasis on entertainment…Long paragraphs of sentences are useless'. Other suggestions made by participants included P11 who stated 'At the end of news report…a section can be added to remind the public about the newly added or current destinations imposed with OTAs…because what always happens is that the government has this information but people cannot reach it'. P4 also offered a useful observation in relation to information delivery: 'It would be good enough if the government can let me know in advertisements that there is an OTA website provided by the Security Bureau'. During the focus group discussions, the potential for developing an apps was raised, however this suggestion was generally met with skepticism. For example, P11 stated 'Even if there is an [OTA] app…I don't think I will download it…Who would bother to download this app?'. Similarly, P36 stated 'It depends

on how interesting the app is and how useful it is…it is maybe even faster to receive a message from friends or via Facebook'.

Tour operators and representatives of insurance companies

In response to the question regarding their views of the OTA system, all tour operator participants agreed that the OTAs was responsive to changes in conditions in destinations and understood that it was necessary to consider a range of issues before issuing an adverse travel advisory. T1 stated 'It is not really slow because I understand that the government takes time to consider the impacts of the issuance of OTAs towards different stakeholder groups and the necessity of issuance very carefully…Nonetheless, the most important thing is that the government has a clear guideline on when to issue the OTAs. Overall participants stated that large tour operators are usually informed in advance of the issue of a OTA and in general were satisfied with the responsiveness of the OTA system.

Participants from the tour operators sector also agreed that an adverse OTA affected revenue and business operations, particularly when responding to enquiries and refunds. For instance, T2 stated 'It is troublesome indeed if a travel destination is imposed with a high level of travel warning…We have to perform additional administrative work on the cancellations of hotel and airline bookings, handling customers' enquiries, and transferring

the affected customers to other tour groups…Therefore, issuance of OTAs definitely has a negative impact on our business and brings extra burden to our front-line staff'. However, they did agree that travel advisories can protect citizens and avoid confusion. For example, T1 stated that 'We are only the middleman and very dependent on the OTA system…without this system…we can do nothing to help our customers'. Several participants commented that the Hong Kong's OTA system is not performing well compared to foreign travel advisory services. One interviewee attributed this to the relatively small population size of Hong Kong, the lack of demand for travel to risky or underdeveloped destinations, and a lack patriotism from Hong Kong citizens who did not follow government advice.

View on the effectiveness of the OTA system by participants from the insurance sector ranged from neutral to positive. The system was considered useful in the decision making process of travel insurance applications and compensation claims. For example, I2 stated that 'It is useful…If a high level of OTA is imposed on a travel destination…it means that the destination is too dangerous…thus the insurance companies would not accept travel insurance application…Therefore, the OTA system helps insurance companies to evaluate the potential risks that they need to bear'. Another participant (I3) offered an alternative view stating that the OTA system might encourage tourists to purchase travel insurance in advance to ensure they were compensated if their trip was canceled because of adverse OTAs.

Overall participants felt that the OTA system had a negligible adverse impact on insurance companies. One participant (I5) stated OTAs have no negative impacts while five participants agreed that the positive impacts of OTAs were greater than its negative impacts (I1, I2, I3, I4, I6). The only negative consequence of OTAs mentioned was that 'The general public is usually unaware of the OTAs and unfamiliar with the coverage of travel insurance schemes about OTAs, this may cause unnecessary misunderstanding between the agents and clients' (I4).

One participant (I3) suggested all insurance companies should offer a standardised level of compensation based on OTA levels but this was not supported by other participants. I2 for example stated that because there are already a diverse range of insurance products available there is no need to develop a unified travel insurance mechanism based on OTAs. Other recommendations include clearer guidelines on travel advisory levels (I4, I5, I6), more frequent updating of OTA information (I4, I6), spreading OTA information via different channels (I2) and avoiding magnifying the travel risk to the whole country by specifying the affected areas only (I3). Overall, participants indicated that travel insurance was a relatively small part of overall revenue and was not regarded as the most important focus of the insurance business.

