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Influence of Mass Media's Coverage of Adventure Tourism on Youth Perceptions of Risk

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Abstract

Perception is a complex construct which is influenced by a number of factors, including the mass media, which can produce a distorted view of reality. This is of significance to adventure tourism businesses because a person's perceptions of adventure, risk and safety are what determine whether they will participate. Research was undertaken to examine how the mass media's coverage of adventure tourism accidents influences youth perceptions of risk. It was found that the news media increases the perceived risk associated with an activity, but instead of discouraging youth participation it actually encourages future participation intentions.

Key Words: mass media, adventure tourism, risk perception, youth travelers

Introduction

Adventure tourism is a rapidly growing segment of the tourism industry, yet remains a relatively new area of research. This paper reports on research undertaken to ascertain the effect of the media's construction of 'risk' in adventure tourism on youth travellers' propensity to undertake adventurous tourism activities.

As with many aspects of tourism, there is no universal definition of adventure travel, and there is some controversy surrounding the terms adventure tourism versus adventure travel. In general, adventure travel is a self-organised experience with no time restrictions, whereas adventure tourism is limited by time and facilitated by a commercial

operation (Morgan and Fluker, 2000l; 2003). Adventure tourism has been summarised by Hall as

[a] broad spectrum of outdoor touristic activities, often commercialised and involving an interaction with the natural environment away from the participant's home range and containing elements of risk; in which the outcome is influenced by the participant, setting and management of the touristic experience. (Hall, 1992, p.143).

In addition, there has been some differentiation between the level of risk attached to adventure activities, described as soft versus hard adventure, where soft adventure is seen as taking place outdoors and requiring some physical activity but risk is minimal, while hard adventure involves high levels of physical challenge in difficult terrain creating high level of risk and the possibility of death. It can be argued that the degree of risk is relative and, for some, a soft adventure activity such as horse riding is seen to be extreme or hard adventure, and is one of the most accident-prone adventure activities (Beeton, 1999a; 1999b; 2001).

However, the entire notion of 'adventure' involves the deliberate seeking of risk, which is the acknowledged attraction in adventure activities. Strangely, it is the only situation in which people seek rather than avoid risk (Ryan, 2003). By entering into this risky activity, they want to experience the feelings that are derived from putting oneself in harm's way to meet a challenge. Hall (1992) labels these feelings intrinsic psychological benefits such as increased self-confidence, conquering fears, realising their full potential, a release of emotions, and a sense of achievement or fulfillment.

Risk is the "potential to lose something of value" (Priest, 1999, p.159). Due to the nature of adventure activities there are real risks involved such as injury or death resulting from equipment failure, human error due to lack of skills or uncontrollable environmental conditions. It is the subjective judgment of these real risks which forms an individual's perception of risk and hence determines their decision to participate in an activity or not.

In other words, a participant will make an assessment of the risk based on their knowledge of the activity and other contributing factors and compare it with the level of risk they are willing and able to endure.

Martin and Priest (1986) illustrate this process well with their adventure experience paradigm, reproduced in Figure 1. The model visually represents the adventure experience as the interaction between risk and competence. It is an expansion of Mortlock's (1984) four stages of an outdoor adventure journey: play, adventure, frontier adventure and misadventure and incorporates Csikszentmihalyi's (1975) concept of flow and Ellis's (1973) theory that adults at play seek optimal levels of arousal through raising performance standards.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE....

The model depicts five varying levels of challenge, which are the balance of risk and competence. For instance, when risk is low and competence is high, there is no challenge and a participant would use this experience to experiment with new tricks or skills to try to increase the challenge. The other extreme is if risk is high and competence is low, resulting in misadventure or even death. The ideal is to achieve a perfect balance between risk and competence so that a peak experience can be had which results in the intrinsic benefits mentioned earlier. The key to achieving this is to have an accurate perception of the risk involved and of one's competency to deal with the risk (Priest, 1992).

Therefore, 'perception' plays a significant role in adventure tourism. It is the process by which an individual organises or clarifies what is communicated to them through their senses. Lashley and Ross (2003) say that it is making sense of "a chaotic world of information" to create a unique picture of reality. This is particularly so when information is incomplete and inferences need to be made (Severin and Tankard, 1997).

The mass media has been identified as an influential force in shaping perceptions (Surette, 1992; Beeton et al, 2005). When the mass media produces images and information it not only provides information, but also helps to construct images of social reality. According to Surette (1992, p.76), “over time people tend to perceive things the way the media portray them. The media thus play not only a reporting role but also a defining role, establishing their audience’s sense of reality...”. They also provide a framework for understanding and taking action when people have not developed their own social reality.

