

The role of communications on the relationship between feelings for and intention to visit a country with ongoing conflicts

Sara Campo, Galia Fuchs and Maria D. Álvarez

Sara Campo is based at the Department of Finance and Marketing Research, College of Economics and Business Administration, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Madrid, Spain. Galia Fuchs is based at the Department of Tourism and Leisure Management, Guilford Glazer Faculty of Business and Management, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Beer-Sheva, Israel. Maria D. Álvarez is based at the Department of Tourism Administration, Boğaziçi University, Istanbul, Turkey.

Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to investigate how feelings for a country influence visitation to conflict-ridden destinations. It also examines the moderating effect of communications – news about terror or pictures of the place’s attractions – and whether the pictures counteract the damaging news.

Design/methodology/approach – This study examines the influence that feelings for a country have on visitation intentions, via the destination’s perceived risk and overall image. Furthermore, an experimental design is used to test the moderating influence of two communications stimuli. The sample consists of 309 individuals from the USA who were randomly exposed to various stimuli.

Findings – The findings confirm that feelings for the country shape risk perceptions, overall destination image and visitation intentions. Communications moderate the influence of these emotions. In addition, pictures of the destination’s attractions mitigate the adverse effect of negative news.

Research limitations/implications – The investigation focuses on Turkey, a popular tourist destination, despite being subject to biases due to its geopolitical situation and ongoing armed conflict. The findings suggest that conflict-ridden destination managers should understand and use emotions, distinguishing between country and destination, while emphasizing the place’s attractions with visual communications to counter negative country reports.

Originality/value – This research contributes a comprehensive model that explains the impact that feelings for a country have on visitation decisions, highlighting the mediating role of risk perceptions and destination image. Furthermore, the study underlines the moderating role of communications, both positive and negative, that shape the effect of the emotions on the studied variables.

Keywords Conflict-ridden destinations, Communications, Feelings for a country, Risk perceptions, Destination image, Visitation intentions

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Visitation decisions to tourist destinations are affected by many considerations, including pull factors that derive from the attributes of the place (Pestana *et al.*, 2020). Among these, perceptions concerning the place’s risk status are important (Najar and Rather, 2023), and may be particularly damaging for destinations that suffer from conflicts. For destinations where conflict is an ongoing rather than a discrete event, risk perceptions may be deeply ingrained and difficult to change. Such destinations are termed conflict-ridden and described as places where socio-political conflicts are expressed through riots, wars and terrorism that may be cyclical and followed by periods of peace and stability (Isaac *et al.*, 2019). Even milder forms of conflict can be detrimental to the destination and its image

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(Isaac *et al.*, 2019), especially as these perceptions may be intensified by the media's reporting (Kapuściński and Richards, 2016).

These conflict-ridden destinations may also be affected by country-based emotions that stem from the dispute and its handling by the country's government (Campo and Alvarez, 2019). The country of origin research establishes that the views that people have about a country inspire their purchases of goods from that place, including tourism products (Nadeau *et al.*, 2008). Country stereotypes, or socially shared opinions about a country, may trigger emotions that affect visitation decisions (Micevski *et al.*, 2021). Such feelings for a country, positive or negative, also influence the image of the destination (Nadeau *et al.*, 2008; Oberecker and Diamantopoulos, 2011). Particularly, for destinations that are in conflict, affective elements have a greater weight in fashioning the destination image and a larger impact on behavioral intentions (Alvarez and Campo, 2014). For these destinations, perceptions and emotions will generally be negative and should be addressed via communication strategies that focus on the destination's attractive characteristics as pull factors (Avraham, 2021).

Although emotions are considered intrinsic to the destination image's formation, there is scarce research that deals with affective elements concerning the country as different from the destination (Micevski *et al.*, 2021). While tourism studies have examined country-based stereotypes and biases (Micevski *et al.*, 2021; Tasci *et al.*, 2007), few investigations have considered the emotions for the destination's country of origin that arise from ongoing conflicts and their influence on tourists' decision-making. Furthermore, to date, there is a lack of research on the role that communications may have in amplifying or diminishing the influence of country-based emotions on visitation decisions.

Our study addresses this gap, proposing and testing a comprehensive model in which the feelings for a country affect the intention to visit conflict-ridden destinations both directly and indirectly via perceptual variables – risk perceptions and destination image. The investigation of these variables and their interrelations provides an in-depth understanding of the mechanisms through which country-based emotions operate. As a key contribution, the research also highlights how communications about the destination, both positive and negative, moderate the impact of these feelings. In addition, our investigation provides insights into the potential use of communication strategies to mitigate the adverse effects of media coverage about conflict at the destination.

This study focuses on Turkey, a destination that boasts many attractions that act as pull factors to its thriving tourism industry (Uner *et al.*, 2023). Despite its high touristic appeal, democratically elected government and stable international relations, Turkey's image still experiences biases and stereotypes linked to its geopolitical situation and ongoing political conflict in its territory, which has led to occasional terror attacks over the span of several decades (Bayramov, 2022; Kılıçlar *et al.*, 2018; Tasci *et al.*, 2007). Thus, Turkey presents the ideal context to investigate the influence of communications that highlight the destination's pull factors or its conflictive situation. The study is carried out from the perspective of individuals from the USA, who represent an important segment for Turkish tourism.

