



Sense of safety toward tourism destinations: A social constructivist perspective

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ABSTRACT

Travel is inherently associated with risk. Scholars have examined the composition of destination safety perceptions, safety climate, and the role of safety as a sub-dimension of destination image. This study aims to address a research gap by revealing a more detailed construction process of tourists' sense of destination safety from a social constructivist perspective. By collecting data from a leading Chinese tourism social media platform, tourists' sense of safety is constructed based on key subjects and contents at different travel stages, that is, before, during, and after a trip. The findings of the study contribute to the literature on tourism safety by emphasizing the need to understand tourists' sense of safety under various space–time conditions. Based on multiple stages of tourists' sense-of-safety construction, this study provides practical implications to help destination management organizations enhance local tourism safety and management.

1. Introduction

Destination safety and security are important factors that tourists consider when making travel decisions, especially when visiting overseas places that are unfamiliar to them (Reisinger & Mavondo, 2005). Tourism safety research is intertwined with the literature on tourism risk; tourism safety has occasionally been investigated in relation to safety threats (Xie, Zhang, & Morrison, 2021). Different from tourism risks correlated with terrorism, war and political instability, crime, natural disasters, or health hazards (e.g. SARS) (Botterill et al., 2013; Cartwright, 2000; Neumayer, 2004; Samitasa, Asterioub, Polyzosc, & Kenourgios, 2018), tourism safety emphasizes stable and orderly conditions—namely being protected and free from injury or danger during tourism activities.

Tourism scholars have proposed various ways to argue that safety is part of a destination image. Examples include a stable social order, a balanced environment, the friendliness of locals, the presence of public security systems, and available facilities and equipment (Chauhan, 2007; George, 2003; Xie et al., 2021). However, tourists' sense of safety largely depends on how people construct safety perceptions about destinations under different conditions. When safety and security cues are lacking or fail to meet expectations, tourists generally view a destination as less safe.

Despite its similarities with risk perception, tourists' sense of safety encapsulates the assurance of being protected from—or unlikely to experience—danger or injury. Risk and safety occupy opposite ends of a continuum; therefore, it remains debatable whether one's sense of safety reflects a fear of specific offenses or marries a general feeling of insecurity with a lack of social trust (Valentea & Pertegasb, 2018; Vieno, Roccatto, & Russo, 2013). In addition, one's sense of safety about traveling to a destination may be limited to hygiene factors which inform travel decisions.

The notion of destination risk has been extensively investigated for years (e.g. Sönmez & Graefe, 1998a; Tsaour, Tzeng, & Wang, 1997; Walters, Shipway, Miles, & Aldrigui, 2017). Research on tourism safety remains comparatively fragmented; this subject is often treated as a dimension of destination image. Recently, Xie et al. (2021) conducted a revelatory study on tourists' perceived destination safety. Specifically, the authors proposed that tourists' perceptions of destination safety embody a higher-order construct containing five sub-dimensions: the perceived safety of 1) human elements, 2) facilities and equipment elements, 3) the natural environment, 4) the social environment, and 5) management elements. These sub-dimensions were drawn from safety system theory and the 4Ms (material, method, machine, man) from the accident system. Yen, Tsaour, and Tsai (2021) adopted a similar approach when devising a scale to assess destination safety climate. Their scale

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includes seven dimensions: safety norms, safety management, activities and equipment, safety resources, infrastructure and environment, travel safety risks, and tourist–resident interaction. These studies have helped to clarify the concept of tourism safety and presented useful construct measures for quantitative research.

One's perceived safety of an external environment is closely tied to the individual's personality, upbringing, and life experience. Many destinations, especially overseas, are new to tourists. Thus, visitors often require detailed information before departure (Carter, 1998; Reisinger & Mavondo, 2005; Singleton & Wang, 2014). Tourists' sense of safety also develops during their trip and varies by destination. Different from a pre-trip sense of safety, which is rooted in the information that individuals obtain prior to leaving, the sense of safety generated in a destination involves more actors and depends on how tourists interact with them.

Given a thin understanding of how people form opinions about destination safety and how these feelings can shift during a trip, this study uses a constructivist paradigm to explore the social construction of a sense of safety along different time–space dimensions. By applying a netnography method, this study presents an in-depth understanding of how tourists generate a sense of safety towards destinations via identifying key subjects at different stages of their trip. Findings produce recommendations for destination management organizations (DMOs) to address safety-related issues. The results are also expected to aid tourism destination stakeholders in enhancing safety images.

