

Social Trust, Safety and the Choice of Tourist Destination

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Abstract

Does social trust influence safety and tourists' destination choice? Our claim is that the roots of safety may take two forms: either formal institutions or informal institutions. Formal institutions concern how society can build up control mechanisms through the legal system, police authority and military. The problem is that high visibility of police and military in public spaces may give the tourist the impression of an unsafe and insecure destination. Instead, social trust through self-enforcements of social norms for behaviour may be important because the informal institutions guarantee the safety of tourists (and locals) without signalling a problem with safety. Building social trust may further enhance the feeling of safety and thereby attract even more tourists. Thus, our trust-safety theory may guide the active use of social trust by tourist officials and policy makers.

Keywords: Social trust, Safety, Tourism, Destination choice, Police, Military, Self-regulation

“Understand, our police officers put their lives on the line for us every single day.

They’ve got a tough job to do to maintain public safety and

hold accountable those who break the law.”

Barack Obama

1. Introduction

A number of factors influence on tourists’ choice of holiday destination. Page & Connell (2006), Goeldner & Ritchie (2006), Sirakaya & Woodside (2005) and Hsu et al. (2009) point to factors such as availability of activities, affordability, loyalty, geographical proximity, availability of cultural and entertainment attractions, nature experiences, personal safety, relaxation, meeting new people, and so on. Looking at the different factors, it seems obvious that the decision to go on vacation not only involves tourists being motivated by a need to escape everyday life or the search for exploration and new experiences but also an object; that is, a destination that can satisfy the need (Jensen & Blichfeldt, 2009). Accordingly, “the push and pull factors melt together in the brain of the consumer” (Goosens, 2000), and in practice, almost all newer studies within tourism decision making includes both types of forces (Hsu et al., 2009; Yoon & Uysal, 2005). The existing literature shows that safety and security are well established as important factors influencing tourists’ choice of destination (Bianchi, 2015; Pisonero, 2015; Kozak et al., 2007; Page & Connell, 2006; Mansfield & Pizam, 2005; Wilks & Page, 2003). What is important is tourists’ perceived risk, not the absolute or actual risk at a destination (Yang et al., 2015). The reason for this is that tourists are mainly concerned with the risk influencing themselves (Yang et al., 2015).

Many of the factors that are important for tourists’ choice of destination may be influenced by tourism firms, destination managers and public policy. However, the perceived safety and security risk may be more difficult to control or even change by tourism stakeholders. In particular, formal institutions concern how society can build up control mechanisms through the legal system, police authority and military. The problem is, however, that high visibility of police and military in public spaces may give the tourist the impression of an unsafe and insecure destination. Instead, social trust through self-enforcements of social norms for behaviour may be important because the informal institutions guarantee the safety of tourists (and locals) without signalling a problem with safety. Building social trust may further enhance the feeling of safety and thereby attract even more tourists. Thus, our trust-safety theory may guide the active use of social trust by tourist officials and policy makers.

Here, we contribute to the destination choice literature by linking the potential motivation factor safety to social trust. To our knowledge, there has so far been no attempt to link social trust with the importance of safety for the choice of destination. This is a puzzle as the interdisciplinary concept of social trust has lately received much attention in the literature (Paldam, 2000; Paldam & Svendsen, 2000; Ostrom & Ahn, 2009; Svendsen & Svendsen, 2016). Thus, the main research question is as follows: Does social trust influence safety and the choice of tourist destination?

We answer this question in the following way. First, Section 2 introduces the concept of social trust. Next, Section 3 develops a theoretical model that links social trust, tourists' feeling of safety and the choice of destination, while Section 4 concludes the article.

2. Social Trust

It is our theoretical claim that safety not only depends on formal institutions such as police and a country's legal system but also on informal institutions such as trust. Enforcement of safety only by formal institutions in the form of control systems may be extremely costly for the society, not only because of the cost of controlling but also because of the negative influence on images important for tourists' decision making. However, where other motivation factors relevant for tourists' choice of destination may be possible to change through innovation and marketing initiatives, it is less clear whether and how the feeling of safety can be influenced through conscious actions such as trust-based behaviour.

The concept of social trust counteracts the traditional "economic man" assumption by focusing on self-enforcement of norms, such as safety in the streets, rather than strict profit maximization for one's personal benefit (Olson, 1965; Ostrom, 1998; Svendsen & Svendsen, 2003). Overall, the social trust approach may be regarded as an attempt to combine sociology and economics. Coleman was the first to define social trust as predictable behaviour in relation to a norm that, again, facilitates people's ability to co-operate on achieving a common goal (Coleman, 1988). This voluntary co-operation based on trust is self-enforcing and establishes an informal institution without any written rules in contrast to forced co-operation, which is enforced by a third party following the written-down rules of a formal institution. The Coleman argument may be traced back to Hume ([1739] 1984).