Literature review

Conflict-ridden destinations often boast many attractions, but are unable to realize their full tourism potential due to ongoing disputes that damage their image and deter visitation (Isaac *et al.*, 2019). Destination image, which refers to "the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions a person has of a destination" (Stylidis *et al.*, 2017, p. 185), has been the object of extensive research (for a synthesis, see Guzman-Parra *et al.*, 2021). The concept includes cognitive and affective components (Afshardoost and Eshaghi, 2020). The overall image is deemed a separate dimension of the destination image, beyond the aggregate of cognitive and affective aspects (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999). It is also seen as a key influencer of behavioral intentions (Afshardoost and Eshaghi, 2020).

Destinations are not in a vacuum, but they are a geographical unit, part of a country (Khalilzadeh *et al.*, 2023). The destination's geopolitical situation can lead to stereotypes and biases – positive or negative – as individuals interpret incoming information about a place based on their perceptions of the country (Nadeau *et al.*, 2008; Tasci *et al.*, 2007). Despite a positive image, destinations may be influenced by negative country stereotypes and biases (Micevski *et al.*, 2021). While the image of the country and that of the destination are distinct, the former influences the latter and both affect visitation intentions (Aragonés-Jericó *et al.*, 2022; Campo Martínez and Alvarez, 2010; Chaulagain *et al.*, 2019). For countries that suffer from conflicts, affective elements become more relevant (Alvarez and Campo, 2014). These are often negative because of the dispute situation, and may in turn have a strong influence on visitation decisions (Alvarez *et al.*, 2020).

Conflict-ridden destinations are generally characterized by cycles of violence that are an expression of the dispute (Isaac *et al.*, 2019), and are detrimental to the destination, increasing tourists' risk perceptions and decreasing visitation (Carballo *et al.*, 2021). These risk perceptions may be magnified by negative feelings that arise from the dispute (Alvarez *et al.*, 2020). In addition, countries that suffer from conflicts are usually targeted by the international media with adverse news reporting that may amplify negative emotions toward the country and increase the perceived risk of visiting (Alvarez and Campo, 2020; Becken *et al.*, 2017; Cahyanto and Liu-Lastres, 2020). Indeed, communications emphasizing elements of the destination's risky situation increase the perceived risk concerning the place (Kapuściński and Richards, 2016). Therefore, destinations need to manage communications during crises and facilitate recovery through marketing strategies (Zhang *et al.*, 2023).

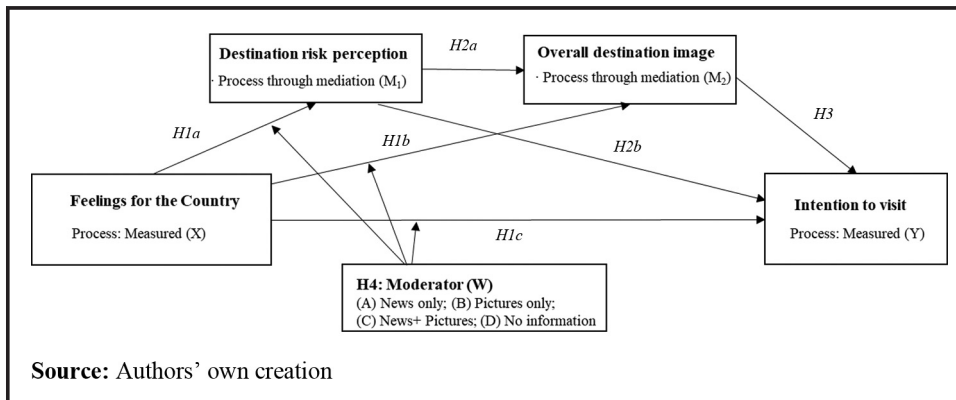
Among the different tools available to destination managers, Avraham (2021) suggests that appealing images of the destination's attractions can create interest or counteract the negative influence of an event. Certainly, information about the destination may be conveyed through visual cues that capture attention and provide the opportunity to vicariously experience the place (Li *et al.*, 2016). Attractive pictures of the destination may also trigger positive emotions toward the place (Jia *et al.*, 2021), and may therefore be used to offset the effect of damaging news. While the role of pictures in the promotion of destinations (Jia *et al.*, 2021) or in forming a biased destination image (Tasci *et al.*, 2007) has been examined in the literature, their potential mitigating effect of conflict and security incidents at the destination is in need of research.

Based on this literature, we propose a model that examines the role of feelings for the country, and the moderating effect of opposing communications on the influence that these emotions have on destination's risk perceptions, overall image and visitation intentions to conflict-ridden destinations. We investigate the negative effect of messages that focus on terror attacks derived from the conflict, as well as the positive impact of promotional visuals concerning the destination. The general model of relations and the moderating influence of communications, as well as the proposed hypotheses are summarized in Figure 1 and discussed in greater length in the following section.