2. Sense of safety

Safety typically refers to a condition of being protected from or unlikely to encounter danger, risk, or injury. Tourism safety represents a core destination attribute (Dolnicar & Grun, 2013; Marine-Roig & Huertas, 2020; Sönmez & Graefe, 1998a). It includes factors such as personal safety, political stability, riots, civil rights violations, and crime rates (Dolnicar & Grun, 2013). The concept of safety in tourism has been researched from numerous angles and described using different terminology. Collectively, however, the terms generally cover similar phenomena. For example, Xie et al. (2021) defined travel safety as “the degree of risk that can be tolerated during travel, which is a collective term for tourism activities in a balanced, stable and orderly condition” (p. 1232). Tourists' perceived safety reflects their personal assessments of possible threats, loss, or injury during travel (Chauhan, 2007). A destination's safety climate captures overall perceptions of destination safety (Yen et al., 2021). Zou and Meng (2020) described a sense of safety in a tourism context as individuals' emotional experiences resulting from the extent to which the external environment and safety conditions meet personal safety needs.

A large body of tourism safety-related research has employed quantitative scales to conceptualize safety and its connections with tourists' travel decisions, destination image perceptions, and revisit intentions. One's sense of safety about a particular destination is highly subjective. This feeling is contingent on intrinsic factors such as one's personality traits (Gstaetner, Rodger, & Lee, 2017; Reisinger & Mavondo, 2005), sociodemographic background (e.g. age and gender), culture and nationality, income, social status, safety knowledge, and risk tolerance (Amir, Ismail, & See, 2015; Clifford, Brander, Trimble, & Houser, 2018). For example, McIntyre and Roggenbuck (1998) argued that a passive personality combined with low-level activity often generates feelings of peace, calm, enjoyment, and safety, whereas an active personality is more likely to induce feelings of arousal, stress, and even fear. Individuals' past travel experiences greatly affect their safety perceptions as well: experienced travelers are usually more risk-tolerant than novices (Lepp & Gibson, 2003; Warton & Brander, 2017). Sönmez and Graefe (1998b) quantitatively examined international tourists' likelihood of traveling to certain regions based on prior experiences. Individuals who had encountered crime and violence in their lives tended to be more accepting of risk.

Although some tourists are adventurous and sensation-seeking, people evaluate safety based on their perceived probability of facing accidents, injuries, or even death (Rosselló, Becken, & Santana-Gallego, 2020). Therefore, actors from a destination's external environment contribute to tourists' decision making and sense of safety. Ghaderi, Saboori, and Khoshkam (2017) contended that media coverage about destination incidents, crises, or events is often biased or exaggerated. By contrast, if alerts are published by the government or public travel advisory bodies, the information tends to be more reliable.

In light of the preceding discussion, this study regards one's sense of safety as an emotional experience involving interactions with actors from the external environment (Barnes, 2018). This social phenomenon is closely tied to ‘when’ and ‘where’ an individual experiences it. ‘When’ refers to the time perspective: individuals' judgments of whether a destination is safe differ with where they are in their tourism experience. Research has provided evidence of the predictive effects of people's safety perceptions when choosing potential tourism destinations. Perceived tourism safety thus plays a key role in tourists' decision making and is a critical component of the tourist experience (George, 2010; Rittichainuwat, Nelson, & Rahmafritia, 2018; Sönmez & Graefe, 1998a). For instance, frequent terrorist attacks in certain regions have deterred tourists from visiting (Sönmez & Graefe, 1998b): in Thailand, bombings at Had Yai International Airport, a Carrefour supermarket in Bangkok, and a hotel in Songkhla on April 3, 2005, led 20% of inbound tourists and 30% of domestic tourists to cancel their trips (Thai Press Report, 2005). However, people's impressions of destination safety can change once they visit in person as discussed below (Rittichainuwat, 2013).

Tourists' sense of destination safety is also related to space (i.e. ‘where’ they are). People tend to feel more secure when they are not in the actual environment (Eitzinger & Wiedemann, 2007; Ryan, 2003). Being away from a place and trying to make decisions in a familiar environment (i.e. at home) may generate unrealistic feelings. People's judgments vary when they are in physical places. The ‘where’ question is also linked to one's cultural orientation. People from different countries, regions, or cultures are apt to exhibit unique perceptions of safety and security when faced with the same object (Reisinger & Mavondo, 2005).

The prospect of danger does not always discourage people from visiting a destination; some tourists consider such places to be mysterious or adventurous (George, 2003; Li, Wen, & Ying, 2018; Mawby, 2000). In a qualitative study, Carter (1998) held in-depth interviews with international travelers and found that informants categorized regions differently based on perceived safety: Europe and North America seemed safe, Africa seemed dangerous and a place to avoid, and Asia seemed risky but exotic and inviting. Accordingly, this study argues that tourists' sense of safety towards a destination constitutes a socially constructed process involving subjective interpretations of the external environment depending on when and where the experience happens.

