PERCEPTION OF SABAH AS A SAFE TOURIST DESTINATION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE TOUR OPERATORS AND TOURISTS

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Abstract: This paper explores the perception of Sabah as a safe tourist destination and the key factors that influenced safety and security issues from the perspective of the tour operators and tourists. Qualitative research through semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from ten inbound tour operators registered with the Sabah Tourism Board and ten tourists who visited Sabah from January to March 2017. The findings indicated that most of the respondents perceived Sabah as a safe tourist destination and would not hesitate to revisit. The perception of safe destination was attributed to beautiful, friendly, haven and peaceful. A significant number of tourists perceived Sabah as a safe tourist destination due to the natural and pristine coastlines and natural environmental habitats. Sabah, well-known as the Land Below the Wind, has a beautiful feature with a wealth of natural paradise to offer to the tourists. Although several key incidents and unsafe events happened in Sabah, the general perception was that Sabah is a safe tourist destination and would not deter the tourists from visiting Sabah. The findings show that perception of Sabah as a safe tourist destination; in the sense that Sabah is described as a beautiful and peaceful tourist destination with friendly people around them and a haven to visit despite the incidents of kidnappings and crimes. Arising from the responses from the tour operators and the tourists, it was revealed that the key factors that influenced safety and security issues are described as human (illegal immigrants, intruders, lack of security personnel), activities (drug abusers, shootings), behavior (irresponsible people [tourists/visitors], negative perception), location (long and winding shores and unlit areas), crime (kidnappings, murder, thefts and threats) and animals (animal attacks)

Keywords: Perception, Tour Operators, Tourists, Key Attributes, Safe Tourist Destination

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Introduction

Previous studies have pointed out that perceptions are likely to influence tourists' travel decision (Aschauer, 2009). According to Sonmez and Graefe, (1998), tourists' perception on safety and security as an individual topic and its impact on tourists' behavior and travel decision receive less attention. Tourists and certain tourist destination, therefore, have been found to be vulnerable to safety and security. Tourists, regarded by criminals as 'easy targets' or those that happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time, may become crime victims, and ensuing media attention may have an adverse effect on prospective tourists' perceptions and ultimately on tourist numbers to such tourist destination in future (George, 2002).

In the tourism industry, the issue of safety and security is regarded as highly sensitive and fragile, as tourists will never go to any places where it is not safe. It is the common responsibility of the tour operators to ensure that the tourist destination is safe and secure to receive their guests (tourists). Significantly, safety and security in the tourism industry has been identified as one of the forces causing changes in the tourism sector in the new millennium. Chan (2007 (b) stated that crises can have a significant impact on inbound and outbound tourist flows. As noted by Yang (2013) safety and security were determinants of safety and security perceptions and its effect. Issues of safety and security are of paramount importance for most tourists and the tourism sector as a whole (Cohen and Cohen, 2012). Throughout the last decade, safety and security have been consistently ranked as one of the top global concerns facing the tourism industry (Edgell and Swanson, 2013).

Johnson (2010) stated that safety and security plays a major role in making travel choices as safety and security also demonstrated quite clearly that peace is the best friend of travel and tourism while war and insecurity are among its worst enemies. Donaldson (2009) opined that peace, safety and security are primary requirements of the growth, attractiveness and competitiveness of a tourist destination. Being unsafe and insecure, tourist destination cannot successfully compete in the tourism market because potential tourists would not want to visit a place that is unsafe and insecure. Cavlek (2002), Pizam (1999), Savignac (1994) researched that peace, safety and security are the primary conditions for the normal tourism development of a tourist destination, region, or country and thus are the basic determinants of its growth.

Perception on Tourist Destination

If a tourist feels unsafe, insecure or threatened at a tourist destination, he or she can develop a negative impression of that tourist destination. This can be very damaging to the tourist destination's tourism industry and can result in the following ways: (i) Prospective tourists may decide not to visit the tourist destination because it has a reputation for having a high crime rate, (ii) If tourists feel unsafe or insecure at a tourist destination, they are not likely to take part in activities outside their accommodation facility, and (iii) Tourists who have felt threatened or unsafe or insecure are not likely to return to the tourist destination, and they are not likely to recommend the tourist destination to others (George, 2002). Hence, understanding tourists' perception is vital as tourists are a pre-requisite for a prosperous tourist destination.