Theoretical framework and hypotheses

Emotions, positive or negative, play a predominant role in creating the destination image and in influencing the decision to visit it (Styliadis *et al.*, 2017). When a country suffers from geopolitical conflicts, it is often exposed to negative affect that stems from the conflict (Campo and Alvarez, 2019). These countries are also subject to potential cycles of violence and terror that make them riskier to visit. According to Alvarez *et al.* (2020) when individuals hold negative emotions toward these countries, their perceptions of risk are magnified. These feelings also impact the image of the destination and visitation decisions (Campo and Alvarez, 2019; Stepchenkova *et al.*, 2018). Therefore:

Figure 1 Theoretical model



H1. The feelings for the country where the destination is located have a negative influence on a) the destination's risk perceptions, and a positive one on b) the overall destination image and on c) the intention to visit the place.

Furthermore, the decision to visit the destination is influenced by both cognitive and affective elements (Correia and Pimpão, 2008). Among these, risk perceptions, which refer to "the perceived probability of occurrence and the magnitude of a threat" (Law, 2006, p. 289), are found to be particularly influential (Najar and Rather, 2023). The literature identifies various travel risks that include physical, social, time, financial and psychological aspects (Seabra et al., 2020). Among these, physical risks that may result in bodily harm to tourists and disrupt the industry are key. These may be caused by crime, pandemics, natural disasters, terrorism or political instability (Agarwal et al., 2021). Terrorism and political instability are of special concern to tourists due to their nature as unexpected events (Kapuściński and Richards, 2016).

Longstanding research provides evidence of the crucial role that risk perceptions play in shaping tourists' decision-making processes, influencing destination choice, and travel behavior (Fuchs and Reichel, 2011; Kozak, Crofts and Law, 2007; Walters et al., 2019). Perpiña et al. (2021) determine that perceptions of risk are intrinsic to the destination, and as such affect its overall image. Especially for destinations that suffer from ongoing disputes, risk perceptions are important as they shape the image of the place and the decision to visit it (Asongu et al., 2019). According to Assaker and O'Connor (2021), these risk perceptions affect visitation decisions indirectly, through the destination image. Thus:

H2. The destination's risk perceptions have a negative influence on a) the overall destination image and on b) the intention to visit the place.

Many investigations confirm that destination image is an important factor affecting tourists' destination preferences, visitation decisions and behavioral intentions (see the review by Afshardoost and Eshaghi, 2020). In particular, the overall destination image as a summary evaluation of the place is seen as especially relevant (Afshardoost and Eshaghi, 2020). Indeed, positive views concerning the destination generally result in greater visitation intentions (Chaulagain et al., 2019).

H3. The overall destination image has a positive influence on the intention to visit the place.

The moderating role of communications. Communications that originate from destinations or other sources may change perceptions and ultimately affect consumers' decision-making (Stojanovic et al., 2022). Especially for destinations that suffer from crises, the media are crucial to provide timely intelligence, while the information transmitted can also influence the

decision to visit (Cahyanto and Liu-Lastres, 2020). Individuals can be particularly sensitive to negative information about places that are unfamiliar to them (Kapuściński and Richards, 2022). Media communications also influence emotions concerning the place (Alvarez and Campo, 2020; Becken *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, the language used in the message and the inclusion or not of certain fields affect how the audience interprets the information (Kapuściński and Richards, 2022). A greater perceived risk is triggered when higher risk elements, such as recurring incidents, high death toll, tourists as targets and attacks widespread throughout the country, are mentioned (Kapuściński and Richards, 2016; Mansfeld and Pizam, 2011; Zhang *et al.*, 2023).

Despite lacking control over the reporting of terror attacks, destination managers can reduce their negative impact on the destination image through communications and other marketing strategies for recovery (Avraham, 2021). Visual elements may cut through the clutter of available information (Yang *et al.*, 2022). Especially when individuals have negative emotions associated with the information provided, they pay more attention to pictures and other visual cues (Yang *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, reports about attacks at a destination may be countered through the use of attractive visuals of the place. Communications concerning conflict-ridden destinations may also include pictures of the place provided together with textual information. Noy and Kohn (2010) remark that many articles written in the domestic press in Israel about destinations in the Sinai are conflicting as they combine generic pictures of attractive tourist sites with messages that warn about vacationing there.

Destination's photographs are useful in not only communicating the destination's attributes but also in unleashing the power of imagery, creating vicarious experiences (Cheung *et al.*, 2020). Appealing pictures not only increase the perceived attractiveness of a destination and intention to visit it but also arouse positive emotions toward it (Jia *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, pictures of the place can also construct simple mental images of the destination (Li *et al.*, 2016). When faced with fewer information, people may rely on peripheral cues, such as photographs, that help them create a simplified picture of the destination (Li *et al.*, 2016). Visual representations may also affect how individuals engage with textual information. Therefore, exposure to pictures of a destination's attractions may reduce the impact of negative textual information as individuals focus more on the place's appealing aspects portrayed.

Based on this literature, communications that focus on the conflict and risk at the destination and those that emphasize the attractions of the place via pictures are thought to moderate the influence that feelings for a country have on destination's risk perceptions, overall destination image and visitation intentions. In particular, textual messages that focus on high-risk elements concerning a conflict are hypothesized to increase the effect of negative emotions for the country, while images of the place's attractions are believed to lessen this impact. The following hypothesis is proposed:

- H4.* Communications about a destination (a textual message concerning terror attacks at the destination and pictures of the place's attractions, either on their own or together) have a moderating influence on the relationship between feelings for the country where the destination is located and the intention to visit the place.