3. Methods

To explore the meaning of one's sense of safety about a destination, this study framed this phenomenon as a continuous formative process involving multiple actors in a tourism context. Different from a quantitative approach intended to produce construct indicators or to predict tourists' attitudes or behavioral intentions by establishing correlation/causality, social construction theory posits that people build their reality via interactivity; this theory also emphasizes the interactive process of social practice (Wang, 2013). Individuals' sense of safety is not only a subjective feeling but also highly dependent on individuals' interactions with other actors in the external environment (An, 2003). As such, netnography—an approach to social media content analysis—was deemed suitable for this study: data collection is less expensive and simpler than in traditional ethnography, in which researchers' participation is often fairly unobtrusive (Kozinets, 2002; Rageh, Melewar, & Woodside, 2013; Wu & Pearce, 2014). The study employed a typical

netnographic procedure based on tourists' social media posts and comments featuring detailed information about their tourism experiences. The process consisted of entrée, data collection, data analysis, and data interpretation phases (Kozinets, 2002).

3.1. Entrée: selection of community and decision on entry

To achieve the research aims, two initial steps were taken to gather data: 1) identifying online communities containing content relevant to the research topic and 2) maximizing data extracted from the identified communities (Kozinets, 2002; Wu & Pearce, 2014). The study specifically chose online communities that provided 1) a focused and relevant segment, topic, or group related to this research; 2) detailed or descriptively rich data; and 3) frequent interactions of the type required by the research question.

Chinese online tourism communities were taken as the research context. These communities have been active since 1999 and have played an important part in the consumption of tourism products (Li, 2014). Based on the volume of subscribers and internet traffic, the study identified a list of popular online tourism communities spanning travel-related websites (e.g. TripAdvisor), peer-to-peer accommodation platforms (e.g. Airbnb), online travel agencies (e.g. Ctrip, Qunar), and large travel experience-sharing platforms (e.g. Mafengwo). Ctrip is an online tourism service company that offers ticketing services, hotel reservations, and delegated tour bookings. Qunar is a real-time Chinese search engine for tourism products (e.g. air tickets, hotels, holiday packages). Mafengwo.com (蚂蜂窝 in Mandarin) is a major online service through which tourists can share their experiences; the site hosts more than over 100 million members and is the most popular site of its kind among tourists (Mafengwo.com, 2018).

Individuals' narratives of their tourism experiences are appropriate for netnographic research for several reasons. First, user posts, such as those published on Mafengwo.com, contain information about distinct travel stages (i.e. from trip planning and on-site experiences to post-trip reflections). Second, the resultant data are detailed and descriptive.

Table 1
Foundational factors of research sample (N = 3140).

Popular tourism destinations	Frequency	Percentage	Popular tourism destinations	Frequency	Percentage
Argentina	22	0.7%	Luxembourg	17	0.5%
Australia	157	5.0%	Malaysia	55	1.8%
Austria	50	1.6%	Maldives	101	3.2%
Belgium	37	1.2%	Mauritius	107	3.4%
Brazil	25	0.8%	Mexico	41	1.3%
Brunei	16	0.5%	Morocco	86	2.7%
Cambodia	24	0.8%	Myanmar	20	0.6%
Canada	97	3.1%	Nepal	50	1.6%
Chile	14	0.4%	New Zealand	29	0.9%
China	231	7.4%	Peru	35	1.1%
Cuba	33	1.1%	Philippines	33	1.1%
Fiji	15	0.5%	Portugal	34	1.1%
France	179	5.7%	Russia	107	3.4%
Germany	44	1.4%	Singapore	122	3.9%
Greece	71	2.3%	Spain	62	2.0%
India	38	1.2%	Switzerland	72	2.3%
Indonesia	118	3.8%	Thailand	129	4.1%
Ireland	20	0.6%	Turkey	121	3.9%
Israel	8	0.3%	Ukraine	100	3.2%
Italy	8	0.3%	United Kingdom	125	4.0%
Japan	151	4.8%	United States	92	2.9%
Kenya	97	3.1%	Vietnam	103	3.3%
Laos	44	1.4%	Total	3140	100%
Year of posting	Frequency	Percentage	Posts on travel elements	Frequency	Percentage
2013	368	11.7%	Food & beverage	214	6.8%
2014	276	8.8%	Accommodation	236	7.5%
2015	552	17.5%	Transport	798	25.4%
2016	340	10.8%	Tour	955	30.4%
2017	298	9.5%	Shopping	166	5.3%
2018	652	20.8%	Entertainment	772	24.6%
2019	655	20.9%	Total	3140	100%

Third, site members actively interact with others who frequently post messages and exchange information (Mafengwo.com, 2018; Mkono & Tribe, 2017). Based on the element of content + transcription, Mafengwo.com was selected as the data source (Wu & Pearce, 2014).

Language proficiency and cultural familiarity were considered critical for data interpretation in relation to social constructivism and netnographic analysis. Two researchers who were native Mandarin speakers and who had been members of Mafengwo.com for years acted as netnographers to analyze the extracted website content.