Discussion

Three research objectives related to the OTA system were outlined at the conclusion of the literature review. In relation to objective 1 (How importance is Hong Kong SAR's OTA system as a source of information for outbound Hong Kong tourists, outbound tour operators, and insurance companies?), the results indicate that the OTA system is not a significant source of information used by outbound tourists. Many focus group participants indicated they use Google and other online forums and news sources for travel information. While this research did not probe the reasons for participants' preferences for non-official sites or the sites accessed, it does raise questions about the accuracy of many of the non-official sites that may be visited by intending tourists and the value in continuing the OTA system in its present form. Participants representing travel agents and insurance companies offered a different view indicating that OTAs were useful although all agreed that it did have shortcomings. This finding does not support Beirman's (2006) view that tourists place considerable importance on travel advisories.

In relation to objective 2 (Do various user groups view Hong Kong SAR's OTA system as an effective source of travel information?), it was apparent that focus group participants did not feel that the OTA system addressed their needs for travel information about potential travel risks. Interviewees from travel agencies and insurance companies did not agree with

this view. However, both groups were skeptical that a more user-friendly system could be developed and that such a system would enjoy a higher level of public and individual support than the current OTA system.

From a government perspective, the low measure of worth ascribed to the OTA system by its main user groups represents a significant policy failure that inhibits the ability of the government to care for its citizens. To overcome this policy failure, measures suggested by focus group participants should be considered. Areas of possible improvements included increasing the number of destinations included in the system and regular revisions to travel advisories. As part of this potential revision, clear information on the factors governing the imposition, adjustment and removal of OTAs should be made available to the public. An approach of this nature would satisfy Tourism Concern's (2003: 13) demands that governments should 'provide the travelling public and the tourism industry with information about how decisions are made regarding the imposition and lifting of travel warnings'. Another aspect that requires improvement is better specification of which areas in specific destinations pose risk to intending tourists. The importance of geographic specificity in relation to threats is supported by Beirman (2006), Tourism Concern (2003), Wilks and Moore (2004) and the UNWTO (n.d.). It was also apparent that improved functionality of the website is required to make it more user-friendly.

Problems relating to awareness suggest that additional resources are required by the administrators of the OTA system to both improve the usability of the OTA website as well as promote the service to potential users. Travel intermediaries have a role in this process through advising clients to consult the OTA system while planning overseas travel. Another suggestion raised during the focus groups was the creation of an OTA mobile app, an approach already adopted by a number of countries including Germany, Sweden, and Australia. However, doubts were also raised in the focus groups that apps would be used even if well-constructed.

Some participants complained that tour operators often handle cancellations and refunds unfairly and inconsistently, particularly in the period when travel threats appear to be emerging. One strategy to mitigate problems of this type suggested by focus group participants was for travel intermediaries to post OTA updates on the company's official website and to also post clear information on the circumstances in which refunds will be made. The Australian 'Charter for Safe Travel' is one example of public/private sector cooperation in travel that could be used as a model for future revisions of the OTA scheme.

In relation to objective 3 (Can a theory based model be developed to examine the role of travel advisories in tourist destination selection?), a number of communication theories and concepts including the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986),

the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991) and the Protection Motivation Theory (PMT) (Rogers, 1983) have been applied in the tourism context to study persuasive communications. Examples include persuading visitors to exercise responsible behavior in national parks (Brown et al., 2010), paying park fees (Steckenreuter and Wolf, 2013), designing persuasive destination websites (Lee and Gretzel, 2012), encouraging online travel reviews (Sparks et al, 2013), adhering to bird feeding warning signs (Ballantyne and Hughes, 2006) and evaluating the effect of media on tourists' destination risk perception (Kapuściński and Richards, 2016).