Methodology

The study examines the role that feelings for a country have in shaping visitation intentions to conflict-ridden destinations through their effect on risk perceptions and overall destination image. Using an experimental design, the research also investigates the moderating effect of communications about the destination. The study focuses on Turkey, a popular tourist destination with numerous natural, historical and cultural attractions that make it appealing to many tourist segments (Uner *et al.*, 2023). Despite having a democratically elected and stable government, Turkey has been labeled conflict-ridden in

the literature, mainly due to an ongoing armed political conflict within its territory (Bayramov, 2022). This dispute between the Turkish government and separatist forces supporting Kurdish independence has resulted in clashes and attacks mainly localized in the contested Southeastern region of the country (Alvarez *et al.*, 2020; Kılıçlar *et al.*, 2018). Nevertheless, the confined and cyclical nature of the conflict, as well as its many attractions, have ensured for Turkey a leading place as a tourist-receiving country (Uner *et al.*, 2023). The potential for both positive and negative evaluations make Turkey an appropriate context to examine the role that feelings for the country play in shaping visitation. While its geopolitical location and longstanding dispute may trigger negative country emotions and higher destination risk perceptions, its numerous tourist attractions may act as significant pull factors (Alvarez *et al.*, 2020; Uner *et al.*, 2023).

The feelings, perceptions and intention to visit Turkey are investigated from the perspective of US residents. The USA as a source country was selected because it represents an important market for Turkish tourism. Turkey received more than 1.3 million US tourists in 2023, growing from around 578 thousand in 2019 (Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu, 2024). In addition, because the USA and Turkey are geographically distant and have limited commercial relations, the general level of knowledge about Turkey among Americans is believed to be low (Yuvaci and Bowles, 2015). Therefore, using a US sample allows for the study of the impact of various communications on visitation decisions in a context where little knowledge about the country is assumed. As Kapuściński and Richards (2022) state, people's sensitivity to negative information about a place is greater when the destination is less known to them.

Data was collected at the end of 2019 via an online survey to US residents, selected through the Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) application from those travelers who report taking a vacation at least once a year. Respondents agreed to participate in the study for a small reward and attention checks were also included in the survey. The respondents were randomly assigned to various groups and exposed to different communications, although they all answered the same set of questions both before and after being exposed to the stimuli.

Single items that summarize the constructs were used to reduce the respondents' work load. These include the feelings for the country, following Verlegh (2001) who states that positive and negative feelings evoked by the country capture the basic affective spectrum. In addition, the overall destination image and the intention to visit the place were adopted from Campo Martínez and Alvarez (2010). The measure of destination risk perception was adopted from Fuchs and Reichel (2006). All of these variables were measured using a seven-point scale (see the Appendix). Demographic characteristics such as age, gender and household income were also measured.

The experiment was carried out with individuals that were randomly assigned to four different groups. In Group A ($n = 70$), the participants read a news item about Turkey as a destination suffering from terrorism tied to an ongoing conflict. The text was written to highlight high risk elements (longstanding conflict, many casualties, violence extending to touristic regions and target of the attacks including tourists), following the literature (Kapuściński and Richards, 2016; Mansfeld and Pizam, 2011; Zhang *et al.*, 2023). The stimulus used (see the Appendix) was subject to prior feedback from a panel of experts.

The participants randomly assigned to Group B ($n = 79$) were exposed to two pictures of tourist attractions at the destination, Turkey, selected from the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism official website (T.C. Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı, 2024) from those photographs that are used for promotion. A pretest was performed on a convenience sample of 101 individuals who evaluated the available picture set. Those pictures with the highest scores were chosen as stimulus for the research (see the Appendix). The respondents in Group C ($n = 79$) were exposed to the pictures shown to individuals in Group B and subjected to the same news item as those in Group A. The respondents in Group D ($n = 81$) were not exposed to any stimulus, although they still answered both sets of questions.

To check the effect of the manipulation and facilitate interpretation, respondents were asked to answer an open-ended question after being exposed to the stimulus (or before answering the last set of questions for the control group), asking them to describe Turkey as a tourist destination (see the [Appendix](#)).

Results

The sample includes 309 US residents, of which 96.4% have said nationality. In total, 72% of the respondents state that they have traveled internationally for leisure purposes in the last three years. Furthermore, 61% of the respondents identify themselves as female and 39% as male. The average age is 39 years old (minimum: 20; maximum: 73). Respondents from various income levels are included in the sample, with 46.6% claiming to earn more than \$60,000 per year. Also, 89.3% of the individuals in the sample have not visited Turkey before (refer to [Table 1](#)).

Manipulation checks

The answers to the open-ended question asking the respondents to describe the destination were analyzed through content analysis, using the NVivo 11 program. The themes that were extracted for each group and their frequencies provide an indication of those aspects of the destination that are more salient in the respondents' mind immediately after being exposed to the stimulus. [Table 2](#) provides a list of the ten most repeated themes for the respondents in each group. The chi-square test ($\chi^2 = 526.87$; degrees of freedom = 54) shows significant differences between groups ($p < 0.00$). A graphical representation of the frequencies of the most repeated words for each group is shown in [Figure 2](#).