Tourism is an experience, and the way in which it is interpreted “has become more and more intertwined with the consumption of media images” (Jansson, 2002, p.431). Adventure tourism businesses rely heavily on images when promoting their products particularly in the initial stage of creating product awareness (Heath, 1997). In many instances, the mass media are responsible for spreading these images but, as they are not controlled by the tourism businesses, they are equally likely to spread many negative images and mis-information. Johnston (1989; 1992) claims that the media reinforces misconceptions about the frequency of accidents and hence blame is attributed for accidents that did not occur.

Apart from Johnston’s study, there has been little research conducted on the mass media’s role in adventure tourism and in particular its role in shaping perceptions of risk and its relationship with the youth traveller. Risky images however, are frequently used to portray adventure activities in advertising material. The effect of these risky images and the use of fear to appeal to people have recently become of interest to academics who have found them to have a positive effect on participation rates (Hem et al, 2002; Palmer, 2002). With the heightened profile of adventure tourism accidents in the media (Wilks and Davis, 2000; Swarbrooke et al, 2003), this therefore raises the question of whether the images portrayed in the media’s coverage of these accidents are having a similar effect to the portrayal of risk in advertising. Is it encouraging participation or turning people away?

The aim of the research outlined in this paper is to determine if the mass media's coverage of adventure tourism accidents alters the perceived risk associated with that activity and if so, what is the behaviour associated with that change. As young people tend to be high risk-takers, particularly men in the early to mid-20s age group, it was decided to study this group in particular. Specifically, how does the mass media's coverage of adventure tourism accidents influence the youth travel market's perception of risk? The youth travel market has been broadly defined in this study, based on Sung's (2004) criteria that they had to be between 19 and 34 years of age, single with an income of less than \$30,000.

Research Method

A mixed method was adopted, combining a survey of the youth travel market using a self-completion questionnaire with two in-depth interviews of experts from major adventure tourism businesses. As universities tend to have a high percentage of young people in the defined 'youth market', three university lecture classes at La Trobe University from three different faculties were surveyed. Seventy-five valid surveys were obtained, and the first in-depth interview was with the operator of a long-standing adventure company offering rock climbing, abseiling, caving and skiing. The second interview was with the marketing department of a hot-air ballooning company, and in addition the interviewee had worked with a major rafting and canoeing adventure operator for eleven years. Consequently, all areas of adventure tourism were covered – land, water and air.

By using the in-depth interviews in conjunction with the questionnaires, a deeper understanding of the quantitative results was obtained, as well as the opportunity to use expert knowledge to understand the difference between perception and reality.

Results

In the survey questionnaire, respondents were given a list of sixteen adventure activities which they had to rate in terms of the risk they associated with the activity. They did this

using a five-point scale where 1 represented no risk and 5 represented extreme risk. As shown in Table 1, skydiving was perceived to be the riskiest activity, followed by bungee jumping and outdoor rock climbing. Snorkeling was perceived as the least risky, closely followed by four wheel driving with a mean of 2.05.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE...

From the business perspective, these results were reflected as being fairly accurate in terms of land adventure activities. Interviewee One claimed that in his business “rock climbing is perceived riskier than caving when in actual fact, caving is more dangerous than rock climbing.” He said, “perception is therefore a selling point” because the danger is what attracts people to his activities. White water rafting was also quite accurately placed in terms of perceived risk. Interviewee Two commented that in rafting there is “a sense that there are risks all the time. If you are on a challenging river...you can tell by the guides, if they are tense and by their safety set up if they have to run a big rapid...you know or can sense there is a danger issue. It has the challenging nature of an adventure activity because in rafting you are much more involved” and therefore it is perceived fairly risky. Hot air ballooning however, is generally perceived to be much riskier by Interviewee Two’s older business clientele than what is reflected in the youth market.

Respondents were also asked to indicate which of the listed activities they had participated in or would be likely to participate in, as shown in Table 2.

Skiing/Snowboarding came in highest with 69.3%, followed by horseback riding at 66.7% and four wheel driving at 64%. The least interest was shown in downhill mountain biking (28%) and parasailing/hang gliding (29.3%).

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE...

Influence of Mass Media on Perceived Risk

The majority of the youth market spends between 16 and 45 minutes per day watching/listening to/reading news stories. They believe that the news media’s coverage

of adventure activities has a medium level of influence when forming their opinion about the risk involved in these activities. When reporting about adventure tourism accidents, newspaper is considered to be the most accurate form of media and magazines the least accurate. However, none of the media scored extremely highly in terms of self-reported influence factors.

