

Modelling travel intention in conflict-ridden destinations: the example of Turkey, 2020–2021

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This study investigates the factors influencing travel intention to conflict-ridden destinations. Empirical research was conducted on an international population that plans to visit Turkey as a conflict-ridden destination. Data collection resulted in a sample of 1420 respondents. Our findings revealed that perceived behavioural control and destination image were significant predictors of an intention to visit. Perceived risk had a negative effect on participants' attitude about visiting. Subjective norms had a positive influence on attitudes towards visiting and perceived behavioural control. The empirical results have both academic and business implications. On the one hand, this research contributes to understanding the factors influencing the intention to visit conflict-ridden destinations. On the other hand, the results identify the tools that market players can use to increase the intention to visit to counterbalance a decline in tourism.

Keywords:

conflict-ridden destinations,
tourism risk perception,
theory of planned behaviour,
tourism,
intention to visit

Introduction

Tourism is one of the main industries worldwide, contributing to more than 10% of global GDP (UNWTO 2021). However, tourism is negatively affected by political instability and terrorism, which trigger a threat of danger. Terrorist attacks, political unrest, and war increase travellers' risk perception (Sönmez et al. 1999) and have a considerable impact on the destination's image (Richie 2004). Owing to the increasing number of conflicts worldwide, tourists pay greater attention to the risks associated with international travel (Michalkó 2012). Thus, a higher perceived risk might prevent tourists from travelling (Um et al. 2006, Larsen et al. 2009).

The research focused on conflict-ridden destinations. Turkey can be considered a conflict-ridden destination. Although Turkey is among the top ten tourist destinations globally, it has the highest terrorism index according to the Global Terrorism Index 2020 [1] among these countries. Turkey is also ranked 149th among 163 countries according to the Global Peace Index 2021 [2]. In addition, Turkey was categorised as a country with highly violent conflicts in 2020; the intensity of the conflict has been determined as limited war, scoring four out of five

intensity levels, by the Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research [3]. Earlier studies have found a strong relationship between the changes in the terrorism index and overall tourism growth rates (Kiliçlar et al. 2018, Bayramov–Abdullayev 2018).

This study aimed to investigate the factors influencing travel intentions in conflict-ridden destinations. More precisely, perceived risk and other factors, such as individual characteristics, destination, and prior experience, influence travel intention in conflict-ridden destinations. The main objectives are summarised as follows. This research contributes to understanding the factors that influence the intention to visit conflict-ridden destinations. Existing studies examining risk perception and travel intention (Quintal et al. 2010, Reisinger–Mavondo 2005, Lepp–Gibson, 2008) overlooked context-specific research, such as in conflict-ridden destinations that may have higher risk perceptions. Studies on tourist behaviour have shown that perceived risk linked to terrorism is a key factor in tourists' travel decision-making processes. This paper adds a novelty to existing tourism literature by examining the factors affecting tourists' destination choice, such as risk perception, individual characteristics, destination image, and prior experience, and integrates them into an extended model of the theory of planned behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen 1991). This theory has been overlooked or partially studied in earlier studies (Quintal et al. 2010, Reisinger–Mavondo 2005, Lepp–Gibson 2008). This model aimed to test the effects of all influencing factors within one model and predict the travel intention to conflict-ridden destinations.

In addition, this study aims to identify the tools that market players can use to decrease perceived risk and increase the intention to visit in conflict-ridden destinations. Similar studies offer managerial implications for destination management organisations and travel agencies to develop a marketing strategy to promote their destinations as safe travel destinations and increase travel intention (Isaac–van den Bedem 2021, Isaac–Velden 2018). However, the effects of destination image or prior experience have been overlooked. Identifying the factors that can predict the intention to visit or have a significant influence provides opportunities to select efficient strategies to apply for destination marketing campaigns. This knowledge may also contribute to the selection of correct target markets and create relevant tourism products for relevant target markets.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. First, the literature on travel behaviour models is reviewed to identify major influencing factors such as risk perception, destination image, and prior experience. Next, the conceptual model is presented by extending TPB with additional influence factors – risk perception, individual characteristics, destination image, and prior experience. Subsequently, after a discussion of the research methodology, theoretical and practical implications are assessed. Finally, this study's limitations and future research directions are identified.