According to these results, individuals that are only exposed to the news (Group A) mostly mention conflicts and terror attacks, also referring to the danger at the destination. In contrast, those that are only shown the pictures (Group B) focus on the appealing aspects of the destination and comment on the beauty, history, culture and attractive scenery. Interestingly, those respondents who are simultaneously shown the pictures and the news (Group C) refer to the beauty of the destination, but they diminish their positive remarks with

Table 1 Demographic characteristics of the respondents

<i>Demographic variables</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Gender</i>		
Female	190	61.5
Male	115	37.2
Other	3	1.0
Missing	1	0.3
<i>Age</i>		
<25	34	11.0
25–35	113	36.6
36–45	79	25.6
46–55	42	13.6
56–65	24	7.8
>65	17	5.5
<i>Annual household income:</i>		
Less than \$20,000	29	9.4
\$21,000 – \$30,000	34	11.0
\$31,000 to \$40,000	30	9.7
\$41,000 to \$50,000	36	11.7
\$51,000 to \$60,000	36	11.7
Above \$60,000	144	46.6
Total	309	100.0

Source: Authors' own creation

mentions about the conflict and danger involved. Many individuals in this group allude to the conflicting information of the pictures versus the news item. Finally, the control group (Group D) seems to consider the potential for visiting the destination and mentions the culture and beauty, while also wondering about the safety of the place.

Comparisons between groups after exposure

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) test compares the groups' responses concerning the variables of interest after having been subjected to the stimuli (or not having been exposed for the control group). The findings (see Table 3) show statistically significant differences between the groups in all variables. The LSD post-hoc results assess the effect of the stimuli by comparing the control group to the other three. Significant differences ($p < 0.05$) exist between the control group and the rest in relation to destination risk perceptions, but not in terms of intention to visit. Further, only those individuals who were exposed to pictures of the destination's attractions on their own have significantly ($p = 0.017$) more positive feelings for the country in comparison to those in the control group. Finally, respondents who were subjected either to the news or to the pictures of the destination alone are significantly different ($p < 0.05$) than those respondents in the control group in their overall destination image. These differences are also shown graphically in Figure 3.

Pre-post experiment mean test results

To isolate the effect of the stimuli on the analyzed variables, a pre-post experiment mean test is performed. The findings (see Table 4) confirm that the changes in the mean value for all variables are not significant for the control group that was not subjected to stimuli. However, individuals who are shown the pictures (Group B) significantly improve their overall destination image, although not enough to increase their desire to visit, to improve their feelings for Turkey or to decrease their destination's risk perceptions. In contrast, for those who are exposed to the negative news (Group A), the overall destination image becomes more negative, as do their feelings for the country, their destination's risk perceptions and their intention to visit. The results also show that pictures of the destination's attractions moderately attenuate the negative effect of the news. When pictures are provided with the news (as in Group C), the individuals' feelings for Turkey are not significantly changed, indicating that the negative effect

Table 3 ANOVA – Assessment of the differences in the variables among the groups

	Group A News (n=70)	Group B Pictures (n=79)	Group C News + pictures (n = 79)	Group D Control (n=81)	F (p)
<i>Turkey's overall destination image</i>					
Mean ^a	3.51	4.84	4.01	4.10	10.04 (0.00)
SD	1.567	1.315	1.629	1.446	
<i>Feelings for Turkey as a country</i>					
Mean ^a	4.09	4.73	4.46	4.25	3.59 (0.01)
SD	1.442	1.163	1.196	1.347	
<i>Intention to visit Turkey</i>					
Mean ^b	3.54	4.38	3.81	3.84	3.06 (0.03)
SD	1.815	1.635	1.769	1.778	
<i>Turkey's perceived destination risk</i>					
Mean ^c	4.79	3.09	4.61	4.27	4.85 (0.00)
SD	1.693	1.398	1.628	1.388	
Notes: SD = standard deviation; ^a 1 = most negative; 7 = most positive; ^b 1 = lowest intention to visit; 7 = highest intention to visit; ^c 1 = lowest risk; 7 = highest risk					
Source: Authors' own creation					

Figure 3 ANOVA – differences among the groups derived from exposure to the stimuli