INSERT TABLE 3 HERE

At this point, it is worth noting the issue of self-reporting – the low influence rates here are the respondents' perceptions and beliefs. The evidence in the literature outlined earlier suggests that the media's influence is far higher. This is a methodological issue of all self-reporting surveys – it can be argued that people are only responding in the way they believed they should, even when anonymous.

Change in Perceived Risk by Adventure Activity

When asked to recall an adventure accident they had heard about in the news media, 28% were unable to recall an accident and therefore did not answer the question. A further 40% of the respondents named land adventure accidents, 21.3% named air adventure accidents and 10.7% named water adventure accidents. Of the 72% of respondents who did answer, a significant 52% claimed that after hearing about the accident their view of the risk involved in that particular activity increased.

INSERT TABLE 4 HERE

Effect on Behaviour

Of those respondents claiming that the mass media's coverage increased the risk associated with an adventure activity, 7.1% participated in the activity after the accident,

50% did not participate but considered participation in the future and 42.9% did not participate and decided never to participate.

Interviewee One claims that for the youth market, every time there is an accident within land adventure activities it reminds them that the activity is there which in turn generates interest and encourages participation. For instance, as Interviewee One reflects on the Interlaken canyoning disaster he comments, “talking to friends who run canyoning, for the twelve months following Interlaken their business went up by about 40%.” Mass media coverage of accidents within the rafting industry has a similar effect to land activities. It increases the risk and thrill associated with rafting and in turn leads to an increase in business. This was the experience of Interviewee Two who recalls a rafting accident within a competitor’s commercial operation where two people died. “I thought that it was going to affect the business but the evidence was that it didn’t at all. If anything, it slightly increased their numbers which surprised me. People were not worried there had just been a death - maybe that increased the thrill of it.”

The mass media’s coverage of such accidents draws people’s attention to the activity and highlights the risk involved, which in turn acts as a draw-card rather than a deterrent, particularly for young males. Young people forget the specific details of the accident and therefore the mass media’s coverage is a form of advertising. It could be suggested that ‘all publicity is good publicity’ for land adventure activities.

Ballooning however, is affected by mass media coverage. Interviewee Two says, “I think the media has an influence on ballooning in that if ever there is any incident in ballooning seemingly worldwide they pick it up and run it as a news story. Ballooning is on the fringe of adventure; it is a luxury activity. Therefore, it is disturbing if they show an incident from America or Europe because they are very rare. I think people have a perception that there are risks and danger and stuff in ballooning which is probably skewed a bit by that sort of exposure.” News media coverage of accidents can therefore have a negative effect on participation rates, however this primarily attracts an older

market. “A serious ballooning accident in Alice Springs ten to fifteen years ago totally destroyed the whole ballooning industry for a number of years.”

Conclusions

In comparing the level of risk perceived with the likelihood of participation in an activity, a trend was observed that the youth were more likely to participate in those activities which they perceived to have little or no risk. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily contradict risk as a motivating factor in adventure tourism as many of the youth may have previously experienced low risk activities in their lives to date. According to Priest (1992), previous experience with a particular adventure activity can influence one's perception of risk. Bunting and Little (1987) found that those with the least experience perceived risk to be greater than those with the most experience.

Finally, Pizam et al (2004) claims that risk-taking behaviour is a personality trait that varies among individuals. Many of the respondents in the sample simply may not have had the personality trait of sensation seeking (Zuckerman, 1979). Despite this reasoning, some may argue that risk taking behaviour is inevitable in all youth (Chang et al, 2001); however, such studies are usually conducted on adolescents and not study youth beyond the age of 25 as in this paper. The ‘youth’ in this study are between 19 and 34 so we may be seeing some adults in the sample that have outgrown the risk taking behaviour. It has also been said that females mature and move on from risk-taking behaviour earlier than males (Chang et al, 2001). As there were a significant number of more females than males in the sample (70% vs. 30%), this may have been a contributing factor to the results.

The extent of influence the mass media has on an individual is determined by the degree of dependency on the media information. The fact that the majority of the respondents spend between 16 and 45 minutes per day viewing news stories and yet 28% of the respondents surveyed were unable to recall an adventure tourism accident they had heard about in the news media is significant. It indicates that there is a fair proportion of the youth market who pay little attention to mass media news.