Literature review

Theoretical models of travel behaviour

Researchers have proposed several theories to study consumer behaviour, such as expected utility (von Neumann–Morgenstern 1947), satisficing (Simon 1956), prospect (Kahneman–Tversky 1977), regret (Bell 1982), reasoned action (Ajzen–Fishbein 1980), and the TPB (Ajzen 1991). The TPB can be considered as one of the most widely used rational choice models; it explains an individual's decision-making processes (Han 2015). TPB describes behaviour that can be determined by factors such as attitudes towards the behaviour, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural controls (Ajzen 1991). Ajzen (1991) developed TPB, proposing that actual behaviour is caused by behavioural intent.

Behavioural intent, in turn, is determined by the attitude towards the actual behaviour, the subjective norms of the decision-maker, and the perceived behavioural control. Intentions are assumed to capture motivational factors that influence actual behaviour; they indicate how hard people are willing to try and how much effort they are planning to exert to perform the behaviour. The attitude towards actual behaviour refers to the degree to which a person has a favourable or unfavourable evaluation of the actual behaviour. Subjective norms refer to the perceived social pressure to perform or not to perform the behaviour. Finally, perceived behavioural control is concerned with judgements of how well one can execute courses of action required to deal with prospective situations (Ajzen 1991).

Researchers have developed and tested TPB in different contexts by adding new factors to the study of travel intention (Quintal et al. 2010, Hsieh et al. 2016, Lam–Hsu 2006, Jordan et al. 2017, Kim–Kwon 2018, Chew–Jahari 2014, Japutra et al. 2019). TPB's popularity has resulted in several opportunities to extend the model by adding potential additional variables to study consumer behaviour, especially tourists, in different contexts. It is accepted that TPB is better understood by altering the paths in a particular context; adding new significant variables as antecedents may contribute to an increased ability to predict an intention and behaviour (Quintal et al. 2010, Hsieh et al. 2016, Lam–Hsu 2006, Jordan et al. 2017, Kim–Kwon 2018, Chew–Jahari 2014, Japutra et al. 2019). Our study extends the TPB framework by integrating risk perception, individual characteristics, and the effects of destination image and prior experience to the model.

Risk perception

Tourism-related risk perception can be described as tourist judgement regarding the uncertainty of tourism activities and processes (Cui et al. 2016). Earlier, researchers distinguished between physical equipment, vacation, and destination risks (Roehl–Fesenmaier 1992) and financial, psychological, temporal, and time risks (Sönmez–

Graefe 1998b). After the terror attack on September 11, 2001, the role of physical risk has been more intensively studied (Marton et al. 2018), covering physical risks associated with terrorism, war, political instability, health hazards, and criminality (Lepp–Gibson 2003). Quintal et al. (2010) concluded that people perceive risk and uncertainty consistently across situations, but several factors influence the risk perception; later, Yang–Nair (2014) identified its external and internal factors. External factors include official information sources (i.e. official warnings and press releases) that communicate the objective risks related to specific destinations. Internal risks are rooted in the traveller’s demographic, psychographic, and cultural characteristics, influencing whether the traveller perceives a higher or lower risk than the objective danger.

Travel-related risks are perceived differently. Therefore, we need to consider travellers’ characteristics (risk tolerance, novelty seeking, information search, and culture) responsible for individual differences in risk perception. Novelty-seeking behaviour increases the intention to travel to conflict-ridden destinations distinctly. A novelty-seeking traveller welcomes new and risky destinations (Lepp–Gibson 2003). Therefore, they are not interested in decreasing the perceived risk related to travel, but they consider it an added value. Thus, a higher perceived risk will induce a positive attitude towards travel, lower social influence, and higher confidence, which increase the intention to visit high-risk destinations. A lower perceived risk results in more positive attitudes towards travel, lower social pressure, and higher perceived control over travel, causing a stronger travel intention (Maser–Weiermair 1998). Hence, novelty seeking is an individual characteristic affecting the extent of risk-taking decisions during the pre-travel and post-travel processes (Pizam et al. 2004). Positively correlating with risky travel decisions, novelty-seeking behaviour provides an important path for future studies focusing on risky destinations such as conflict-ridden destinations. Thus, novelty seekers are more willing to accept uncertainty, risks, and visiting a less familiar destination, as they handle risk differently (Wang–Yotsumoto 2019).