3.2. Data collection

To explore how travelers expressed their sense of safety online, Chinese-language words such as 'safety/security' (安全), 'accident' (事故), and 'dangerous' (危险) were initially used as keywords to search posts published on Mafengwo.com. Data collection occurred between December 2018 and January 2020. Content was chosen based on a defined set of principles. First, a user's initial post must contain travel safety information and the writer's evaluation, response, consultation, or discussion (i.e. the material must feature an interactive context to allow for social construction analysis). Second, the posts must be of a certain length (i.e. more than 200 words) and in a communicative discourse. Third, each post (i.e. piece of discourse) must contain informational elements, such as the poster's username, posting time, and content to ensure the authenticity of each interaction. Ultimately, 3140 reviews that contained detailed travel itineraries and described multiple aspects of tourists' safety experiences (e.g. indicating whether '*** [redacted place] is safe') were retained for analysis. The researchers carefully read all reviews and assembled a profile of the review sample accordingly (Table 1).

3.3. Data analysis

Two analytical techniques were used to identify the content and process of the social construction of tourists' sense of safety. First,

discourse materials were imported into the analytical software NVivo 11. The grounded theory technique of open coding was employed to develop key themes (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Open coding followed an inductive process to attach descriptive terms to the data and to identify themes related to the subjects of interest (i.e. tourists' sense of safety).

The researchers then applied a manual coding process to analyze content, targeting 100% consistency in identifying reviews. Concurrency throughout the coding process confirmed the accuracy of thematic interpretations, resulting in total agreement about discourse assignment and codes used (Wu & Pearce, 2014). The researchers reviewed 3000 comments for discourse analysis and 140 comments for data verification. No new concepts and themes emerged after verification; that is, data saturation was theoretically achieved. Table 2 lists the key subjects, content, and categories that were grouped into structural descriptions relating to the social construction process of tourists' sense of safety.

4. Findings and discussion

Data analysis indicated that tourists' social construction of their sense of safety towards a destination entailed a continuous three-stage process: before travel, personal on-site experience, and post-trip evaluation. Each stage featured distinct subjects and interactive activities. Tourists' sense of safety manifested as they processed information that they received, discussed, and stored in memory (Zou & Meng, 2020). Based on cognitive judgments of such information, tourists developed safety expectations prior to traveling, established a sense of safety during their visit, and evaluated destination safety after their trip (Table 2).

4.1. Stage 1: first impressions of safety image and pre-trip expectations

Before embarking on an overseas trip, tourists usually spend time researching destinations to determine safety (Zou & Zheng, 2014). This search process inspires tourists' initial impressions of destination safety and shapes their judgments about what to expect and how to respond to potential danger. Typical sentiments from Mafengwo.com users were as follows (when reporting results, '***' indicates the name of a location):

I have been responsible for collecting information and identifying coping strategies. I need to make sure that the arrangements are meticulous and the DIY trip is safe. (Lv.2251, 09/04/2018, 12:25:34)

Before departure, I check the destination weather, traffic, public security, and other safety information. I prepare and respond in advance. (Lv.265, 01/28/2019, 22:35:36)

Review data show that tourists' first impressions of destination safety are generally derived from three sources: 1) the public sector, 2) news media and social media, and 3) other actors.

Table 2
Process, content, and key subjects.

Sense of safety	Key subjects	Content	Categorized process
Social construction process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Public sector (government organizations, destination marketing organizations) News media and social media Other actors (family members, friends, other tourists) Human actors (local residents, service staff, drivers, tourism operators) Facility and equipment actors (accommodation, risk activities, safety monitoring facilities, first aid facilities) Environment and social order (crime, traffic, local cultural practices and taboos, crowds; going out alone, pollution, weather, hygiene issues) Management factors (emergency rescue services, tourism safety signs, warning information, public rules) Social media (complaints and comments about safety environment, reviews of the experience) Other actors (other tourists) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Safety information regarding key subjects First impressions of destination safety Safety expectations Interactions with key subjects Experience with destination safety climate First-hand safety knowledge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pre-trip stage: generate safety expectations and safety perceptions On-site social construction via personal experience Comprehensive post-trip evaluation and construction
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Personal evaluations of safety expectations and actual experience Recommending the destination to others and giving others safety tips 	

4.1.1. Public sector

Searching for public information about a destination is normally tourists' first pre-trip activity. The public sector provides public information about destination safety. People often check whether their home government has issued safety warnings about traveling to specific places. Apart from governmental information, tourists may refer to sources such as DMOs, public safety agencies, and local police. Other information sources include 'public bulletins' about safety services or laws and regulations around public order. People tend to trust information provided through the government or public travel advisories more than information from other channels. One post in the sample read: "A lot of research was done before travel that mainly focused on the safety aspect. By searching the latest related safety alerts and warnings from *** official websites, I knew I should submit my individual information to the embassies and consulates in ***" (Lv.1013, 03/17/2016, 02:52:04).