In the context of this research, the authors propose a model of travel advisory compliance (Figure 1) based on a matrix that incorporates elements of the TPB and PMT models (Ifinedo, 2012) and the findings of the interviews reported earlier in this paper. As illustrated in Figure 1, both PMT and TPB share self-efficacy as a common concept (Ifinedo, 2012) thus providing a link between the models.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

The proposed model suggests that the persuasiveness capacity and effectiveness of travel advisories are maximized when (1) an individual perceives that the threat that the travel advisory advises against is severe; (2) he/she is vulnerable to the threat; (3) the benefit of not adhering to the travel advice is negligible; (4) compliance of travel advice is effective in reducing the threat; (5) the cost of following travel advice is insignificant; (6) the person is capable to collect travel advisory information and heed the advice; (7) the individual has a positive attitude towards travel advisory compliance; (8) the individual perceives that people important to him or her support the act of following travel advice; (9) the travel advisory information is up to date (Filieri and McLeay, 2013); (10) credible (Xie et al, 2011); (11) of sufficient breadth, depth and scope (Filieri and McLeay, 2013) and (12) would bring benefits from its use (Filieri and McLeay, 2013). This proposed model represents a concrete step towards the understanding of how tourists perceive and use travel advisories and provides directions for future studies.

Conclusions

As indicated in the literature review, there are major gaps in understanding about the value of travel advisories and how they are used by tourists during travel planning. Rather than attempt a multi-national study involving a number of economies, this study adopted an

inductive approach to identify issues that affect how travel advisories are perceived and used by tourists and within the travel trade using Hong Kong as an example. The inductive approach adopted in this research provided a range of insights that lead to the development of the model outlined in Figure 1.

From a Hong Kong perspective, the OTA system is not performing the tasks it was established for, particularly from the consumer's perspective. The research indicates the reasons for this situation including perceived bias, failure to constantly update information, lack of ongoing publicity, poor user-friendliness and competition from other news sources. While the research did canvass suggestions for improving the OTA system, it is apparent that the Hong Kong authorities need to reevaluate the purpose of the OTA system, their resourcing of the system, the role travel intermediaries and insurance firms can play and how it is promoted. Further, the present Hong Kong's OTA system lacks regular and transparent public and travel industry consultation. The government is recommended to develop close collaboration with the public and industry sectors in order to effectively review the operation of the system and improve the associated travel refund policies. Some of the problems identified with Hong Kong's OTA system are not unique as previous research from Australia (The Australian, 2006), the United Kingdom (Paris, 2013) and the United States (Global

Sources, 2014) has demonstrated a need for changes in the travel alert systems used in other countries.

The lack of research into this issue suggests the need for a research agenda to investigate a range of travel advisory associated issues. These could include testing the model outlined in Figure 1, the role of social media as a complimentary source of travel advice, strategies for enhancing the user-friendliness of travel advisories, promotion of travel advisories as a key travel decision making resource, differences in use of travel advisories according to specific travel groups (business vs leisure, tour groups vs independent travellers) and if there is scope for a universal travel advisory standard administered by an independent body. As with all research a number of limitations were encountered. As discussed in the literature review, the lack of academic research into how consumers perceive and use travel advisories should ideally be addressed on a multi-national scale with studies undertaken across a number of economies. This was not possible with the resources available thus one economy was selected as a test case. Secondly, while focus groups offer researchers the ability to probe certain issues and identify others that may not be easily uncovered with a survey instrument, this approach also has a number of limitations including the inability to assign numerical values to the issues raised. For example, the research can only provide measures such as 'many', 'some' and 'most' which precludes generalization of findings.

Limitations of this nature are common in qualitative research and are best addressed in follow-on quantitative research. One further limitation that could be addressed in future research is that differences in knowledge of the OTA system between members of tour groups and independent tourists was identified as an issue but not pursued. This could be important given that tourists on group tours may have a different view on the need to identify threats compared to those on independent tours.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

Ajzen I (1991) The theory of planned behaviour. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 50(2): 179–211.

Ballantyne R and Hughes K (2006) Using front-end and formative evaluation to design and
test persuasive bird feeding warning signs. *Tourism Management*27(2): 235–246.

Beirman D (2006) Chapter 21: A travel industry perspective on government travel
advisories. In: Wilks J, Pendergast D and Leggat P (eds) *Tourism in Turbulent Times:
Towards Safe Experiences for Visitors*. New York: Routledge, pp. 309–319.