Destination image and prior experience

Destination images related to tourism can be defined as a continuous mental process by which one holds a set of impressions, emotional thoughts, beliefs, and prejudices regarding a destination due to information obtained from different channels (Kim–Chen 2015). Destination images and prior experience positively impact travel intentions (Han–Kim 2010, Ye et al. 2014, Su et al. 2016). Destination images comprise cognitive and affective evaluations of the destination (Mackay–Fesenmaier 1997, Baloglu–Mangaloglu 2001, Hosany et al. 2006). Tourists might be attracted by destinations with a positive image, even if the country’s image is evaluated less favourably (Lepp et al. 2011, Martínez–Alvarez 2010, Mossberg–Kleppe 2005). Tourists rely heavily on a destination’s image when they decide on a

travel destination (Um–Crompton 1990). Concerning conflict-ridden destinations, prior experience might counterbalance the negative indirect effect of higher perceived risk and uncertainty on the intention to travel. However, the effect of the destination image cannot be limited to the choice of destination because it influences the tourist behaviour in all stages (before, during, and after the travel). This is particularly true for destinations in conflict-ridden areas, where the perceived travel risk may be much higher. As destinations are intangible products, customers heavily rely on their images of alternative destinations when making destination decisions (Um–Crompton 1990).

Many studies have investigated prior visit experience for a destination. Many destinations have developed marketing strategies to encourage repeat visitation. However, a profound understanding is required to explain why some tourists visit the same destination more than once, while others do not, or why they visit a specific destination repeatedly. Existing studies on prior experience and repeat visitation revealed a relationship between lower perceived risks, higher satisfaction levels, personal attachment, or links to values and attitudes (Fakeye–Crompton 1991, Lehto et al. 2004). Prior experience can significantly affect tourists' behaviour and decision-making processes. In other words, prior knowledge of tourism destinations influences the information search process of potential tourists (Kerstetter–Cho 2004).

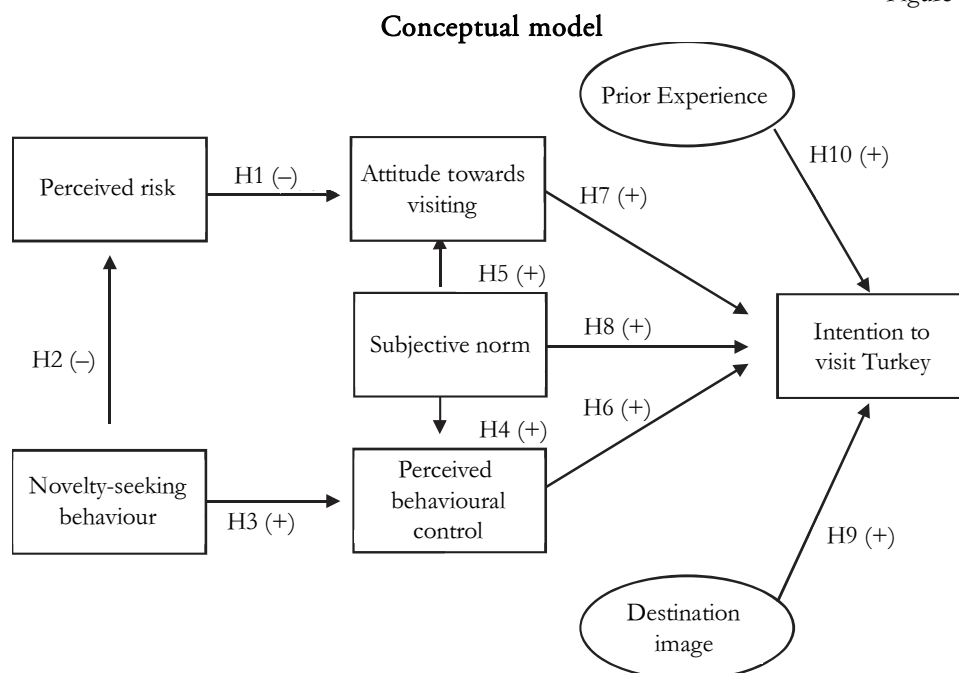
Similarly, destination image affects the choice of first-time visitors and repeat visitors differently. First-time visitors rely on a secondary image that induces the promotion of the destination organically through the information search process (Schofield et al. 2020). However, repeat visitors rely on a primary image of a destination that is a modified version of the secondary image formed during the visit (Schofield et al. 2020). Studies on behavioural intention to visit tourism destinations have shown the significance of prior visit experience on future intention and behaviour (Sönmez–Graefe 1998a, Han–Kim 2010, Ye et al. 2014, Su et al. 2016). In addition, prior experience is a significant predictor of travellers' intentions (Lam–Hsu 2006). Repeat visitors hold a more favourable destination image than first-time visitors, enhancing their willingness to visit the destination repeatedly (Schofield et al. 2020).