4.1.2. News media and social media

Apart from public information released by the government or tourism organizations, tourists' sense of destination safety can be greatly influenced by how the media portrays the destination's image (Barker, Page, & Meyer, 2002). Media outlets cover incidents, crimes, or disasters, but their reporting is often biased or exaggerated (Ghaderi et al., 2017). Such bias can distort tourists' impressions of destination safety, particularly when they have little knowledge about the place (Cavlek, 2002). One example is as follows:

*Recently, I have seen much news about how bad public security in *** is. I remember that when I first came to ***, I also asked the tour guide this question. He said that he had never been robbed in *** in seven years.* (Lv.1920, 06/18/2018 11:11:30)

When tourists search for news articles about destination safety before a trip, reports' eye-catching titles may magnify danger, sparking concerns about security (Mawby, 2000). The advent of social media has caused safety-related information to spread faster and to a larger audience than ever before. Comments such as those below appeared common on Mafengwo.com, suggesting that tourists construct their sense of destination safety based on information from news reports and social media:

*Reading the news now, the situation in *** is unstable. Is it really safe to go to *** now? Already bought a ticket.* (Lv.1822, 12/13/2017, 13:21:13)

Another user responded to this post:

*Reviewing the recent development of the situation, the security situation in *** is complex and severe. It is recommended to proceed cautiously ...*

This is my personal opinion. Whether to go or not, you decide. (Lv.1823, 12/13/2017, 15:36)

4.1.3. Other actors: Family members, friends, and other tourists

Social construction theory purports that the meaning of a socially constructed concept is reviewed, judged, and revisited through several rounds of communication among individuals. Along with assessments of information published via the media or public organizations, tourists generate impressions of destination safety through other actors. Such actors in the pre-trip stage are mainly family, friends, and other tourists—but actors can also be any person with an opinion about the destination. For instance, one tourist mentioned the power of relatives' opinions before departure: "Ten years ago, whenever I thought of going to ***, my family seriously disagreed. The reason they gave me was that *** is not safe and they said no straightaway" (Lv.1013, 03/17/2016, 02:52:04).

Another post described how friends' warnings contributed to initial impressions of destination safety: "When my friends heard we were going to ***, they all exclaimed, 'How dare you, three girls, go? It's so unsafe there, you know?' They tried every way to persuade us not to go" (Lv.2, August 07, 2013, 22:52:36).

Interactions between tourists and other actors could influence individuals' decisions even without deterring them from traveling completely. The following quote portrays one tourist's difficult decision making: "However, all our tickets were booked, and there was no reason to quit. We decided to experience it by ourselves no matter if it is safe or not" (Lv.2, August 07, 2013, 22:52:36).

The following conversations depict an interactive consultation process before a trip. Potential tourists actively sought to consult with others who had already visited their destination:

*Is there anyone who returned from *** in the last two months? Please share the situation there! Especially ***, Are these places safe? What should I be aware of? What are the hidden dangers? My ticket is purchased for October 21. Can anyone who has personal experience give me some advice? Thank you. (Lv.133, 10/18/2014, 15:15:39)*

The posted reply is as follows:

*There are many speeding motorcyclists in ***. It is best to walk inside the crosswalk. When crossing the road, pay attention to both sides. You are more likely to be the target to have your bags or cameras robbed at the intersection, especially in the downtown area. (Lv.138, 10/19/2014, 01:32:45)*

Another message suggested:

*I went for the *** this year, which was OK when I was there. I don't know how it is now. My friend went there last month and said there was nothing dangerous either. These *** cities are quite safe, though they look messy because of too many motorcycles in the streets! (Lv.143, 10/19/2014, 09:18:04)*

4.2. Stage 2: on-site experiences with safety climate and sense of safety during the trip

The term 'safety climate', which is often applied in organizational studies, refers to the collective perception of policies, procedures, and practices implemented to ensure tourism safety (Stackhouse & Turner, 2019; Yen et al., 2021). A destination's safety climate is colored by tourists' overall perceptions of safety-related issues based on personal evaluations of public safety regulations, supervision, and maintenance (Yen et al., 2021). Only once individuals arrive in a destination can they describe its safety climate. The data unearthed four major subjects in this regard: human factors, environment and social order, facilities and equipment, and management factors. These findings align with those of

Xie et al.'s (2021) findings in many places but this study focused on interactions between tourists and other actors along with the availability of facilities, equipment, and objects reflecting how safety and security can be assured. This work also concerns the social order that tourists experienced in destinations.

4.2.1. Human factors

Social interaction during tourism activities produces relationships across multiple stakeholder groups in a destination: between tourists and local tourism operators, tourists and local residents, and tourists and public service providers. Tourists sense human factors within their specific context based on these interactions. The data highlighted two key actors, namely locals and tourism operators. Locals are people in a destination who have loose connections with tourists, such as residents and market sellers; tourism operators (e.g. taxi drivers, hotel attendants, and local tour guides) have close ties with tourists. For example, market sellers can sell products to tourists, but their main customers are residents. Although some markets are deliberately built to sell tourists local products and souvenirs, tourists tend to judge their overall destination experiences without explicitly considering a market's purpose. Two posts mentioned how the locals had influenced tourists' travel experiences:

*One of the most important facts about *** during my travel is the local people living there who have a helping nature and are trustworthy and welcoming. (Lv.112, 09/18/2014, 23:50:06)*