However, of the 72% who do pay attention, the media information and images were influential enough to increase the perceived risk associated with the activity involved in the accident recalled for over half (51.9%) the respondents. Interviewee One commented that media coverage of accidents acts as a reminder to young people that the activity is risky and there is the possibility of death. This aligns with Surette's (1992) view that people tend to perceive things the way the media portray them. In this instance, the media portrays the activity as dangerous and risky and therefore people begin to perceive it that way.

Furthermore, the media's coverage of adventure accidents affects different types of activities differently. Although a chi-square test revealed there to be no significant relationship between the two variables, it was observed that air activities was the only type of activity in which the number of respondents who experienced a change in perceived risk clearly outnumbered those who experienced no change in their perceived risk level. The greater influence on air activities also became apparent in the interviews. Interviewee Two suggested that perhaps this could be contributed to the media profile of the activity. For example, hot air ballooning has a very high profile and the media reports everything that happens within the ballooning industry. However, the profile of land and water activities is not as high and therefore accidents can occur that never receive a mention by the media. The frequency of media coverage is likely to be a contributing factor to the level of influence the media has on perceptions. It is also likely to impact on behaviour.

It has been established that in the majority of cases, the media's coverage of adventure accidents increases the youth market's perception of risk. So how then does this affect their behaviour? The survey results showed that 7.1% participated in the activity soon after, 50% did not participate but considered participation in the future and 42.9% did not participate and, while 43% decided not to participate in the activity, 57% either had or intended to. It is clear that the increase in risk encourages contemplation of participation in the future. Perhaps the increase in perceived risk adds kudos to those that participate

or even talk about participating (another interesting issue of self reporting!). People are encouraged to participate in a risky activity because of the psychological benefit of receiving recognition for their achievement (Ewert, 1989). It also shows that the news media has a similar positive effect on participation rates as Hem et al (2002) and Palmer (2002) found risk images did in advertising adventure tourism.

Both interviewees raised the point that, unlike the older generations, the youth market tends to forget the details of adventure accidents reported in the media very quickly. Therefore, as Interviewee One pointed out, the media's coverage of an accident acts as a form of publicity for the activity involved, reminding people that the activity exists and that it is risky. People then start to inquire about the activity and go in search of a reputable operator because as far as they are concerned, all operators cannot be unsafe. As noted in the interviews, business actually increased after an accident within each of the rafting, canyoning and caving industries. A similar pattern was also observed following the death of eight climbers on Mt Everest (Heath, 1997).

Recommendations

A key finding of the research was that a significant proportion of youth were more likely to participate in those activities which they perceived to be low in risk. As a result of this finding, adventure tourism businesses may need to reconsider how they market their adventure activity to the youth market. Risk-taking behaviour has been classified as a characteristic of young people (Chang et al, 2001) and therefore it has been assumed that the youth market are more inclined to participate in high-risk activities. However, as this study suggests, this is not the case for all youth, so that market may require further segmentation and understanding to adequately market the adventure product to all possible participants. Further research is therefore required to confirm this trend and to investigate the reasons for it, in order to give adventure businesses direction in their marketing.

Although the youth associate low levels of accuracy with the news media's reporting of adventure accidents, the results showed that the news media does have an effect on them.

Therefore, it is important that adventure tourism businesses take a proactive stance when an accident occurs within their business, as a greater number of youth travelers would become exposed to the publicity created by adventure tourism accidents in the media.

Another interesting result to emerge from this study, was that for most adventure activities the media's coverage of adventure accidents increases the perceived risk associated with the activity, which in turn encourages participation if notions of kudos and achievement are key motivators. In other words, the media's coverage raises awareness of the activity and acts as positive publicity. Adventure tourism businesses could use this free publicity to their advantage.

Interviewee One suggested that the peak marketing bodies should also be making the most of the publicity generated by the news media's coverage of adventure accidents. While the accident is still fresh in people's minds they should be getting the media to report on how the activity can be enjoyed if done safely and with a reputable operator. It is also an opportunity to promote the benefits of adventure tourism in general. Although this is not as easy as it sounds, Interviewee Two demonstrated how this could be done through the medium of talk-back radio. However, in the instance of the youth market, it is advisable that such promotion be done through newspaper or television because according to the findings of this study, the youth market identifies these to be the most accurate forms of news media when reporting about adventure tourism.

Further Research

As with all research during the process of conducting this study, a number of other questions that did not relate directly to the research objectives surfaced. It would be beneficial to explore these questions further at a later stage to add to the knowledge obtained from this research and therefore provide an even deeper understanding of the influence the mass media has on the adventure tourism industry.

