

Eight Ideas for Reducing Visitor Harassment in Markets for Exploration

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Abstract

The goal of the article was to introduce to the discourse on visitor harassment (VH) ways VH may be kept low in markets at destinations. Eight broad ways were highlighted. Four of the ways include, by ensuring: 1] temperature and humidity levels are comfortable, smelliness level low and cleanliness level high; 2] visitors are aware of the cost of products and services before they enter vendors' stalls and the prices advertised remain constant throughout the sale; 3] the market is dominated by good quality locally made products, and 4] vendor displays are diverse with each vendor specializing in a particular type and level of product. The author then recommended, at the end of the article, that the veracity of the above be examined in future VH research.

Keywords: Markets, visitor harassment, tourist harassment, environmental factors

1. Introduction

There is a famous adage which states “*in every crisis, there are opportunities*”, an axiom true for tourism as well. One opportunity the present novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic provides is a chance for the tourism sector to reboot itself and refine its existing VH mitigation protocols.

The harassment of visitors by micro-entrepreneurs at destinations is an area of concern globally (Visitor Harassment Research Unit @ Purdue, 2018). Before the COVID-19 pandemic, there were reports of visitors being harassed by vendors at destinations, such as by tour guides, transport providers, street performers, and craft traders (Zaid Alrawadieh & Alrawadieh, 2019; Nicely & Mohd Ghazali, 2014). According to previous research, the practice can deleteriously affect destinations. For example, it can negatively impact visitors' satisfaction with the destination (Kozak, 2007) as well as their intention to return and recommend the destination to others (Kozak, 2007; Sorokina, Wang, & Cobos, 2018). It can also reduce the level of business vendors get (Ziad Alrawadieh, Alrawadieh, & Kozak, 2019; Sorokina et al., 2018). Despite research in the field, a few of which are cited here (Zaid Alrawadieh & Alrawadieh, 2019; Badu-Baiden, Agyeiwa Adu-Boahen, & Elvis Otoo, 2016; Kozak, 2007; Nicely & Mohd Ghazali, 2014; Sorokina et al., 2018), little is known about the direct and indirect drivers of the practice.

One country where there have been reports of trader harassment (TH) of visitors, before the COVID-19 pandemic, is Thailand (Kitching, 2014; Nikki M, 2015). In June 2018, the author of this article also experienced TH during a visit to the southeastern Asian country.

Thailand is an ethnically diverse country. However, most Thais are Siamese (91.5%) (Misachi, 2019). The remaining 8% are Khmer (2.3%), Malay (2.1%), Bamar (1.5%), Karen (0.6%), Chinese (0.4%), Hmong (0.3%), and from other ethnic groups (1.3%) (Misachi, 2019). In 2018, Thailand, with a population of approximately 69.4 million persons (The World Bank, 2020), welcomed 38.3 million visitors, most of whom were from China (10.5 million), Malaysia (4.1 million), South Korea, and Laos (1.8 million each) (Bangkok Bank, 2019; Rhee, 2019).

When I visited Bangkok in 2018, visitor harassment (VH) was not as pervasive as expected. In fact, to date, my best experience at a local market, both in my home country and elsewhere, was at the Chatuchak Weekend Market in Bangkok, Thailand. While at the Chatuchak Market I experienced little to no vendor harassment. As a visitor harassment (VH) researcher, this led me to ask why. So, the goal of this research note is to introduce a few factors that may explain the low levels of VH experienced or witnessed at Chatuchak. These ideas are new to the research stream. They have not been examined in previous VH research. The ideas are also important as they could assist tourism leaders, from affected destinations, in improving visitors' shopping experience at their local markets.

Trader harassment (TH) is an undesired micro-selling behavior. Like most forms of harassment, it is based on the perception of the victim, in this case, the visitor (Nicely & Morrison, 2019). There are a series of micro-trading behaviors visitors characterize as harassment, especially visitors from the West (Nicely, Singh, & Zhu, 2020). For example, when vendors beckon, overcharge, and refuse to take "no" as a response (Nicely & Mohd Ghazali, 2014; Nicely et al., 2020). TH is an issue for destinations as the practice often makes visitors angry, afraid, and/or sad (Nicely & Ghazali, 2014).

Before I share my ideas of possible suppressants/drivers of TH of visitors in local markets, it is important to note the following. I am a Black, middle-aged, female, from the West. I am originally from the Caribbean. During my visit to Bangkok, in 2018, I visited the Chatuchak Weekend Market twice. During my first visit, which was a Saturday afternoon, I was in the company of two graduate students, one South Korean and the other Thai. On my second visit, the Sunday morning that followed, I visited the market alone. Chatuchak is a large door/outdoor market with over 15,000 stalls divided into 14 sections, each dedicated to specific types of products (Chatuchak Weekend Market, 2020). For example, one section was dedicated to clothing, hiking equipment, and leather; and another to postcards, souvenirs, and pets (Chatuchak Weekend Market, 2018). Chatuchak Market has been named the world's largest weekend market (Chatuchak Weekend Market, 2020).

2. Discussion

2.1 Environmental factors

I believe one reason why I experienced little to no harassment while at Chatuchak was the interior of the market was comfortably cool. Thailand is a tropical country with warm moist climates year-round (Kottek, Grieser, Beck, Rudolf, & Rubel, 2006). The temperature in Bangkok, during the time of my visit, ranged from 77 to 95 degrees Fahrenheit (30-35 degrees Celsius). On the days of my visits, the outdoor area of the market was hot, but the interior was

cool. Most stalls in the interior of the market had artificial cooling devices, in particular, air conditioning units and/or fans (Figure 1).