Perceptions of safety and security are influenced by the society in which it is operated, including aspects such as wealth, demographics, technology and the media (Slovic, 1990). Another aspect that impacts upon perceptions of safety and security is public outrage and the familiarity people have with the activities (Segal, 1990). The tourists' perception on safety and

security is determined by their travel behavior (Segal, 1990). The tour operators perceived safety and security such as physical health, social status, emotional wellbeing, financial wealth, among others.

In Sabah's context, Sabah has been battling with safety and security issues such as kidnappings and shootings since 1998, resulting in the decline of tourists/visitors' arrival to Sabah as evidenced by newspaper reports. The trend would continue to threaten its sustainability if it is not dealt with efficiently and effectively. Therefore, it is necessary to evaluate and identify critical stages that need to be addressed immediately (JohnRose, 2010). Tour operators need to understand the safety and security risks and the role of travel information incorporating safety and security information in shaping the tourists' choice and travel behavior.

Sabah is fortunate to have been gifted with an abundance of tourist attractions; among them, Mount Kinabalu, Turtle Island Park, Mabul Island, Pulau Kapalai, Pulau Sipadan, Mantanani Island, Tunku Abdul Rahman Park, Sepilok Orang Utan Sanctuary, Tawau Hills Park, Gomantong Cave, Maliau Basin Lost World, Tabin Wildlife Reserve and these are presented in Map 1.

Map 1. Map of Sabah with Key Tourist Attractions

Source: https://www.google.com/search?q=Map+of+Sabah

Research Gaps

The tourism industry is an important industry in Malaysia, as in the eyes of the world, Malaysia had always been portrayed and promoted as a "safe, peaceful and hospitality-filled tourist destination" (Ayob, 2014).

However, the safety and security incidents in the east coast of Sabah and the two Malaysian Airline Air Disasters - MH370 and MH17 have raised the question of safety and security in

travelling to Malaysia, in particular, Sabah and thus evokes "how safe" is travelling? (Yang, 2013).

In understanding tourist destination safety and security, one must gain the understanding from the respective stakeholders, tour operators and tourists (Yang, 2013). Past studies show little understanding on safety and security at the tourist destination in Malaysia, in particular, in Sabah's context (Yang, 2013 and 2015). Previous studies have highlighted the safety and security concerns in tourism, however the studies did not examine the safety and security at the tourist destination from the perspective of the tour operators and tourists.

Noticeably, the safety and security in the tourism industry has been identified as one of the forces causing changes in the tourism sector in the new millennium and that crisis can have a significant impact on tourist inbound and outbound flows (Yang, 2013). As a result, there is a need to shift the paradigm in dealing with safety and security in the tourism industry, in particular, in making tourist destination more safe and secure. Also, to examine the safety and security issues at the tourist destination from the perspective of the tour operators and tourists.

Hence a study on tour operators and tourists' perception on safety and security at the tourist destination need to be ventured as it is vital to improve the tourist destination safety and security system.

Research Objectives
The research aimed to provide a better understanding of the tourist destination safety and security in Sabah. Hence the perspective of the tour operators and the tourists are vital to understand the perception of Sabah as a safe tourist destination.

Hence, the research objectives for this research were as follows:

(1)   To explore the perception of Sabah as a safe tourist destination from the perspective of the tour operators and tourists; and
(2)   To identify the key factors that may influence safety and security issues at the tourist destination in Sabah.

Research Method
This research applied semi-structured in-depth interview technique to gather and collect data (Marshall and Rossman, 1989). Descriptive data was collected using the interview questionnaires. Semi-structured face-to-face in-depth interviews was chosen as this method was found to be the most suitable method for collection of qualitative data for this research. This technique allowed for more flexibility and the opportunity to explore the complexity on perception and key factors of safety and security issues at the tourist destination. This method enabled the researcher to develop and build a rapport and engage with the respondents through a series of conversational style of communicating. This manner allowed the respondents to feel more comfortable and at ease thereby allowing them to voice out personal views and opinions more freely. The respondents' personal views and opinions added credence as additional and relevant information.