Conceptual model

Based on a literature review, a research concept and conceptual model (Figure 1) were developed to study factors influencing travel intention to Turkey as a conflict-ridden destination. This TPB model (Figure 1) is extended by adding perceived risk novelty-seeking behaviour, destination image, and prior experience to the core model. The conceptual model adds new constructs of individual characteristics to the TPB model, which function as an antecedent of risk perception. According to

previous research, some risk factors may attract people to visit risky destinations (Quintal et al. 2010). The existing model is also extended by considering the impact of destination image and prior experience of the destination. The other construct we add to the TPB model is prior experience. Previous studies (Han–Kim 2010, Ye et al. 2014, Su et al. 2016) have confirmed that prior experience affects travel intention. Considering the higher perceived risk of a conflict-ridden destination, prior experience may have a significant effect on travel intention.

Figure 1



Studies on risk perception's effects on tourism have revealed that previous travel experiences and risk perceptions influence future travel intentions (Sönmez–Graefe 1998b). This study is relevant as negative events such as terrorism, political instability, and war can increase the perception of a destination's riskiness (Lepp–Gibson 2003), especially in conflict-ridden regions. Therefore, H1 proposed that risk perception has a negative effect on attitudes towards visiting Turkey as a conflict-ridden destination.

H1: Higher perceived risk decreases tourists' favourable attitudes towards visiting a conflict-ridden destination.

Novelty-seeking tourists are more attracted to high-risk destinations and risky activities (Lepp–Gibson, 2008). Therefore, it is worth understanding how novelty-seeking tourist characteristics affect the intention to visit Turkey as a conflict-ridden

destination associated with a high-risk perception. H2 and H3 test the impact of novelty-seeking behaviour on risk perception and perceived behavioural control.

H2: Tourists with a higher level of novelty-seeking behaviour have a decreased perceived risk related to a conflict-ridden destination.

H3: Tourists with a higher level of novelty-seeking behaviour show increased perceived behavioural control related to a conflict-ridden destination.

Based on TPB (Ajzen 1991), attitudes towards behaviours, subjective norms, and perceived behaviours were adopted to understand their relationship with visitation intention for conflict-ridden areas. It provides a possible future direction in applying the framework of Quintal et al. (2010) in the specific context of conflict-ridden destinations with high-risk perception levels. Accordingly, hypotheses were developed to verify the relationship between attitudes towards visiting, subjective norms, perceived behavioural control, and intention to visit a destination in a conflict-ridden region. Subjective norm is a social pressure to approve or avoid risky destinations. Hence, the subjective norm is assumed to have a significant effect on perceived behavioural control and attitudes towards visiting; those relationships are tested by H4 and H5.

H4: A higher level of subjective norms for visiting conflict-ridden destinations positively affects perceived behavioural control.

H5: A higher level of subjective norms for visiting conflict-ridden destinations positively affects the attitude towards visitation.

H6 tests the prediction effect of perceived behavioural control on intention to visit. Perceived behavioural control is assumed to have the necessary resources, abilities, and opportunities that help reduce and cope with the risks of visiting Turkey as a conflict-ridden destination.

H6: A higher level of perceived behavioural control positively increases the intention to visit conflict-ridden destinations.

H7 tests the prediction effect of attitudes towards visiting based on an intention to visit conflict-ridden destinations.

H7: A more positive attitude towards visiting a conflict-ridden destination increases the intention to visit a conflict-ridden destination.

In addition, H8 tests subjective norms as a significant predictor of the intention to visit Turkey. It is assumed that a higher level of subjective norms increases the intention to visit conflict-ridden destinations.

H8: A higher level of subjective norms for visiting conflict-ridden destinations increases the intention to visit conflict-ridden destinations.

Destination images and prior experience provide an important research avenue to test their predictive effect on the intention to visit conflict-ridden destinations (Martínez–Alvarez 2010, Lepp et al. 2011, Hsieh et al. 2016). H9 tests the impact of destination image, and H10 tests the effect of prior experience on the intention to visit Turkey. Empirical studies have examined the effect of destination image on travel intention and revealed that destination image positively affects future travel intention and behaviour (Park et al. 2016). H9 assumes that the level of a positive destination image directly increases the intention to visit Turkey.

H9: A positive destination image positively affects the intention to visit Turkey.

