

Visitor Harassment Research Report Card

By Dr. Annmarie Nicely



Annmarie Nicely

Visitor harassment is a global problem, negatively impacting the reputation of over 58 tourist destinations worldwide (Travel Foundation, 2013). The problem has resulted in: visitors remaining within the confines of their hotels and not supporting local markets (Skipper, 2009); cruise lines pulling their vessels from various ports of call (Thompson, 2011); and even tensions between traders and other tourism stakeholders such as hotels (Travel Foundation, 2013). Billions have been spent by destinations in trying to cauterize the problem. Jamaica alone had over 50 major types of private and government-led initiatives targeting visitors, the wider Jamaican public, and the traders in particular (Nicely, Day, Sydnor, & Mohd Ghazali, 2015). Some studies have been conducted but-like most burgeoning fields-research work in the area has been scant and largely descriptive. There is also a virtual absence in the literature of studies focused on developing and testing solutions.

Visitor harassment is an aggressive trading behavior often displayed by small independent traders at tourist destinations. Between 2012 and 2014 graduate students and faculty from the School of Hospitality and Tourism Management at Purdue embarked on a series of research studies focused on finding a solution to the problem. The goal of the studies was two-fold: first, to understand the problem; but more importantly to begin the process of developing and testing models for effectively reversing the aggressive selling behaviors.

The objective of one of the earlier studies was to identify the types of harassment behaviors as well as visitors'

emotional responses to these behaviors. A phenomenological study was undertaken. Comments chronicling the visitors' harassment experience and posted on the travel website, TripAdvisor, were analyzed. Twenty-six individual, group, contact, and non-contact aggressive selling behaviors were identified in this study. The study also found that harassment led to visitors feeling three of four negative consumer emotions; anger, fear, sadness, but not shame (Nicely & Mohd Ghazali, 2014).

In the second study Jamaica's visitor harassment mitigation efforts from 1957 to 2013 were examined. The objective of this study was to apply a model for sustainably reducing small independent traders' aggressive selling behaviors developed by the team to a destination grappling with the problem for decades. One hundred and eighty-one newspaper articles, 37 annual tourism reports, and 20 other government documents were subjected to rigorous thematic content analysis. The study found that while the island had initiatives focused on discouraging the traders engagement in harassment behaviors, it had much fewer initiatives focused on encouraging non-aggressive trading behaviors (Nicely, et al., 2015).

The third study that was undertaken looked at the use of local music in evoking emotions linked to good customer service and in feelings opposite to those linked to traders' aggressive selling behaviors. A number of music experiments were conducted with traders from a single market at a tourist destination. The study revealed a number of interesting findings that could be used by destinations when selecting ambient music for local

markets. For example, it was found that nostalgic local music had a positive effect on small independent traders' customer-service related emotions, in particular on them feeling confident, encouraged, happy, forgiving, and calm. This study is currently under review by a hospitality journal.

At this time the effect of visitors' cultural background on their emotional reaction, as well on their intention to return to, promote, and spend at a destination, when exposed to specific harassment behaviors are being examined.

References

- Nicely, A., Day, J., Sydnor, S., & Mohd Ghazali, R. (2015). *Sustainably changing small traders' harassment behaviors - A theoretical framework*. *Tourism Management*, 47, 273-285.
- Nicely, A., & Mohd Ghazali, R. (2014). *Demystifying visitor harassment*. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 48, 266-269.
- Skipper, T. (2009). *Understanding tourist-host interactions and their influence on quality tourism experiences*. Wilfred Laurier University.
- Thompson, M. (2011). *Ocho Rios sees correlation between business closures, tourist harassment*. *Financial Gleaner*.
- Travel Foundation (2013). *All inclusive approach to improving livelihoods and reducing tourist hassle*.