*[In ***,] local people are friendly as family. They respect and help each other, and police patrols are often on the streets. As long as you have basic safety awareness, traveling there is very safe. (Lv.239, 03/08/2015, 12:22:47)*

In addition to influencing tourists' sense of destination safety, human factors shaped their perceived likelihood of being deceived or defrauded by locals. Threatening social groups and incivility imply greater destination-related danger (Brunton-Smith & Sturgis, 2011; Torrente, 2001) and amplify tourists' insecurities (e.g. fear, worry, anger). For example:

Be vigilant. Move away quickly if you see suspicious people around. Don't buy subway tickets in subway stations. Remember to find INFORMATION and ask for staff in red uniforms if you don't know the way. Don't trust the 'good-hearted people' who help you buy tickets. They are swindlers. If you see anyone like them, just say NO. (Lv.95, 04/15/2014, 23:30)

Apart from taking care of your belongings, when encountering groups of young boys who suddenly ask if you can speak English, ignore them and leave quickly. They may come together and rob you if you are close to them. (Lv.2032, 07/18/2018, 21:13:26).

Human factors also included actors such as travel companions and other visitors in the destination. One's sense of safety varies based on traveling alone or with others and when visiting areas that are either overcrowded or deserted. Whereas some tourists may feel their safety is threatened if they are surrounded by throngs of people, others may feel uneasy when no one else is around (Valera & Guàrdia, 2014). For instance:

*The old streets are chaotic and in disorder, full of pedestrians and motorcycles. Dirty and messy. It's so crowded and no one follows the order. The inefficiency caused a serious accumulation of crowds. People piled up ... Someone was squeezed into ***, had hypoxia, and fainted ... A stampede may happen if you are not careful. (Lv.136, 10/18/2014, 23:05)*

4.2.2. Facility and equipment factors

Tourists' sense of safety is further informed by the availability of facilities and equipment. Key aspects of this realm include food and accommodation,

protections or insurance for risky activities, safety monitoring, and first aid facilities. Yen et al. (2021) identified similar facets. In the dataset, corresponding remarks included: "Is *** safe, especially the drinking water or food? A colleague told me only to drink bottled water, or always boil the water before drinking it. The hotel I stayed in made me feel bad. There was a moldy smell in the room, and there were many small bugs" (Lv.714, 11/23/2015, 10:25:39). Tourists may have a stronger sense of safety when certain equipment is available: "A tour guide told us a high-tech tsunami monitoring and early warning system has been set up in the Indian Ocean, which can provide warnings at least 1 h before the tsunami occurs ..." (Lv.158, 12/26/2014, 10:09:27).

Tourists typically judge a destination's safety by verifying the safety of potentially risky activities (Bentley, Page, Meyer, Chalmers, & Laird, 2001). One tourist wrote, "Are hot air balloons safe? I am worried after reading some news about accidents in low-altitude entertainment projects" (Lv.1708, May 06, 2017, 23:32:26). In terms of first aid facilities, one quote read: "Suddenly ... I felt very uncomfortable and seemed to have a heart stroke. The tour guide quickly helped contact the police. The police sent an ambulance directly, and the staff in the ambulance took my temperature, blood pressure, and finger pricks to get a blood sample, and then I was sent to a hospital immediately ..." (Lv.1521, 09/24/2016, 15:36:27).

4.2.3. Environment and social order

Environmental factors heavily mold tourists' evaluations of destination safety. These features include an area's natural and sociocultural environments, such as the probability of encountering extreme weather or natural disasters (e.g. typhoons, hurricanes, flooding, heatwaves, earthquakes), air and water quality, and cultural taboos (Freitas, 2010; Hübner & Gössling, 2012; Xie et al., 2021). Tourists' sense of safety can decline accordingly:

Difficult to describe it, but you must never breathe in any air like this in your life. Masks must be worn. The air quality is still worrying. (Lv.1326, 04/28/2016, 13:25:28)

*The smog in *** was more serious than expected. When the plane landed, it was so foggy that I could hardly see things over five meters. I don't know how to describe it, but you must have never breathed such bad air in your life. (Lv.285, 07/28/2015, 23:12:49)*

Social order is also highly relevant to tourists' safety experiences. The presence of armed soldiers, the frequency of police patrols, and alarms may be interpreted as political instability, terrorism, or poor public security (Gartner & Shen, 1992; Jenkin, 2006; Pizam & Smith, 2000; Sönmez & Graefe, 1998b). Perceptions of limited social order and high potential danger can psychologically burden tourists in unfamiliar surroundings, even directly affecting their sense of safety. For instance:

*Personally, I feel that law and order is not a major issue during this trip. At night, the streets of *** are crowded and lively. There will be police patrols on the streets. The public security situation has not been as terrible as some media reported. (Lv.1453, 08/25/2016, 13:35:57)*