Beirman D (2013) The evolution of a cooperative approach to government travel and
advisories in Australia between the travel industry and the Australian Dept. of Foreign
Affairs and Trade. In: *CAUTHE 2013: Tourism and global change: On the edge of
something big*, (Ed J Fountain and K Moore), Christchurch, New Zealand, 11–14
February 2013, pp. 35–38.

Brown TJ, Ham SH and Hughes M (2010) Picking up litter: An application of theory-based
communication to influence tourist behaviour in protected areas. *Journal of Sustainable
Tourism*18(7): 879–900.

Bywater M (1993) Market segments: The youth and student travel market. *Travel &
Tourism Analyst3*: 35–49.

Cavlek N (2002) Tour operators and destination safety. *Annals of Tourism Research*29(2):
478–496.

Eisenhardt KM (1989) Building theories from case study research. *Academy of Management Review* 14(4): 532–550.

FCO (The Foreign and Commonwealth Office, n.d.) How the Foreign & Commonwealth Office puts together travel advice. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/guidance/how-the-foreign-commonwealth-office-puts-together-travel-advice (accessed 1 January 2016).

Filieri R and McLeay F (2014) E-WOM and accommodation: An analysis of the factors that influence travelers' adoption of information from online reviews. *Journal of Travel Research* 53(1): 44–57.

Gaskell G (2000) Individual and group interviewing. In: Bauer MW and Gaskell G (eds) *Qualitative Researching with Text, Image and Sound*. London: Sage publications, pp. 38–56.

Glaser B (1992) *Basics of Grounded Theory Analysis*. California: Sociology Press.

Global Sources (2014) Travel warning? Yawn!. Available at http://www.globalsourcellc.com/mag/travel-warning-yawn/ (accessed 5 January 2016).

Henderson J (2004) Managing the aftermath of terrorism: The Bali bombings, travel advisories and Singapore. *International Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Administration* 4(2): 17–31.

Hong Kong Apple Daily (2015) OTA remain unchanged (外遊警示不變郭家麒斥「做一半唔做一半」). *Hong Kong Apple Daily*, 8 June, 15.

Hong Kong's Information Services Department (2011) Press release: Outbound Travel Alert. Available at: http://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/201103/17/P201103170005.htm (accessed 2 February 2016).

Ifinedo P (2012). Understanding information systems security policy compliance: An integration of the theory of planned behavior and the protection motivation theory. *Computers & Security*31(1): 83–95.

Kapuściński G and Richards B (2016) News framing effects on destination risk perception. *Tourism Management*57: 234–244.

Kumar N, Stern LW and Anderson JC (1993) Conducting interorganizational research using key informants. *The Academy of Management Journal*36(6): 1633–1651.

Lai (2011) OTA system still has room for improvement (外游警示機制尚有完善空間). *Hong Kong China News Agency,* 31 January, 11.

Lam J (2009) Refundable package tour fee on the issue of red or black OTA (紅或黑色旅遊警示可退款). *Oriental Daily*, 10 October 10, 2009.

Lee W and Gretzel U (2012) Designing persuasive destination websites: A mental imagery processing perspective. *Tourism Management*33(5): 1270–1280.

Lepp A and Gibson H (2003) Tourist roles, perceived risk and international tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research* 30(3): 606–624.

Löwenheim O (2007) The responsibility to responsibilize: foreign offices and the issuing of travel warnings. *International Political Sociology* 1(3): 203–221.

Mak and Ng (2013) Doubts on the effectiveness of OTA (旅遊警示效用成疑——從埃及熱氣球與菲律賓人質事件談起). *Hong Kong In-Media*, 12 March 13. Available at: http://www.inmediahk.net/node/1015783 (accessed 6 March 2016).

Mansfeld Y (2006) The role of security information in tourism crisis management: The missing link. In: Mansfeld Y and Pizam A (eds) *Tourism, Security & Safety: From Theory to Practice.* Oxford: Elsevier, pp. 271–290.

Marshall MN (1996) Sampling for qualitative research. *Family Practice* 13(6): 522–526.

Metro (2015). Coverage of travel insurance (旅遊保險範圍還看外遊警示). *Metro*, 7 May, 15.