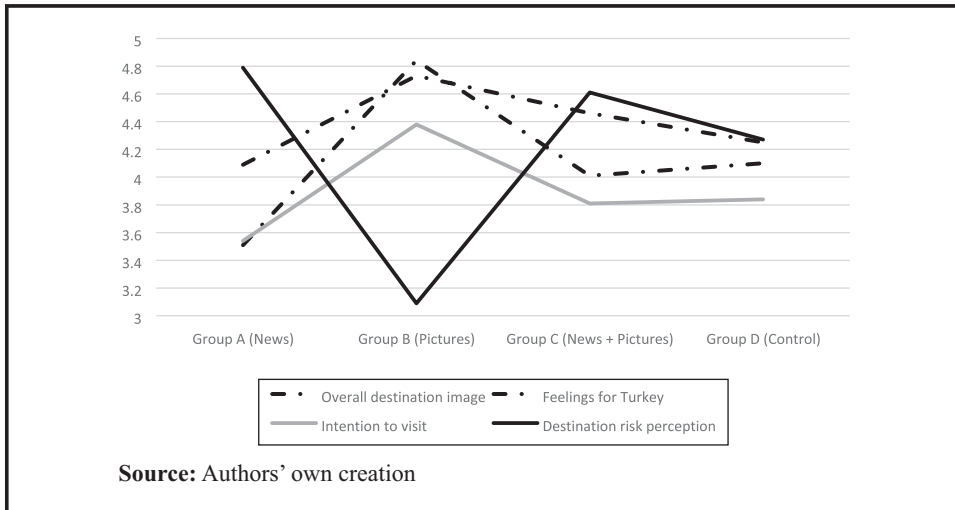


Table 4 Pre-post experiment means test for each of the groups

	Group A: News only (n = 70)		Group B: Pictures only (n = 79)		Group C: Pictures + news (n = 79)		Group D: Control (n = 81)	
	Pre Mean (SD)	Post Mean (SD)	Pre Mean (SD)	Post Mean (SD)	Pre Mean (SD)	Post Mean (SD)	Pre Mean (SD)	Post Mean (SD)
Turkey's overall destination image ^a	4.86 (1.52)*	3.51 (1.57)*	4.54 (1.40)*	4.84 (1.32)*	4.65 (1.31)*	4.01 (1.63)*	4.25 (1.39)	4.10 (1.45)
Feelings for Turkey as a country ^a	4.64 (1.25)*	4.09 (1.44)*	4.66 (1.25)	4.73 (1.16)	4.44 (1.16)	4.46 (1.19)	4.20 (1.31)	4.25 (1.35)
Intention to visit Turkey ^b	4.33 (1.75)*	3.54 (1.82)*	4.25 (1.74)	4.38 (1.64)	4.16 (1.76)*	3.81 (1.77)*	3.98 (1.75)	3.84 (1.78)
Turkey's perceived destination risk ^c	4.04 (1.59)*	4.79 (1.69)*	4.04 (1.47)	3.91 (1.40)	3.92 (1.59)*	4.61 (1.63)*	4.22 (1.63)	4.27 (1.39)

Notes: SD = standard deviation; * $p < 0.05$; ^a1 = most negative; 7 = most positive; ^b1 = lowest intention to visit; 7 = highest intention to visit; ^c1 = lowest risk; 7 = highest risk

Source: Authors' own creation

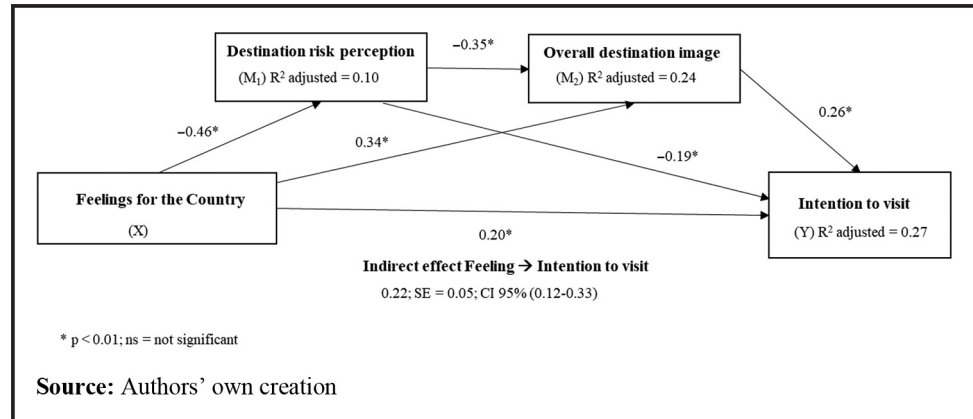
of the news is countered by the pictures of the destination. The overall destination image and the intention to visit are still negatively affected, although this effect is lower than that observed for Group A (those exposed only to the news).

Dependency analysis

To test the mediating effects of the destination's risk perceptions and the overall destination image, a causal mediation analysis is carried out with Process Model 6 (Hayes, 2018). The results are shown in Figure 4. The direct effects are discussed first, followed by the indirect ones.

The model proposes a direct relationship between the feelings for the country and the intention to visit (H1c), which is confirmed (0.20; $p < 0.05$). In addition, the mediating effect of the perceived risk and the overall destination image is established (total indirect effect = 0.22; SE = 0.05; 95% CI = 0.12 to 0.33). Indeed, the relationship between the feelings for the country and perceived risk is negative and significant (H1a is confirmed = -0.46; $p < 0.05$), as is that between the feelings for the country and the overall destination image (H1b is confirmed = 0.34; $p < 0.05$). The perceived risk affects directly and significantly the

Figure 4 Test of the basic theoretical model



intention to visit (*H2b* is confirmed = -0.19 ; $p < 0.05$), but it also plays a mediating role via the overall destination image (*H2a* is confirmed = -0.35 ; $p < 0.05$). Furthermore, the relationship between the overall destination image and the intention to visit is positive and significant (*H3* is confirmed = 0.26 ; $p < 0.05$). The results verify the importance that feelings for the country have for conflict-ridden destinations, while the mediating effect of risk perceptions and overall destination image are also verified.

The moderating effect of communications

In line with the theoretical discussion, we propose that communications concerning the destination, both positive (pictures of the destination's attractions) and negative (news about the conflict) have a moderating effect and increase the direct and indirect effect of feelings for the country on visitation intentions. To test this (*H4*), we ran a moderated mediation analysis (Process Model 85; Hayes, 2018).