Prior experience with a destination affects a tourist's decision-making process, and tourists who have more experience with a destination are less affected by risk perception (Hsieh et al. 2016). Lam and Hsu (2004) also found that prior experience has a significant effect on tourists' intention to travel to a specific destination. Moreover, prior experience enhances the predictive ability of the original TPB. Hence, H10 assumes that tourists with prior experience have a higher level of intention to visit Turkey.

H10: Prior experience positively affects the intention to visit Turkey.

Methodology

We conducted a quantitative study to test the hypotheses and provide insights on travel intention to conflict-ridden destinations.

The research population comprised people who planned to visit Turkey for leisure purposes after the lockdown. The research population was reached through social media platforms related to Turkey and international travel. A non-probability sampling method using the snowball technique was applied. Thus, respondents who planned to visit Turkey filled out the questionnaire. Subsequently, they could share the questionnaire link with other potential visitors to Turkey. Respondents were motivated to participate and share the questionnaire using an Amazon gift card. Consequently, data collection generated 1420 respondents that could be included in the data analysis.

The questionnaire included model and demographic variables. Constructs were measured using scales adopted from previous studies. The components of the TPB, such as attitude towards travel, subjective norms, and perceived control over travel, were measured based on the study of Lam and Hsu (2006). Perceived risk was assessed using the scales of Sönmez–Graefe (1998a). The destination image scale was adopted from Park et al. (2016). Finally, novelty-seeking behaviour was quantified using the scale of Lee–Crompton (1992). Respondents would evaluate all scale items on a 7-point Likert-scale. Prior experience was measured as the number of actual visits to Turkey.

The sample size reached 1420 respondents. The population comprised individuals planning to travel to Turkey for leisure purposes after the COVID-19 travel restrictions were lifted. Of the respondents, 85.7% were U.S. residents. A total of 72.9% were male, and the majority (59.41%) held a bachelor's degree. Most respondents were among the 18–29 (47.57%) and 30–39 (39.07%) age groups. Data were analysed by covariance-based structural equation modelling (SEM) – a widely implemented analytical method for modelling travel behaviour (Chen–Peng 2018, Chew–Jahari 2014, Park et al. 2016, Jordan et al. 2017, Kim–Kwon 2018, Lam–Hsu 2006). SEM can test all hypotheses within one model (Kaplan 2015).

Table 1

Description of the sample

Denomination	N	%
Gender		
Female	380	26.8
Male	1,035	72.9
Other	5	0.5
Highest education		
High school or lower	32	2.3
Secondary school	278	19.6
Higher education	1,110	78.2
Region		
North-America	1,228	87.0
Asia	70	5.0
Europe	58	4.1
Africa	23	1.6
South-America	21	1.5
Australia	11	0.8
Prior visit to Turkey		
Yes	573	40.4
No	847	59.6

Results and discussion

Analysis of the measurement model

Table 2 presents the results of the reliability tests. A reliable scale needs to show a minimum alpha of 0.7 (Hair et al. 2014). The minimum calculated alpha was 0.793 for subjective norms, which is still an acceptable level of reliability. Thus, the items that compose each scale were averaged to conduct further tests.

Table 2

Reliability test results

Denomination	Cronbach's Alpha	AVE	CR	N of items
Individual characteristics	0,923	0.576	0.905	7
Risk perception	0,925	0.623	0.920	7
Attitudes	0,888	0.619	0.890	5
Subjective norms	0,793	0.596	0.815	3
Perceived control	0,805	0.564	0.795	3
Destination image	0,921	0.593	0.897	9
Intention to visit	0,834	0.635	0.839	3

Abbreviations: Attitudes, attitudes towards visiting; Perceived control, perceived behavioural control; AVE, average variance extracted; CR, construct reliability; N of items, number of items.

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted using SPSS AMOS software, which uses the maximum likelihood (ML) algorithm to estimate results. ML is the most common method used to estimate parameters in CFA because of its attractive statistical properties (i.e. asymptotic unbiasedness, normality, consistency, and maximal efficiency) (Li 2016). After defining the model in the software and executing the analysis, four main phases were conducted to examine the validity of the measurement model: (1) assessment of model fit, (2) assessment of convergent validity, (3) assessment of internal consistency, and (4) respect of the model (if necessary). After the assessment of the model fit, convergent validity and internal consistency were examined. Convergent validity refers to the “extent to which indicators of a specific construct converge or share a high proportion of variance in common” (Hair et al. 2014, p. 601). The first CFA model included all variables with their corresponding latent variables (constructs). The model achieved good fit (χ^2 (506, N=1359) =4,027.67; $p < .001$; $\chi^2/df=7.960$; RMSEA=0.058; CFI=0.928; NFI=0.919) The significant chi-square does not necessarily mean that the model did not achieve good fit, as this indicator is sensitive to large sample sizes, which is the case here.