Murphy L (2001) Exploring social interactions of backpackers. *Annals of Tourism Research* 28(1): 50–67.

On.cc (2010a) Travel agencies should indicate OTA on receipts (旅社收據須註明外遊警示). *On.cc*, 14 October, 10. Available at: http://the-sun.on.cc/cnt/news/20101014/00407_099.html (accessed 26 December 2015).

On.cc (2010b) Travel insurance plans in the market do not cover loss resulted from political unrest and terrorism (探射燈:市面旅遊保險計劃不包暴動恐襲損失). *On.cc*, 16 September, 10. Available at: http://orientaldaily.on.cc/cnt/news/20100916/00176_098.html (accessed 26 December 2015).

Parasuraman A, Zeithaml VA and Berry LL (1985) A conceptual model of service quality and its implications for future research. *The Journal of Marketing*49(4):41–50.

Paris N (2013) Nine in ten unaware of Foreign Office travel warnings. *The Telegraph*, 14 July, 13. Available at: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/travelnews/10179003/Nine-in-ten-unaware-of-Foreign-Office-travel-warnings.html (accessed 3 March 2016).

Patton MQ (2002) *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Petty R and Cacioppo J (1986) *Communication and Persuasion: Central and Peripheral Routes to Attitude Change*. New York: Springer-Verlag.

Qiu ZH (2005) Impact of the tsunami on Chinese outbound tourism. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*17(5): 433–435.

Rabiee F (2004) Focus-group interview and data analysis. *Proceedings of the Nutrition Society*63(4): 655–660.

Remenyi D (2011) *Field Methods for Academic Research: Interviews, Focus Groups and Questionnaires in Business and Management Studies*. Reading: Academic Publishing International.

Rogers RW (1983) Cognitive and physiological processes in fear appeals and attitude change: A revised theory of protection motivation. In Cacioppo JT and Petty RE (eds) *Social Psychophysiology.* New York: Guilford Press, pp. 153–176.

Saunders M, Lewis P and Thornhill A (2000) *Research Methods for Business Students*. Essex: Pearson Education Limited.

Sharpley R, Sharpley J and Adams J (1996) Travel advice or trade embargo? The impacts and implications of official travel advice. *Tourism Management*17(1): 1–7.

Sparks BA, Perkins HE and Buckley R (2013) Online travel reviews as persuasive communication: The effects of content type, source, and certification logos on consumer behavior. *Tourism Management*39: 1–9.

Steckenreuter A and Wolf ID (2013) How to use persuasive communication to encourage visitors to pay park user fees. *Tourism Management*37: 58–70.

The Australian (2006) Aussies ignore travel warnings. *The Australian*, 13 September, 06. Available at: http://www.theaustralian.com.au/archive/travel-old/aussies-ignore-travel-

warnings/story-fn30263y-1111112206166?nk=2103b8880641d88100f4dc1517f24dfb
(accessed 5 March 2016).

Tourism Concern (2003) FCO travel advisories: The case for transparency and balance.
Report, UK, October.

Warheit GJ, Buhl JM and Bell RA (1978) A critique of social indicators analysis and key
informants surveys as needs assessment methods. *Evaluation and Program
Planning*1(3): 239–247.

Wilks J and Moore S (2004) Tourism Risk Management for the Asia-Pacific Region. *An
Authoritative Guide for Managing Crises and Disasters.* Gold Coast: CRC for
Sustainable Tourism Pty Ltd.

UNWTO (n.d.) *Travel advisories*. Available at http://www2.unwto.org/en/risk-crisis-
management/travel-advisories (accessed 3 March 2016).

UNWTO (2016) *All countries: Outbound tourism: Expenditure 2010-2014*. Available at
http://www.e-unwto.org/doi/abs/10.5555/unwtotfb0000290520102014201601
(accessed 3 March 2016).

Xie H, Miao L, Kuo PJ and Lee BY (2011) Consumers' responses to ambivalent online
hotel reviews: The role of perceived source credibility and pre-decisional disposition.
*International Journal of Hospitality Management*30(1): 178–183.