Thus, informal institutions as trust and self-enforcement of social norms for human interaction matter in relation to safety and how strangers, such as tourists, are treated. Fukuyama (1995, p. 153) has defined trust in the following way: "Trust arises when a community shares a set of moral values in such a way as to create regular expectations of regular and honest behaviour". In other words, when *social trust* is present, regular and predictable behaviour prevails, and the likelihood of being cheated decreases. A local you happen to meet down the street as a tourist is less likely to break the norm and attack or cheat you when social trust and the level of self-enforcement are high even though there is a private economic net gain from opportunistic behaviour among locals when interacting socially with tourists.

The social dimension of human behaviour is also reflected in the classical prisoner's dilemma games. Here, economists have long wondered why people tend to co-operate more than economic theory and the idea of *homo oeconomicus* would predict (Smith, 1776; Hillman, 2009). Such excess co-operation may therefore take place in prisoner's dilemma games because of the presence of social trust (Poulsen & Svendsen, 2005). In sum, both experimental and everyday observations indicate that people tend to co-operate based on informal rules of the game for social interaction such as social trust (Poulsen, 2009). Thus, it is possible to share a social trust norm among many locals when a social sanctioning mechanism is at work including both rewards (when cooperating) and punishments (when cheating) (Ostrom, 1990). Swedberg has defined such a social structure more specifically as a recurrent and patterned

interaction between agents that is maintained through self-enforcement and social sanctions (Swedberg, 1994). The dominant trust norm in question is simply an informal rule of the game for appropriate behaviour. Coleman (1987, p. 138) puts it this way: "... a norm may prescribe certain actions, such as the norm that an athlete on a team should play his best". Likewise, locals should do their best to respect the trust norm in question.

In practice, the actual level of social trust can be measured as the percentage of a population answering yes to the question "Do you think that most people can be trusted, or can't you be too careful?" (Svendsen & Svendsen, 2016). Here, Denmark and the other Scandinavian countries rank highest in the world, possessing more than 70 percent social trust, followed by the Netherlands. Citizens in Denmark and Scandinavia, where social trust is the highest in the world, are then likely to give social rewards to other citizens who protect tourists and punish defectors. This may be compared to Trinidad, for example, which is ranked at the bottom with only 4 % social trust (ibid., Svendsen & Svendsen, 2010).

The following story illustrates the difference between high and low trust countries. Some years ago, one of the authors travelled from Denmark to a conference in a non-safe city, namely Durban in South Africa (10 % social trust) (ibid.). Here, in the next-largest city of South Africa, tourists were being attacked in the open street without anyone taking notice. There were armed guards most places, and people clutched their bags and belongings. One simply had to change strategy and adapt to the new and unsafe environment, which was most troublesome. Soon, even tourists from high-trust countries began wondering whether they would be assaulted when moving outside the hotel and facing strangers in street:

"The first day at the conference there is an outbreak of panic because many participants are assaulted. The thugs wait outside the hotel and chase hotel guests who venture outside carrying valuables. One sits on top of the victim holding a knife to his throat while the other searches the pockets"...After many protests and cries for help from the participants, the organizers order a bus for the next day, so that we can run from the hotel lobby to the bus and thus avoid assaults. We look like a bunch of horrified lemmings squeezing into the bus." (Svendsen, 2014, p. 8).

So obviously, the self-enforcement system only works as long as most citizens follow and sanction the norm in question. If the majority of the population does not sanction the norm of safety, as was the case in Durban, it would be foolish for single citizens to try to sanction this norm because the costs incurred from doing so would be extremely high when most people are free-riding and not acting. Such a citizen would not even receive any social rewards for his or her contribution and would have to pay the cost of encountering many defectors in everyday life.

For tourists travelling to destinations that are often more or less unknown to them beforehand, it may be important to feel safe that the people they meet can be trusted and that unacceptable behaviour will be punished. This is especially true when the cultural distance to the tourist-generating country and destination is high or where previous travelling experiences in general and with the specific destination is low (Garg, 2015). Consequently, we hypothesize that social trust may matter for the choice of destination when choosing high-trust countries

such as Denmark and indirectly because social trust reduces the need for visible formal institutions.

Social trust is not only important for bringing down the cost of controlling but also for tourists' perception of safety. Visibility of police and military in the streets and at tourist attractions may, on the one hand, signal a country that focuses on security and safety; on the other hand, it may signal incidents and problems and give tourists the impression that this is an unsafe destination to visit. As a consequence, the country's image is negatively affected by too much formal control. Instead, the informal institutions may play a positive role. As social trust basically builds on norms and predictable behaviour, it means that if a person does not follow these informal rules, that person will simply be socially sanctioned, ostracized by the group, receive a bad reputation and, as a consequence, bear substantial extra costs from not co-operating.