4.2.4. Management factors

Tourism destination safety management can involve a number of initiatives (e.g. safety warnings, public rules, crisis management, emergency rescue services, and disaster recovery plans) (Becken & Hughey, 2013; Rittichainuwat, 2008, 2013). Several popular destinations (e.g. South Korea, Thailand, and Turkey) have established tourism police units to address safety issues related to tourism activities. The police culture and police service quality in public safety governance are vital to tourists' safety expectations and destination perceptions (Tyagi, Dhar, & Sharma, 2016). One tourist recalled: "I experienced a storm while I was at *** and there was a flood. Roads were disrupted. The river swelled and the bridge was washed away and we could not go out! There was this emergency system available informing people from the very beginning. Warning signs were placed on the roadside showing:

'Caution: No Access to ***; Road Closed! Washout Flooding! No alternate route!' There was the emergency rescue team on site, and we saw helicopters coming and going to rescue people" (Lv.1901, April 05, 2018, 23:23:38). This review exemplifies the role of destination management in heightening tourists' sense of safety.

4.3. Stage 3: evaluation of travel experience and post-trip behavior

4.3.1. Expectation gaps

Tourists' evaluations of destination safety continue after a trip; they tend to recall their experiences and cognitively assess a place based on their actual experiences. The dissonance between one's expectations and experiences further informs a sense of safety. Tourists are more likely to be satisfied with the destination if their experiences were better than anticipated. One tourist said:

*I always felt that *** was a very dangerous country for female tourists, especially after reading the many reported rape incidents recently. However, you have to experience it yourself before a conclusion can be made!.. What I felt was completely different from what I had expected. My experience showed that *** people were very warm and friendly, *** is not dangerous, and it is really safe. (Lv.2, 07/08/2013, 22:52:36)*

4.3.2. Recommendations for safe destinations

When tourists' destination experiences are positive and surpass their expectations, individuals become passionate promoters of the destination and may even offer others safety tips. Some posts described discrepancies between tourists' expectations and actual experiences:

*The most impressive feeling about *** is the hospitality and friendliness of *** people. It is not dangerous, and it is truly safe!!! No need to be afraid of traveling there, just enjoy the mysterious country. (Lv.2, 07/08/2013, 22:52:36)*

*After eating and wandering around the streets of ***, I thought it was safe. [The locals] are very happy to help people. I get their help from time to time in ***, and my journey is full of warm memories, but someone familiar with the supermarket warned us of thieves here who often pick-pocket in supermarkets. Be careful. (Lv.99, 04/28/2014, 16:01:19)*

5. Discussion and conclusion

5.1. Theoretical implications

This study investigated tourists' sense of destination safety from a social constructivist perspective. One's sense of safety is intertwined with social practices and is contextually dependent (Yi & Guo, 2003). In a departure from earlier work on tourism safety, this study reframed tourists' sense of safety in relation to time and space. The findings substantiate the need to conceptualize and verify tourism safety-related concepts, such as tourists' perceived destination safety (Xie et al., 2021), destination safety climate (Yen et al., 2021), and sense of safety (Zou & Meng, 2020). The study further advocates for attention to the process through which tourists construct their sense of safety. Regardless of the importance of identifying key elements to monitor destinations' safety systems, this study emphasizes intangibility in arguing that one's sense of safety varies throughout the travel process. Considering safety perceptions before, during, and after a trip unveils noteworthy topics that differ from stage to stage.

The study confirmed tourists' common need to obtain information from different sources at the pre-trip stage. Such insight can shape their interpretations of a destination's safety-related issues. For example, one's impression of whether a destination is safe may directly affect their travel intentions: some tourists may decide to cancel a trip entirely if they feel that a destination is unsafe (George, 2010; Rittichainuwat et al., 2018).

Tourists' sense of safety also varies by information source. Information from the government or public sector is more likely to be trusted over news media, which can be exaggerated or biased (Ghaderi et al., 2017). Yet news reports are still considered a critical source that can influence tourists' sense of safety at the pre-trip stage. Given broad access to social media, tourists are more likely to establish strong destination impressions that are highly descriptive and tailored (Marine-Roig & Huertas, 2020). Along with information received from the public sector and intermediaries, comments from personal contacts such as family members, friends, or other tourists who have already visited the destination can influence people's sense of safety before a visit (Duffy, 2015).

Following the pre-trip stage, tourists' sense of safety continues to evolve based on their actual experiences and interactions with other actors during their trip (Zou & Zheng, 2014). Perceived risks in a destination can either come to fruition or not once tourists leave their home environment. For example, tourists who hold negative perceptions of a crowded attraction may in fact feel invigorated and welcomed upon encountering the local people and environment (Yu, Pickering, Geng, & Yen, 2021). Police patrols are similar in that a police presence may indicate a safety net to some tourists but signal poor social order to others.