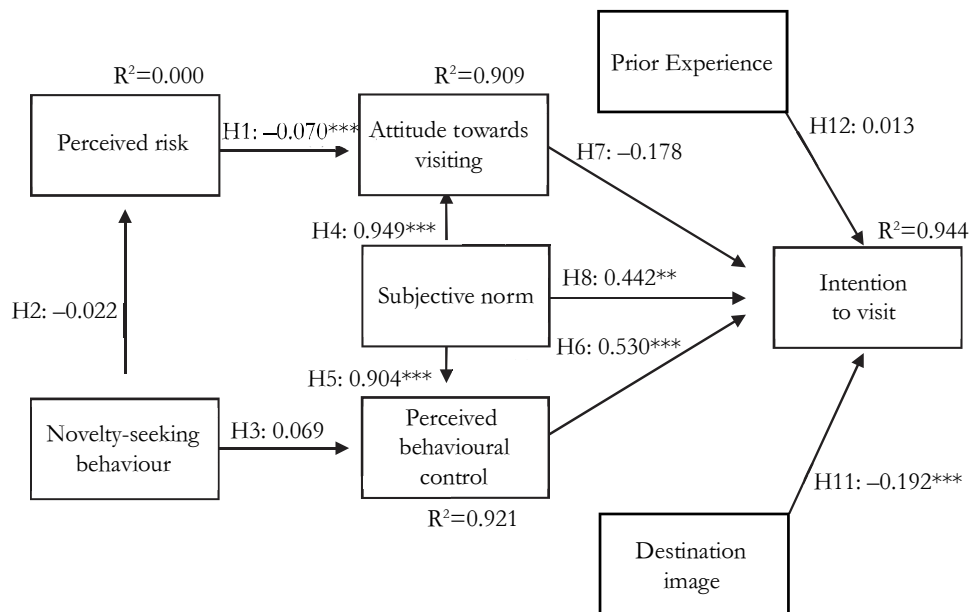
Average variance extracted (AVE) was calculated to examine convergent validity, as recommended by Fornell and Larcker (1981), who established that its value should exceed 0.50. Composite reliability (CR) was calculated using the resulting factor loadings, as it is sometimes advocated as a more reliable measure of construct reliability than Cronbach's alpha (Henseler–Sarstedt 2013). All the coefficients were acceptable (AVE > 0.500 and CR > 0.600), demonstrating that the constructs were successfully validated. An AVE of 0.5 or higher is a good rule of thumb, suggesting adequate convergence, and a CR \geq 0.7 suggests good reliability (Hair et al. 2014).

Structural model

After we validated the constructs through CFA, the next step was to fit the structural models according to the conceptual model. The model showed good fit (χ^2 (548, N=1359) =3,132.75; $p < .001$; $\chi^2/df=5.717$; RMSEA=0.059; CFI=0.923; NFI=0.908). Figure 2 shows the path coefficients. The model ($R^2=0.944$) explains 94.4% of the variance in the intention to visit.

Figure 1

Standardised regression weights and explained variances of the structural model (N=1359)



Notes: *, $p < 0.05$, **, $p < 0.01$, ***, $p < 0.001$.

The strongest predictor was perceived behavioural control ($\beta=0.530$, $p < 0.001$), followed by destination image ($\beta=0.192$, $p < 0.001$). Attitudes towards visiting, subjective norms, and prior experience were not significant predictors of intention to travel. Subjective norm has strong positive effects on both attitudes towards visiting ($\beta=0.949$, $p < 0.001$) and perceived behavioural control ($\beta=0.904$, $p < 0.001$), while individual characteristics had no significant effect on perceived behavioural control or perceived risk. Nevertheless, perceived risk had a negative effect on attitudes ($\beta=-0.070$, $p < 0.001$).

Hypotheses test results and discussion

Hypotheses developed based on the conceptual model were evaluated based on the value of the path coefficients and their significance level. H1 ($\beta=-0.070$, $p<0.001$) was accepted. The higher perceived risk decreases tourists' attitudes towards visiting Turkey. This result is consistent with those of Quintal et al. (2010) and Hsieh et al. (2016). They found a negative relationship between perceived risk and attitudes towards visiting. This hypothesis is crucial for considering the negative effect of risk perception in conflict-ridden destinations.