According to the findings (see Figure 5), none of the stimuli (positive or negative) moderate the direct relationship between the feelings for the country and the intention to visit. However, the news message that provides a damaging account of the conflict increases the negative effect of the feelings for the country on risk perceptions (conditional effect = -0.70 ; $p < 0.05$) and overall destination image (conditional effect = -0.58 ; $p < 0.05$). In contrast, the pictures of the destination's attractions have a positive moderating influence, but only on the relationship between feelings for the country and overall destination image (conditional effect = 0.56 ; $p < 0.05$). Furthermore, when individuals are exposed to both the news and the pictures, the effect of both stimuli counteract each other so that the negative conditional effect of the damaging message on the destination's risk perceptions is attenuated to -0.37 ($p < 0.05$). In addition, when the news item is presented together with attractive pictures of the destination, the moderating effect on the relationship between the feelings for the country and the overall destination image becomes nonsignificant.

Discussion

This research confirms the essential role that feelings for the country play in shaping perceptions of a conflict-ridden destination and ultimately visitation decisions. When the country is subject to negative emotions, which for conflict-ridden destinations may be a consequence of an existing dispute (Alvarez *et al.*, 2020), the destination is seen as riskier and is also evaluated less favorably overall. The ultimate effect of these feelings for the country on the intention to visit is both direct and indirect, via the perceived risk and the overall destination image.

The study also verifies the moderating effect of the communications stimuli on the relationship between feelings for the country and intention to visit. Yet, this effect is exerted indirectly through the relation between the feelings for the country and the mediating variables, perceived risk and overall destination image, supporting the idea that visitation decisions are influenced by many considerations (Alvarez *et al.*, 2020). Thus, communications, positive and negative, only have a minimal influence, which is mainly exercised indirectly via other variables.

For conflict-ridden destinations, communications are generally provided by the media, which usually magnify the risk and negative image (Cahyanto and Liu-Lastres, 2020). Indeed, our research confirms that the news stimulus that highlights the conflict and terror attacks has a negative moderating effect on the influence that feelings for the country have on risk perceptions and overall destination image.

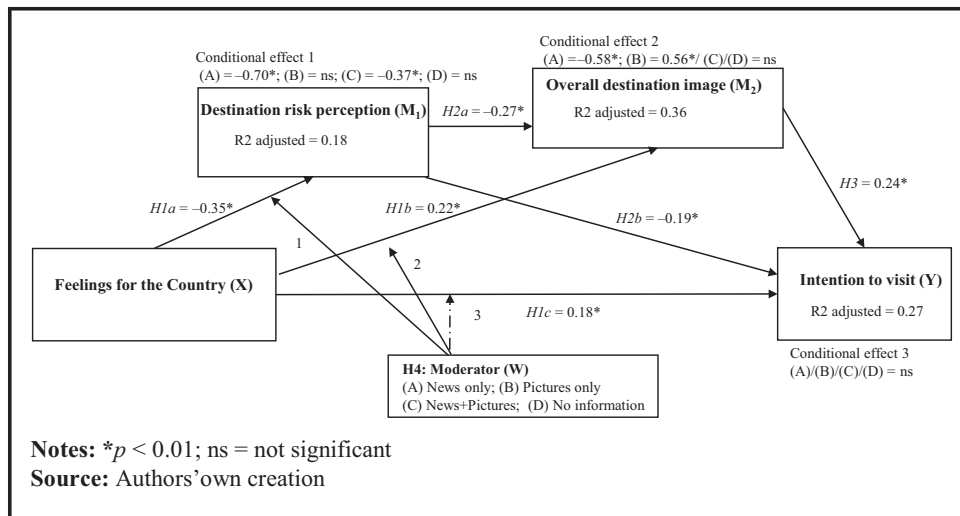
In addition, in support of the literature about the use of visual images to highlight the destination's appeal in response to crises (Avraham, 2021), our study verifies that pictures of the destination's attractions, on their own, have a positive moderating effect, but only on the overall destination image. Hence, this favorable effect is not strong enough to affect risk perceptions, possibly because the pictures only allow respondents to gauge the appearance of the place (Li *et al.*, 2016) and not the destination's risk status, which is strongly shaped by reported incidents (Xie *et al.*, 2023). Nevertheless, when the pictures are shown together with adverse news related to the conflict, they diminish the negative effect of the news on the destination's risk perceptions and overall image. These conclusions are also supported by the respondents' answers in the open-ended question describing the destination. Certainly, individuals that are simultaneously shown the pictures and the news refer to the beauty of the destination, along with the conflict and danger involved, while also commenting on the mismatching information provided by both stimuli.

Conclusions

Theoretical implications

The study addresses a gap in the tourism literature and extends the existing knowledge concerning the role of country-based effect on destination's perceptions and visitation decisions. The investigation provides insights into the mechanisms through which feelings for a country operate to influence the intention to visit. Previous studies have examined stereotypes and biases concerning the country from a cognitive perspective, largely

Figure 5 Test of the moderating effect of the communications



ignoring the emotions that countries evoke (Micevski *et al.*, 2021). These are especially relevant for conflict-ridden destinations that may be target to negative feelings. Our study confirms that these emotions amplify the destination's risk perceptions. Moreover, these feelings are crucial determinants of the intention to visit, both directly and indirectly. Therefore, future research about conflict-ridden destinations should give greater relevance to emotions concerning the country, especially those that are grounded on disputes.