The semi-structured interview began with a short self-introduction and the purpose of the interview. Audio-recording was used during the interview as it allowed the interviewer to concentrate and listen attentively to the respondents' answer, their expressions and other non-verbal cues (Saunders, 2009).

Sampling
Convenience sampling was used to select suitable respondents in the research area because of their accessibility. This technique ensured that the responses from respondents were meaningful and significant to research rationales (Mason, 2002). This method was an appropriate strategy to collect information in relation to tourist destination safety and security: perception and key factors.

Since a large number of respondents were not necessary in a qualitative study, the numbers of semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted was based on both redundancy and the theoretical saturation of significant data from additional informants (Dibley and Baker, 2001; Lincoln, 2011). A different approach to determining the size of the sample was to conduct interviews until there is nothing new from the interview. Hearing the same set of responses over and over is referred to as "data saturation" (Smith, 2010). Sample size was determined when information and theoretical insights reached saturation, which constitutes hearing the same information reported without anything new being added. Chan and Baum (2007) suggested that 20 to 40 in-depth interviews are necessary for qualitative research of this nature.

In-depth interview questions focused on the following:
1. Can you share with me whether you think Sabah is a safe destination? Yes. Why? No. Why?
2. What is your opinion with the current issues and happenings related to safety and security at the tourist destination?
3. What are the key factors that influence safety and security issues at the tourist destination?

Respondents
Twenty respondents comprising ten inbound tour operators registered with the Sabah Tourism Board and ten tourists who visited Sabah from January to March 2017 were interviewed for this research. The interview questions were guided by the research objectives of this study. The interview session were conducted at the offices, at the hotel lobby and at the tourist sites in Kota Kinabalu, Kudat, Lahad Datu, Sandakan and Tawau where an interviewer asked questions and the interviewee answered according to the question asked. Prior to the interview, the researcher had requested the respondents' consent to interview them and subsequently to sign a consent form. The data was collected from January to March 2017 and analysis was conducted in April 2017.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Tour Operators [N = 10]

Characteristics		Number	Percent
Gender	Male	6	60
	Female	4	40
Location	Kota Kinabalu	3	30
(to interview the	Kudat	1	10
respondents)	Lahad Datu	1	10
	Sandakan	3	30

	Tawau	2	20
Age Range	Below 20	0	0
	20-35	2	20
	36-50	4	40
	51-65	4	40
Level of Education	Certificate	1	10
	Secondary	2	20
	Diploma	5	50
	Bachelor's Degree	2	20
	Master or PhD	0	0
Nationality	Malaysian	10	100
	Others	0	0

Table 2: Demographic Profile of Tourists [N = 10]

Characteristics		Number	Percent
Gender	Male	6	60
	Female	4	40
Location (to interview the respondents)	Kota Kinabalu	3	30
	Kudat	1	10
	Lahad Datu	1	10
	Sandakan	3	30
	Tawau	2	20
Age Range	Below 20	1	10
	20-35	3	30
	36-50	3	30
	51-65	3	30
Level of Education	Certificate	0	0
	Secondary	1	10
	Diploma	2	20
	Bachelor's Degree	4	40
	Master or PhD	3	30
Nationality	Malaysian	5	50
	Others	5	50

Table 1 and Table 2 illustrated the demographic profile of the respondents. A total of twenty respondents comprising ten tour operators and ten tourists (both international and domestic) were interviewed using the semi-structured interview approach.

Data Analysis
The data was analysed using thematic coding. The notes and transcription were analysed using content analysis. The analysis involved searching for phrases and themes, then comparing them with themes from literature on perception and key factors on safety and security at the tourist destination. Common themes were then identified; the importance of the themes was established by identifying which themes were mentioned repeatedly by the respondents. The data was analysed manually because the number of respondents was small. Furthermore, the researcher was able to work directly with the data that had been collected and was able to immerse in the data. Data analysis involved working through data to discover meaningful themes, patterns and descriptions that answered the objectives of this research (Yin, 2009).