The hypothesis based on the individual characteristics of H2 was rejected. There is no significant effect of a higher level of novelty-seeking behaviour on the perceived risk in conflict-ridden destinations. Therefore, H3 was rejected. Tourists with a higher level of novelty-seeking behaviour showed no significant effect on perceived behavioural control related to Turkey. These results are not consistent with previous studies (Lee–Crompton 1992, Lepp–Gibson 2008). This interesting outcome may also suggest that novelty-seeking behaviour loses its significance with destinations that show a more positive destination image over the risks tourists may face related to conflict-ridden destinations. Hypotheses concerning subjective norms – H4 ($\beta=0.904$, $p<0.001$) and H5 ($\beta=0.949$, $p<0.001$) – were accepted. This result is consistent with those of Quintal et al. (2010) and Hsieh et al. (2016). They proved the positive impact of subjective norms on perceived behavioural control and attitude towards visiting. More positive subjective norms related to Turkey positively affected perceived behavioural control ($\beta=0.904$, $p<0.001$) and attitude towards visiting ($\beta=0.949$, $p<0.001$).

Hypotheses related to the significant predictors of intention to visit – H6 ($\beta=0.530$, $p<0.001$) and H9 ($\beta=0.192$, $p<0.001$) – were accepted. A higher level of perceived behavioural control had a positive effect on the intention to visit Turkey (H6). This result is consistent with those of previous studies (Quintal et al. 2010, Hsieh et al. 2016, Lam–Hsu 2006, Sparks–Pan 2009). A positive destination image increases the intention to visit Turkey (H9). This is consistent with the findings of Park et al. (2016). H10 was rejected because prior experience had no significant effect on the intention to visit Turkey.

More positive subjective norms (approval of visiting Turkey) did not positively affect the intention to visit Turkey. Therefore, H8 was rejected. This finding contrasts with those of previous studies (Quintal et al. 2010, Hsieh et al. 2016, Lam–Hsu 2006, Sparks–Pan 2009). Hence, prior studies suggest that cultural and contextual differences may influence the effect of subjective norms on behaviour. For example, Eastern cultures are more controlled by subjective norms than Western cultures (Quintal et al. 2010). As a major part of the research sample represents U.S. citizens, it can be explained by the fact that it is a non-normatively controlled group, which is not highly affected by subjective norms during decision-making.

H7 was rejected because the attitude towards visiting Turkey had no significant effect on the intention to visit Turkey. This finding is inconsistent with the studies of Quintal et al. (2010) and Hsieh et al. (2016) but consistent with those of Lam–Hsu (2006) and Sparks–Pan (2009). Lam–Hsu (2006) and Sparks–Pan (2009) suggest that certain groups may place greater importance on other factors, such as perceived behavioural control, than attitudes towards visiting. The hypothesis related to prior experience (H9) was also rejected, as prior experience revealed no significant effect on the intention to visit conflict-ridden destinations. This result is consistent with that of Lam–Hsu (2006). This finding can be explained by the varying behaviour of tourist groups and in different contexts being affected differently by the same factors (Sparks–Pan 2009).

Conclusion and implications

The main results of this study confirmed the assumed relationships between perceived risk, destination image, prior experience, and TPB constructs. Most results are consistent with those of previous studies (Quintal et al. 2010, Hsieh et al. 2016, Lam–Hsu 2006, Sparks–Pan 2009, Lee–Crompton 1992, Lepp–Gibson 2008). The results suggest that perceived risk and destination image are distinct constructs that have a significant impact on Ajzen’s (1991) TPB model. The findings also suggest that subjective norms influenced both perceived behavioural control, attitude towards visiting conflict-ridden destinations, and intention to visit. In addition, perceived behavioural control also influenced the intention to visit, while attitudes towards visiting had no significant impact on intention to visit conflict-ridden destinations. The results show that perceived risk negatively influences attitudes towards visiting conflict-ridden destinations. In turn, perceived behavioural control and destination image are both significant positive predictors of intentions to visit Turkey. However, individual characteristics (novelty-seeking behaviour) had no significant effect on perceived risk and perceived behavioural control.

Theoretical and practical implications

The results of this study shed new light on the factors predicting the intention to visit conflict-ridden destinations, which offer implications for researchers and practitioners.