The research also adds to the literature on ongoing crises' communications by verifying that both negative and positive messages affect the impact of country-based feelings. That is, exposure to communications about the destination may diminish or amplify the effect of negative emotions that are directed to the country because of an ongoing conflict. Especially the news about the conflict and associated terror attacks, on its own, substantially increases the negative impact of the emotions on both perceived risk and overall destination image. Nevertheless, this harmful influence of the news is not strong enough to directly damage visitation intentions. Thus, our study adds insights into the mechanism that shapes visitation decisions via negative communications, establishing that the impact of these adverse messages is on mediating variables – destination image and risk perceptions.

In addition, the study significantly contributes to the literature by verifying the ability of pictures of the destination's attractions to mitigate the adverse influence of news concerning terror attacks. Although this premise emerges from the literature (Jia *et al.*, 2021; Yang *et al.*, 2022), our investigation confirms this conclusion empirically through the use of an experiment. Thus, this research points to the power of the destination's pull factors that can be conveyed via pictorial communications as a way to mitigate negative textual information. Furthermore, the study offers insights that are relevant for destinations, such as Turkey, that combine a strong touristic appeal with risk elements and the potential for negative affect due to conflict in the country.

Practical implications

This investigation's results lead to several practical implications. Given the significance of country-based emotions as established in this study, destination managers need to understand whether their countries elicit positive or negative emotions in their target markets, and consider how these may be amplified or mitigated. Faced with negative emotions, it may be necessary to disassociate the destination from the country (Micevski *et al.*, 2021) by focusing on communication strategies that highlight the attractive aspects of the place.

The study indicates that negative reports about conflicts and terror can be mitigated with positive information about the destination's attractions. Destination managers should learn how to use visual information effectively to repair the harm to the destination's image. According to Avraham (2021), the strategies used by European decision-makers to restore their destinations after terror attacks include finding alternatives to traditional news outlets. Our research indicates that the use of attractive visual content may counteract negative information about security incidents and terror attacks. Destination managers should also consider which communications may be best used at different stages of the trip to trigger positive emotions. For example, social media may be especially effective to convey visual representations of destination attractions, which may diminish negative feelings for the country that are derived from a conflictive situation.

Further, the pictures used for this research are those taken from the destination's official website, while different stimuli can be examined. Previous research (Cheung *et al.*, 2020) on evocative images that allow dreaming and a vicarious experience indicate that new immersive technologies, such as virtual reality, open a wide range of possibilities for the management of destinations in crisis. This is a topic that should be further investigated.

Limitations and further research

Our study focuses on Turkey, a country that is touristically appealing because of its many attractions, but which also suffers from negative biases due to its geopolitical situation and longstanding conflict (Alvarez *et al.*, 2020; Tasci *et al.*, 2007; Uner *et al.*, 2023). For such a country, the findings suggest that the destination's pull factors may be conveyed via visual media to diminish negative country-based emotions that may exist because of a dispute. However, Turkey stands out as a unique country where its conflict is localized and cyclical, and many pull factors exist. For a greater generalization of the findings, the research should be replicated in other destinations with slightly different contexts.

Similarly, the research centers on the views of US residents, a segment of interest for Turkish tourism. Nevertheless, the views of these individuals are shaped by their cultural context, their perceived destination psychological and geographical distance, their familiarity with Turkey and their exposure to information about the place. Consequently, future studies in other source countries may provide a more complete understanding of the topic.

Finally, our research focuses on how visual communication addresses negative textual information. Future research should explore other aspects of the communications process, such as examining whether the source of the information (destination management organization and social media influencer) or the media channel used to provide it are relevant. Such an investigation would be of practical use to conflict-ridden destinations.

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Picture stimulus used for Groups B and C

Figure A1 A bird's-eye view of the Hagia Sophia historical building in Istanbul



Source: From the archives of the Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Culture and Tourism, Directorate General of Promotion - Used with permission

Figure A2 View of the unique landscape in the Cappadocia region



Source: From the archives of the Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Culture and Tourism, Directorate General of Promotion - Used with permission

News textual stimulus shown to Groups A and C

The armed conflict between the Republic of Turkey and Kurdish separatist groups has been going on since the mid-1980s. Together with the armed conflict taking place in the Southeastern part of the country, terror attacks have occurred both in this Southeastern region and in other areas of Turkey, including Istanbul and Ankara. These attacks have targeted Turkish military personnel, civilians and tourists and resulted in a heavy death toll.

Questionnaire items

Overall destination image

My overall evaluation of Turkey as a tourist destination is (1 = extremely negative – 7 = extremely positive).

Destination risk perception

I consider Turkey in general as a risky destination (1 = strongly disagree – 7 = strongly agree).

Feelings for the country

In general, what are your feelings for Turkey as a country (1 = extremely negative – 7 = extremely positive).

Intention to visit

I would like to visit Turkey in the near future (1 = strongly disagree – 7 = strongly agree).

Corresponding author

Sara Campo can be contacted at: sara.campo@uam.es

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