Tourists' post-trip sense of safety is worth noting as well, as their opinions are based on their recall of the actual experience. Tourists tend to remember a destination's prominent safety features or activities (Yu et al., 2021). When destination safety is better than expected, tourists are more likely to revisit, to share the experience with prospective tourists, and to recommend the destination to others (Zhang, Wu, & Buhalis, 2018). The feedback that tourists share online also serves as an information source for others' pre-trip safety perceptions. In essence, the study asserts that tourists' sense of destination safety is not static but dynamic given multiple time-space dimensions, forms of interpersonal communication, and social interactions (Barnes, 2018).

5.2. Practical implications

By delineating the subtleties of tourists' sense of destination safety, this study illuminated key subjects at each stage of the safety construction process. First, before a trip, tourists leverage information sources including input from the public sector, general media, social media, and other actors to form safety impressions and make corresponding destination judgments. Government and public sector information sources are considered the most trustworthy. However, tourists are also influenced by media reports, word of mouth on social media, and opinions from their close circles. It is therefore important for DMOs to track media reports and to identify coverage that may contain misinformation. DMOs can then direct prospective tourists to more reliable sources.

Tourists seem particularly interested in seeking advice through online travel experience-sharing platforms (Marine-Roig & Huertas, 2020). As such, DMOs should consider partnering with these platforms and designing campaigns to encourage tourists to share their positive destination experiences. In addition, DMOs should consider helping destinations create websites that enable tourists to view real-time safety information and related guidance. This information could bolster potential tourists' confidence (even before their departure) that they will encounter a safe environment (Brown, 2015).

Second, to improve tourists' experiences with destination safety, brochures or mobile apps that cover local laws and regulations, medical services, police contacts, important transportation information (e.g. bus/train timetables), driving instructions, and local cultural taboos can be provided to tourists once they arrive at the destination. Tourists' sense of destination safety also relies on their interactions with actors in the local environment. A tourist-friendly environment is crucial. DMOs should consider collaborating with the local government to ensure that stakeholders are creating a tourist-friendly environment with strategic

plans, such as attraction route planning (e.g. a tourist traffic monitoring system), clean and orderly public spaces (e.g. streets, markets), and honest and regulated public services (e.g. taxi service).

The quality standards for food, drinking water, air, and accommodation can be prioritized for enhanced tourism management as well. Facilities and equipment management should be strengthened through safety inspections, maintenance, and updates. Areas with poor public security should devise rescue plans, and local governments should react promptly to resolve emergent issues. Timely media reports and social media communication can further contribute to positive impressions of destination safety (Zou & Zheng, 2012). For destinations for which safety-related perceptions tend to be low, DMOs may consider strengthening impressions of public safety by implementing public security patrols, installing security devices and alarm systems, and providing professional safety programs (Fennell, 2017). However, these objectives may not be attainable in all cases: destination residents may hold opposing opinions about tourism or visitors from other cultures (Moufakkir, 2010).

Finally, because tourists' sense of safety is subjective and based on a particular time and place, judgments may be biased by what tourists do, where they visit, and whom they meet during activities. For instance, crowding can imply danger, but so can deserted streets. DMOs should ponder ways to effectively manage crowds or abandoned locations to increase tourists' sense of security. In terms of crowd control, introducing a one-way system at attractions or dividing roads for different purposes (e.g. vehicle drivers vs. pedestrians) could be helpful. Brighter street lighting, more active security patrols, and neighborhood watches can further ease people's worries about going out at night.

5.3. Limitations and future research

This study examined tourists' sense of safety via social constructivism, which has limitations. First, the study adopted netnography to deconstruct the formation process of tourists' sense of safety, which is highly subjective based on the researchers' interpretations: the same Mafengwo post could be understood differently by researchers from different backgrounds. Second, this study only referred to Mafengwo.com; insightful views from other social media platforms were excluded (Filiari, Yen, & Yu, 2021). In addition, the use of Chinese social media reflected views of a specific population. Scholars can analyze data from informants of diverse cultural backgrounds in the future (e.g. regarding safety precautions and risk management) to enhance the generalizability of findings.

Moreover, because most posts in the sample did not cover the full construction process of one's sense of safety, researchers are recommended to conduct in-depth case studies to uncover more details about this construction process across different time-space stages. Additionally, data were collected before the COVID-19 outbreak. Subsequent work should address the pandemic's impacts on people's perceptions of the tourism environment, such as in terms of disease-checking facilities and healthcare support. Investigating tourists' sense of safety during and after the pandemic would be interesting as well.

Finally, researchers may wish to contemplate the fluidity of the construction of one's sense of safety on an individual level. The data did not capture individuals' intrinsic features, such as demographics, past experience, and personalities. Future studies can integrate these attributes and their roles in one's sense of safety. For instance, people who have psychocentric, mid-centric, and allocentric personalities (Plog, 1974) may display distinct attitudes towards destination safety. Their feelings and behavior could also vary among the pre-, during-, and post-travel stages.

Author statement

Yongguang Zou contributed to conceptualizing, data collection and analysis, drafting and revising the manuscript. Qionglei Yu contributed

to the conceptualization, literature review and the revision of the manuscript.

Declaration competing of interest

None.

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