From a theoretical perspective, this study tested an extended TPB in a new context of conflict-ridden destinations using new constructs such as perceived risks, individual characteristics (novelty-seeking behaviour), destination image, and prior experience. The effects of perceived risk on perceived behavioural control and destination image allow identifying ways to operationalise them for further research and different dimensions.

As expected, perceived risk negatively influenced attitudes towards visiting conflict-ridden destinations. However, attitude towards visiting was not a significant predictor of the intention to visit conflict-ridden destinations. The important academic contribution here is that perceived behavioural control was the most significant predictor of intention to visit conflict-ridden destinations. This provides new insights into the implications of TPB models and frameworks to study tourists' behaviour. However, novelty-seeking behaviour had no significant effect on risk perception and perceived behavioural control. This can be explained by the fact that risk perceptions and perceived behavioural control associated with travel to a particular destination or region are not affected by the level of novelty-seeking behaviour (Lepp–Gibson 2008). Turkey's strong destination image, which is among the top 10 travel destinations (UNWTO 2021), may be the distinct characteristic of this destination that weakens the effect of novelty-seeking behaviour. Additionally, our study revealed a significant prediction effect in a new context – conflict-ridden destinations – associated with high-risk perception, which has been a limitation of existing studies (Quintal et al. 2010, Hsieh et al. 2016).

Another contribution of this study is the integration of destination image as the predicting construct of intention to visit; this is the pioneering addition to the extended TPB model in tourism, which is not present in tourism literature (Quintal et al. 2010, Hsieh et al. 2016). Additionally, we enhanced the findings of Park et al. (2016) in a new context of conflict-ridden destinations with high-risk perception levels. Hence, our findings revealed the direct effect of destination image on the intention to visit conflict-ridden destinations with a single model that was not present in previous studies (Quintal et al. 2010, Hsieh et al. 2016, Park et al. 2016, Lepp–Gibson 2008).

Along with the academic contributions, the results of our study offer practical implications for travel practitioners such as destination management organisations (DMOs), tourism agencies, and other market players providing accommodation and other tourism services.

DMOs should manage a destination's image, developing a safe and secure destination image to gain more positive travel intentions to a conflict-ridden destination (Isaac–Velden 2018). The results showed that in a destination with a higher score for destination image, intention to visit was significantly affected by the image factor. DMOs should work on strategies to guarantee the safety of tourists and communicate it clearly to potential tourists to avoid uncertainty in their travel decision-making (Isaac–van den Bedem 2021). This suggests that responsible and positive communication related to the destination image is extremely important to increase the intention to travel to destinations associated with high-risk perceptions. Hence, a more positive destination image increases the travel intention to conflict-ridden destinations.

DMOs and travel agencies should adapt their strategies to target tourism products or the product development process. The results suggested that tourists with a higher level of perceived behavioural control and a more positive destination image have a higher level of intention to visit conflict-ridden destinations. This is a pioneering contribution that was not reported in previous studies (Quintal et al. 2010, Hsieh et al. 2016, Lam–Hsu 2006, Sparks–Pan 2009, Lee–Crompton 1992, Lepp–Gibson 2008). Ultimately, this study provides implications for how travel intentions can be increased in conflict-ridden destinations. DMOs and travel agencies can use this knowledge to target individuals characterised by higher perceived behavioural control and have a higher level of intention to visit destinations associated with higher perceived risk levels.

Limitations and future research

This study has some limitations that should be addressed in future research. Data collection was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, which was accompanied by travel restrictions. Hsieh et al. (2016) suggested that data collection timing (length and season) may affect the results. Considering the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, future researchers may conduct their studies when there are no travel restrictions to obtain more comprehensive results.

This study was also limited to visiting Turkey, which is associated with higher risk perceptions and is among the top ten tourist destinations worldwide. Furthermore, the snowball sampling method led to the overrepresentation of North American male respondents, which might have affected the research findings. Future research should apply quota sampling to ensure a better representation of the structure of incoming tourists to Turkey.

Applying the proposed conceptual model of destinations with relatively low-risk perceptions would improve our understanding of predicting the effects of the studied constructs on intention to visit. In addition, future studies may consider segmenting the sample into a population of individualist and collectivist cultures. Quintal et al. (2010) also suggested that a comparison of travel risk across diverse countries or regions will enhance the understanding of individual and collective consumer behaviour. This will enhance the understanding of the effects of individual characteristics on the intention to visit.

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