3. A Theoretical Model

We will now develop a theoretical model that shows how co-operating with people who trust you are easier, simply because the likelihood of being deceived is lower when trust and predictable behaviour prevail. In contrast, if a local attacks a tourist in the street, he is breaking both the formal and informal rules of the game and is cheating. Such presence of self-enforcement increases perceived safety even further in a country above the level established by formal institutions. As the degree of social trust varies among countries, tourists' choice of destination may depend on it, as reflected in the safety motivation factor.

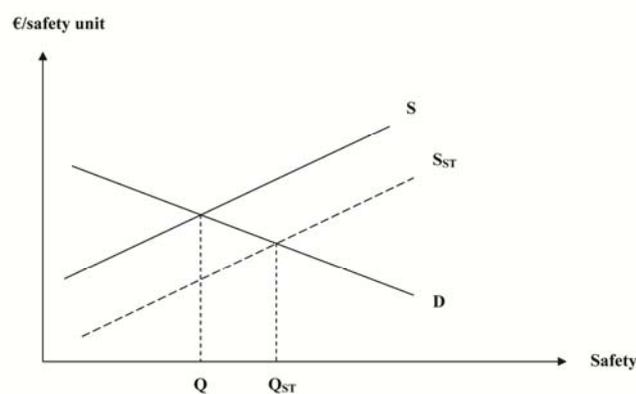


Figure 1. Social trust and safety

Figure 1 suggests why more safety is accomplished with social trust implying social sanctioning. In Figure 1, the aggregated demand curve for safety in society, D , is shown as the classical case of a downward-sloping straight line. Here, we simply assume that any citizen receives less and less utility per extra unit of safety. The supply curve, S , for formal provision of safety by police and court systems, is shown as an increasing straight line, indicating that the cost to society from providing one extra unit of safety becomes more and more expensive after picking the “low-hanging fruits” first. As society tries to provide full safety (100%), many

policemen and comprehensive control systems are needed, implying extremely high costs but also a negative impact on the perceived image of the destination.

Without the presence of social trust, society will provide Q . *With* the presence of social trust and the possibility of inflicting social costs on any opportunists who fail to co-operate by attacking tourists in the streets, this self-enforcement of safety means that even more safety can be provided, so that we now obtain the new S_{ST} . As drawn, the S_{ST} curve crosses the D curve at Q_{ST} , implying that more safety is provided, given the presence of social trust on top of the formal institutions. Here, again for the sake of simplicity, we assume that community members can punish one another socially at a negligible cost.

Thus, social sanctioning and the maintenance of social trust increases safety even further in any society to the benefit of tourists. More voluntary transactions can take place at a lower cost, and trust will increase predictability in society because it is no longer necessary to have a formal third party for monitoring and enforcing all transactions. In this way, a high-trust country is capable of providing more collective goods, such as extra informal safety provision, than a low-trust country. Self-enforcement among locals based on social trust is in fact a less costly way of enforcing safety for overall society than third-party enforcement by police, court systems, and so on. As argued by Ostrom (1990), self-regulating behaviour among local groups can often be the optimal solution for overall society rather than costly state intervention. A simple model is depicted in Figure 2 below.

Social trust ↑ → Safety (Informal self-enforcement) ↑ → Likelihood of choosing tourist destination ↑

Figure 2. Model

Overall, the presence of social trust increases the likelihood of choosing the tourist destination in question.

4. Conclusion

Our main research question was the following: Does social trust influence safety and the choice of destination? We argued that the interdisciplinary concept of social trust could be an underlying factor that contributes to locals' and tourists' feeling of safety, perceived risks and perceived image of the destination. Thus, understanding the mechanism of social trust creation may enable changes in the safety factor. We developed a trust-safety theory, arguing that social trust increases the level of self-regulation and the enforcement of appropriate norms that further enhance the feeling of safety and thereby attract even more tourists. In this way, it may be possible to improve on safety without signalling problems through more visible police force in the public space.

Safety is already one of the main factors in the literature on motivation theory, but arguably, a link exists between social trust and safety in a society. We argued that this causal relationship

may be a fertile topic for future research because the presence of social trust most likely enhances the ability to co-operate. In other words, one implication of the study is that because Scandinavian countries rank the highest in the world in terms of trust, these countries have a competitive advantage in the tourist market because of self-enforcement of appropriate social norms, which may, again, result in an even higher feeling of safety. If this trust-safety theory holds true, it follows that if the level of social trust had been higher in South Africa or Brazil than now, then even more tourists would begin to choose these destinations because of increased safety levels combined with less visible third-party enforcement.

Overall, our claim that social trust is a new motivation factor for tourists' choice of destination needs to be tested even further in future research. At the moment, comparable data on social trust is available for many countries. A relevant qualitative question to pose foreign tourists in the future could be whether they trust most local people in the country of destination. However, comparable data for safety and other motivation factors do not exist at the moment but is needed to further analyse the link between social trust and safety. If our claim turns out to be verified in future qualitative and quantitative research, further efforts should be undertaken by countries to enhance the levels of social trust and thereby safety in order to attract more tourists.

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