Research findings
Findings on Perception of Sabah as a Safe Tourist Destination
The empirical evidences from the interview responses are presented in Table 3. The findings revealed several themes that describe Sabah as a safe tourist destination and these can be categorized as beautiful, friendly, haven and peaceful. Each of these themes emerged from the interview responses are supported by Al-Kwifi (2015), Williams (2015) and Kaur (2016). Al-Kwifi (2015) stated that beautiful described an attractive destination, hence will spur the tourists with higher intention to visit. Williams (2015) stated that friendly resonates (to continue to have a powerful effect or value) strongly at the tourist destination while Kaur (2016) stated that peaceful is a positive attribute of a tourist destination. These studies are consistent and supported the findings where it seems to confirm that safe is associated with beautiful, friendly and peaceful. Interestingly, one new factor emerged from the findings; haven, which was not discovered in previous studies.

Table 3: Empirical Evidences from the Interview Responses on Perception of Sabah as a Safe Tourist Destination

Type of Respondents	Interview Responses/Respondents	Themes	Supported Literature
Tour Operators' Perception	*"Yes, inspite of the spats of kidnap cases, there really is no cause for alarm. Sabah is a peaceful State."*	Peaceful	Williams (2015) (Friendly; resonates strongly at the tourist destination)
	"Yes. So far in business, nothing untoward happened. Sabah is indeed a peaceful place to visit."	Peaceful	
	"Yes. Sabah is a haven for tourists; especially the foreigners."	Haven	Al-Kwifi (2015) (Beautiful; attractive destination will lead to higher intention to visit)
	"Yes. Obviously so. Peaceful. No major issues except the Tanduo and kidnapping incidences."	Peaceful	
	"Yes. Sabah is a peaceful State."	Peaceful	
	"Yes. Sabah is generally a safe and peaceful place to visit; so many repeat tourists."	Peaceful	
	"Yes. Sabah is truly a safe destination. A beautiful place for anyone to visit."	Peaceful	Kaur (2016) (Peaceful; positive attribute of a safe tourist destination)
	"Yes. Sabah is a safe and peaceful destination. My customers keep coming back."	Peaceful Beautiful	
	"Yes, no doubt about that. Indeed, Sabah is a peaceful State."	Peaceful	
	"Yes. Sabah is a haven for tourists; I had a lot of enquiries from repeat customers."	Peaceful	
		Haven	
Tourists' Perception	*"Yes. Because I don't feel unsafe. This place is beautiful."*	Peaceful Beautiful	
	"Yes. We didn't feel unsafe at any time during our	Peaceful	

	holiday; it you must know, this place is truly a haven for us, tourists.”	Haven		
	“Yes. I felt safe at all times with friendly people.”	Peaceful Friendly		
	“Yes. Visited safe tourist spots and was accompanied by a friendly tourist guide.”	Peaceful Friendly		
	“Yes. No problem. We can take care of ourselves as Sabah is a beautiful place to visit.”	Beautiful		
	“Yes. Well-organised. Locals are friendly.”			
	“Yes, I agree that Sabah is a peaceful place to visit.”	Friendly		
	“Yes. Safe and peaceful destination. I feel at ease travelling around these areas.”	Peaceful		
	“Yes. Friendly people.”	Peaceful		
	“Yes. All fine. Peaceful.”			
		Friendly		
		Peaceful		

Findings on Key Factors that Influence Safety and Security Issues

The empirical evidences from the interview responses are presented in Table 4. The findings revealed fourteen key factors that influence safety and security issues. These factors can be categorised as human (illegal immigrants, intruders, lack of security personnel), activities (drug abusers, shootings), behavior (irresponsible people [tourists/visitors], negative perception), location (long and winding shores and unlit areas), crime (kidnappings, murder, thefts and threats) and animals (animal attacks). Past studies on the key factors were consistent with Konar (2014) who described crimes as a factor that determines quality and quantity of safety and security. Williams (2015) who opined that human, location, activities as important factors of social, political, economic and technological challenges and lastly Kovari (2011) who described behaviour as negative impacts of irresponsible people or visitors. One new factor emerged from the findings; animal attacks, which was not discovered in previous studies.