One of these questions was whether the mass media affects different adventure activities differently, and in what ways. It would be beneficial to conduct a study that focused primarily on the influence the mass media has on individual sectors, such as air adventure activities. This would involve interviewing representatives from a wider range of air activities so that the sample was larger and therefore more representative of air adventure tourism. A similar study could then be done for land and water activities, so that a comparison could be made between the three types of adventure. In each study it would be necessary to consider the profile of the activity in the media, as well as the frequency of accidents reported, as this was identified as a factor in differentiating the influence of the mass media on hot air ballooning compared with rafting or rock climbing.

Another issue raised was whether the media affects people who regularly participate in an activity differently to those who have never or rarely participate. In other words, to what extent does previous experience of an activity have on the degree to which the media influences one's perception and hence their behaviour.

As previously identified, it would also be of benefit to conduct some segmentation studies on the youth market. By segmenting the youth market in terms of psychographic and behavioural characteristics not just by demographics as done in this study, it could be determined whether all youth are attracted to those activities perceived to be low in risk or whether it is only a particular segment. This would help businesses to identify with their youth clientele and hence market more effectively.

Finally, having researched the effects of the mass media on the youth market, the next step would be to examine whether the media has a similar effect on the older markets. Both interviewees commented that they believed the mass media had a greater impact on older rather than younger people. Therefore by conducting the same study on the older markets, meaningful comparison could be made.

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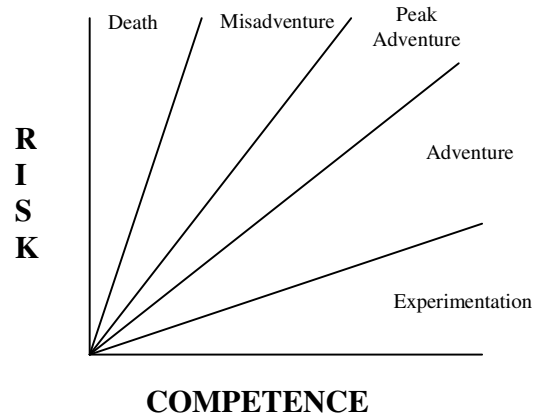
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Figure 1 – The Adventure Experience Paradigm



Source: Martin and Priest, 1986, p.19

Table 1 – Current Youth Perception of Risk in Adventure Activities

Activity	Mean	Mode
Sky-diving	3.76	4
Bungee Jumping	3.53	4
Outdoor Rock Climbing	3.53	3
Parasailing/Hang Gliding	3.35	4
White Water Rafting	3.12	3
Downhill Mountain Biking	3.08	3
Canyoning/Caving	3.05	3
Mountaineering	2.97	3
Kayaking/Canoeing	2.59	2
Skiing/Snowboarding	2.56	2
Scuba Diving	2.54	2
Hot Air Ballooning	2.47	2
Horseback Riding	2.29	2
Trekking	2.12	2
Four Wheel Driving	2.05	2
Snorkeling	1.97	2

Scale: 1=no risk
2=low risk
3=medium risk
4=high risk
5=extreme risk

Table 2 – Youth Participation in Adventure Activities

Activity	Would participate	Would not participate
Skiing/Snowboarding	69.3%	30.7%
Horseback Riding	66.7%	33.3%
Four Wheel Driving	64.0%	36.0%
Snorkeling	53.3%	46.7%
Kayaking/Canoeing	52.0%	48.0%
Scuba Diving	46.7%	53.3%
Trekking	45.3%	54.7%
Hot Air Ballooning	42.7%	57.3%
Canyoning/Caving	41.9%	58.1%
White Water Rafting	40.0%	60.0%
Outdoor Rock Climbing	36.0%	64.0%
Sky-diving	33.3%	66.7%
Mountaineering	32.0%	68.0%
Bungee Jumping	30.7%	69.3%
Parasailing/Hang Gliding	29.3%	70.7%
Downhill Mountain Biking	28.0%	72.0%

Table 3 – Youth Perception of the Accuracy of News Media when Reporting Adventure Tourism Accidents

Media	Mean	Mode
Newspaper	3.14	3
Television	2.89	3
Radio	2.73	3
Internet	2.66	2
Magazine	2.41	2

Scale: 1=Not Accurate
 2=Slightly Accurate
 3=Mostly Accurate
 4=Very Accurate
 5=Extremely Accurate

Table 4 – Adventure Activity and Change in Perceived Risk

Count

		Adventure activity accident recalled from news media			Total
		Land Accident	Water/Ocean Accident	Air Accident	
Change in perceived risk	Risk level did not change	15	5	6	26
	Risk level increased	15	3	10	28
Total		30	8	16	54