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Explaining GA residents' pro-tourism behaviour during the COVID-19 pandemic

Joseph C. Barr*
University of Georgia Parks, Recreation and Tourism Management Program

Tara J. Denley
University of Georgia Parks, Recreation and Tourism Management Program

Kyle Maurice Woosnam
University of Georgia Parks, Recreation and Tourism Management Program

*corresponding author, Joseph.Barr@uga.edu

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Abstract

Introduction

As of December 1, 2021, the World Health Organization (2021) reported 47,945,945 COVID-19 cases in the United States.. Unfortunately, 773,083 individuals lost their lives due to the virus. As numbers of cases and fatalities continue to mount, many U.S. governors are conflicted with the balance of protecting their residents while trying to stimulate economies in their states. Given tourism ranks among the top-10 industries in many U.S. states, governors are faced with tough decisions concerning tourism, especially considering residents may not want to be subjected to visitors and the increased potential to contract COVID-19. This research focuses on residents' responses to pro-tourism behaviour within the state of Georgia where contentious perspectives have been voiced that the decision to reopen the economy is potentially political and risks public health (Amy & Nadler, 2021). In research completed in both Hong Kong (Wassler, Wang, and Hung (2021) and Mainland China (Zuo, Gursoy, & Wall, 2017), a direct relationship between trust in the government and residents' intentions to support various forms of tourism in their communities (Wassler, Wang, and Hung, 2021; Zuo, Gursoy, & Wall, 2017) as been found. This study aims to build on previous work by Yeager, Boley, Woosnam, and Green (2019) which showed that GA residents' personal economic benefits as well as both positive and negative impacts of tourism has on their support for tourism. The research also intends to build on the work by Joo et al. (2021), that found that the return of tourists in South Korea during the pandemic was shown to be a negative predictor of residents' support of tourism. To measure residents' pro-tourism behavior this model uses the Social Exchange theory. The social exchange theory is defined as "a general sociological theory [though born out of economics research conducted by George Homans (1961)] concerned with understanding the exchange of resources

between individuals and groups in an interaction situation” (Ap, 1992, p. 668). Individuals will remain in the relationship (or in the case of residents’ attitudes research, support tourism) so long as it is beneficial to them. If it is not, individuals will either exit the relationship, desire a change, or as with perceptions of tourism, withdraw support (Erul, Woosnam, Ribeiro, & Salazar, 2021). Therefore this study goal was to examine the degree to which trust in the GA state government, personal economic benefit from tourism, perceived risk of COVID-19, and perceived impacts of tourism all contribute to residents’ intentions to support tourism in Georgia during the pandemic.

Methods

This work tests a social exchange model which includes four potential predictors of residents’ pro-tourism behaviour. This study attempted to target the general population of residents living in Georgia who were at least 18 years of age. To reach this population, the research team identified 61 different community groups focused on residents in various parts of Georgia hosted on the social networking sites Facebook and Reddit. A link to an online Qualtrics survey was posted twice, three weeks apart to ensure adequate coverage without spamming community members. After the second posting of the survey link on social media groups, 895 participants had responded. After checking responses for thoughtfulness and completion, 410 responses were removed, resulting in 485 responses for analysis.

Results and Discussion

This study is among the first to examine residents’ pro-tourism behavior considering five constructs derived from the social exchange theory while living in a time of “new normalcy” amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The proposed model was assessed using structural equation modeling whereby eight of the 11 proposed hypotheses were supported. Perceived positive and

negative tourism impacts were the strongest predictors of pro-tourism behavior. Although the perceived risk of COVID-19 was not a significant predictor, the everchanging nature of the pandemic could impact this relationship on pro-tourism behavior and should be studied further.

The results have countered existing research showing that the perceived risk of COVID-19 does not have a significant negative impact on the residents being less welcoming to tourists (Zenker and Kock, 2020). In contrast, several constructs showed support for previous work (Megeirhi, Woosnam, Ribeiro, Ramkissoon, and Denley, 2020) who explained the overall variance of pro-tourism behaviour in residents. Perceived positive and perceived negative impacts of tourism were each found to significantly predict pro-tourism behaviour, such that the former impact demonstrated a positive relationship (H10) and the latter impact demonstrated a negative relationship (H11). These findings are in line with what other authors (e.g., Eusébio et al., 2018; Ouyang et al., 2017; Ribeiro et al., 2017; and Styliadis & Terzidou, 2014) have found during pre-COVID-19 times. Our findings further validate what others have reported connecting the two perceived tourism impact forms to pro-tourism behaviour in a time of COVID-19 (Kamata, 2021; Tilaki et al., 2021).

The implications of this study will assist stakeholders as they manage tourism in communities when developing communication strategies to further increase residents' pro-tourism support during a pandemic. However, further studies should be completed at various stages of the pandemic to continue to explore residents' perspectives of tourism during this tumultuous time. Considering the volatile nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, resident attitudes may quickly change, and destination stakeholders will need recent data to ensure effective marketing strategies.

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