Table 4: Empirical Evidences from the Interview Responses on Key Factors that Influence Safety and Security Issues

Type of Respondents	Interview Responses/Respondents	Themes	Categories	Supported Literature
Tour Operators	*“The long and winding shores; intruders can easily get unnoticed”*	Long and winding shores	Location	Konar (2014) (Crimes: quality and quantity of safety and security)
	“Irresponsible tourists.”	Irresponsible tourists	People	
	“Unlit areas, drug abusers and illegal immigrants.”	Unlit areas Drug abusers	Location People	Williams (2015) (Human, location, activities, negative perceptions:
	“Illegal immigrants, irresponsible people.”	Illegal immigrants Irresponsible	People	

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		people	People	important factors of social, political, economic and technological challenges)
	"Lack of security personnel patrolling some of the tourist destination; intruders can easily intrude."	Lack of security personnel Intruders	People People	
	"Our Sabah shores are long and winding."	Long and winding shores	People Location	Kovari (2011) (Behaviour: negative impacts of irresponsible people/ visitors)
	"The paperless illegal immigrants."	Illegal immigrants	People	
	"Irresponsible visitors."	Irresponsible visitors	People	
	"Some of our tourists just could not be bothered."	Irresponsible tourists	People	
	"Sabah's coastline as tourist destination are wide."	Wide coastline	Location	
Tourists	*"Threats by intruders."*	Threats	People/ Location	
	"Danger to life, thefts, animal attacks."	Animal attacks Thefts	Location People/ Location	
	"Thefts, kidnappings, murder, shootings."	Kidnappings Murder Shootings	People/ Location	
	"Kidnapping for ransom."	Kidnapping	People/ Location	
	"Irresponsible people."	Irresponsible people	People	
	"Negative perception and irresponsible people." *"Irresponsible tourists."*	Negative perception Irresponsible people	Location/ People People	
	"Some irresponsible people."	Irresponsible tourists	People	
	"Irresponsible people."	Irresponsible people	People	
	"Irresponsible people."	Irresponsible people	People	

Summary of the Findings

The research aimed to understand the perception of Sabah as a safe tourist destination and the key factors that influence safety and security issues for tourist destination in Kota Kinabalu and the coastal areas of Sabah. The objectives are perception of Sabah as a safe tourist destination and key factors that influence safety and security issues at the tourist destination in Sabah.

The research findings have successfully achieved the research objectives. These are presented as follows:

Research Objective on Perception of Sabah as a Safe Tourist Destination

The findings from the tour operators and tourists conclude that Sabah is perceived as a safe tourist destination. Sabah is perceived as safe in the sense that they described Sabah as a beautiful and peaceful tourist destination, with friendly people around them and a haven to visit despite the incidents of kidnapping and crimes.

Research Objective on Key Factors Influencing Safety and Security Issues

The findings conclude that there were six main factors that influence the tourist destination safety and security. These factors can be categorised as (1) human (illegal immigrants, intruders, lack of security personnel), (2) activities (drug abusers, shootings), (3) behavior (irresponsible people [tourists/visitors], negative perception), (4) location (long and winding shores and unlit areas), (5) crime (kidnappings, murder, thefts and threats) and (6) animals (animal attacks).

Contribution

The research findings contribute to the knowledge of tourist destination safety and security in several ways. The research had addressed the gaps. The identified factors add to the existing literature review of tourist destination safety and security.

The new factors that emerged from the findings were haven and animal attacks; these were not discovered in previous studies. The tourists perceived Sabah as a haven for them to visit. The safety and security of the tourist destination, despite being in a multi-racial and multi-cultural community, there is no conflicts, war or intolerance. The factor on animal attacks like fierce and wild dogs, can be described as a factor on safety and security issues at the tourist destination.

In this research, such relevant information was collected through qualitative approach which provided findings based on the responses from the tour operators and the tourists. Qualitative method was used to explore the perception and key factors for tourist destination safety and security.

Past studies on safety and security issues at the tourist destination have yielded an array of concepts: societal/cultural, political, environmental, economic, technological, physical structure, features, maintenance, practices and procedures, rules and regulations. However, the present research findings were able to contribute to the body of knowledge in terms of perceptions and key factors.

This study also took into account the importance of the stakeholders who were the tour operators and tourists. The tour operators are the stakeholders who are very concern as they operate tours to the tourist destination and get first-hand information. Whereas the tourists would still come in whatever situation, be they safe or otherwise. It is therefore crucial for the tourism industry to be more vigilant and be aware of the needs of the respondents; tour operators and tourists.

The findings of this study is deemed useful to the respective government, in particular, the state security department, the Esscom officers and relevant government agencies. The strong perception by the respondents that Sabah is a safe tourist destination could facilitate better cooperation amongst the government agencies, authorities and the tourists' association to popularize Sabah's tourist destination further. The perception that Sabah is beautiful, friendly, haven and peaceful would impact a greater influx of people visiting Sabah.

Finally, the research provided some insights for the industry players concerning the issues of safety and security by being aware of the key factors influencing safety and security at the tourist destination. Being in the business venture, the tour operators deemed the key factors are necessary to be aware of. Meanwhile, the key factors necessitate tourists to ensure their travel are safe and secured.

In summary, the research findings were deemed beneficial for all tourism stakeholders (tour operators, tour suppliers, tourists' associations, tourists, local communities, government authorities, government agencies, non-governmental organisations, tourists' associations, private and public entities) in terms of the knowledge in the perception and key factors influencing safety and security at the tourist destination.

Conclusion
Based on the research findings, this study provides a new perspective of understanding tourist destination safety and security as the research has successfully answered the research objectives. Research objective on perception of Sabah as a safe tourist destination concluded that Sabah is perceived as safe as Sabah is beautiful and peaceful with friendly people and a haven for the tourists. Research objective on key factors influencing safety and security issues in Sabah were the human (illegal immigrants, intruders, lack of security personnel), activities (drug abusers, shootings), behavior (irresponsible people (tourists/visitors), negative perception), location (long and winding shores and unlit areas), crime (kidnappings, murder, thefts and threats) and animals (animal attacks).

The implication on perception and key factors influencing safety and security for tourist destination would be useful to understand tourist destination safety and security for the government and stakeholders.

Limitations of the Study
There were a few limitations in this study identified by the researcher that may offer opportunity for future research. The limitations of this study could serve as a research gap for future research.

Firstly, the scope of this study was focused on tour operators and tourists in the Esszone areas of Sabah, which embodies the characteristics of specific factors; perceptions and key factors influencing safety and security for tourist destination which have limited generalization. The generalization of findings can be enhanced by expanding the scope of study with samples from other tourism industry's stakeholders namely the local communities, government, government agencies, tourist suppliers (transportation, accommodation) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as Sabah Hotel Association, Sabah Tourist Guides Association, Malaysian Association of Tour and Travel Agents (MATTA Sabah Chapter) and the Eastern Sabah Safety Zone Committee (Esscom) officers.

Secondly, the study site covered specific areas only; in Kota Kinabalu, Kudat, Lahad Datu, Sandakan and Tawau.

Thirdly, the researcher's approach was not perfect, but they were the best options for these data. Reading and densely coding the interview responses was laborious and sometimes mind-numbing, but the findings were interesting and the use of the data for qualitative research was an area that was ripe for meaningful research on public opinions, interpersonal interaction and other social phenomena.

Lastly, from the research findings, it would be a good move to add other emerging issues related to tourist destination safety and security such as the new factor in the perception of Sabah as a safe tourist destination which is haven which was not discovered in previous studies. Another factor that ought to be included in the key factors influencing safety and security issues at the tourist destination is the animal attack.

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