Previous studies have made a connection between both temperature and precipitation levels and human interaction in spaces. Studies have found the higher the temperature and humidity levels in a space, the greater the likelihood of negative human interaction in that space (Howarth & Hoffman, 1984; Kolb, Gockel, & Werth, 2012). In addition, blog posts on the popular travel website, TripAdvisor, have also hinted at a possible link between both environmental temperature and humidity levels and TH of visitors at destinations (Jackel 1956, 2017; Watts-Up, 2014). Several other TripAdvisor postings, some of which are cited here, also hinted at other environmental contributors to negative interactions between visitors and vendors and those are the smell (Debra H, 2015) and cleanliness (Watts-Up, 2014) of the vending space. It is important to state here that while at Chatuchak, the market was relatively clean, and no unpleasant smells were detected.

The link between environmental conditions and TH of visitors in markets has not been explored to date. The following is posited for consideration by researchers.

Pla-d: *Environmental factors (namely temperature, humidity, smelliness, and cleanliness) may be important determinants of VH intensity levels at local markets. The more comfortable the temperature and humidity levels, the lower the level of smelliness, and the higher the level of cleanliness, the lower the VH intensity level reported will be.*



Figure 1. Cooling systems at Chatuchak Market

2.2 Price awareness and price consistency

Another reason I believe significant harassment was not experienced or witnessed at Chatuchak was vendor prices were boldly displayed. The vendors' price displays could be seen from the walkways (Figure 2). Also, once I entered the vendor stalls there were no surprises. The price quoted and received was as displayed at the entrance to the stalls. Hence, before entering a stall, I was able to make an initial judgment on whether the items are seen from the walkway communicated value. So, once I entered a stall I already had strong intentions of making a purchase. This, therefore, reduced the need for aggressive selling. In other words, early price awareness may lead to little to no TH of visitors.

Blog posts on TripAdvisor also suggested a connection between both early price awareness and price consistency, and the TH of visitors (561Mattp, 2019; 255114Gill45, 2012). Early price awareness, price consistency, and TH intensity have not been explored in the previous TH of visitor research. The following is therefore proposed.

P2a-b: *Visitors' early price awareness and price consistency may be important determinants of VH intensity levels at local markets. The more aware a visitor is of product prices before entering a vendor's stall and the greater the price consistency throughout the sale process, the lower the VH intensity level reported will be.*



Figure 2. Prices on display at a stall in Chatuchak Market

2.3 Quality of items and where they were made

The third reason I believe TH of visitors was not experienced or witnessed at Chatuchak was most items viewed seemed locally made and of good quality. Therefore, I had no difficulty finding and accessing good quality locally made items at Chatuchak. Actually, most of the items viewed were labeled “Made in Thailand”. Oftentimes, when visitors mention being harassed they usually reference feeling forced to buy poor quality items as well as imported items (561Mattp, 2019; Rob S, 2015). To date, no study has examined associations between both product source and quality and TH of visitors in local markets. As a result, the following is proposed.

P3a-b: *Product quality and the source may be important determinants of VH intensity levels in local markets. The more convinced a visitor is that the vendor's products are of good quality and locally made, the lower the VH intensity reported will be.*

2.4 Diverse displays but vendors specialize

The fourth reason why I did not experience or witness harassment at Chatuchak may be due to display variety and vendor specialization. As mentioned earlier, the Chatuchak Market was organized according to product type. Each vendor would then specialize in both a particular type of product in that category and a particular style or design of that product (Figures 2 and 3). For example, in the Clothing, Hiking Equipment and Leather section of the market a vendor will specialize in scarves of a particular style or design (Figure 2). This minimized competition among the vendors, a factor considered a major driver of VH in markets but needs to be researched further. The product diversity across the vendors also made viewing the various stalls interesting and enjoyable. In addition, within each section of the market, there was a mixture of high-end

and low-end stalls (Figure 3). This was particularly interesting as micro-trading practices of the former may be influencing that of the latter. Similar observations were made in other markets in Asia as well. To date, researchers have not examined associations between display variety and vendor specialization, and TH of visitors in markets. As a result, the following is proposed.

P4: *Display variety across vendors and vendor specialization may be important determinants of VH intensity levels at local markets. The more diverse the products across vendors and the more vendors specialize in a particular style, design, and level of a particular type of product or related group of products, the lower the VH intensity levels reported in the market will be.*



Figure 3. Product specialization and display diversity at Chatuchak Market – high-end and low-end item displays

2.5 Diverse shoppers

A fifth possible contributor to the low TH of visitor levels at Chatuchak is its diverse shoppers. Observing and listening to the shoppers at Chatuchak, it was clear that they were from different countries but locally as well (Figure 4). Chatuchak is popular among locals and visitors alike (Wancharoen, 2020).

A diverse consumer pool is likely to accomplish the following. One, locals can assist with the policing of vendors' negative behaviors toward visitors. Most importantly, it reduces vendors' over-dependence on a single market source for their income. So, it mitigates their risk. Finally, it makes the shopping experience for visitors feel less contrived. The following is therefore proposed.

P5a-b: *Shopper diversity (i.e. shoppers from different countries as well as local) may be an important determinant of VH intensity levels at local markets. The more diverse the shoppers (i.e. in the case of international shoppers from different sources markets, as well local and international shoppers) the lower the VH intensity levels reported in the market will be.*



Figure 4. Diverse shoppers at Chatuchak Market

2.6 High ratio of shoppers to vendors

Miniscule levels of VH at Chatuchak may also be due to the high ratio of shoppers to vendors. This makes this factor the sixth reason for low levels of VH in markets such as Chatuchak. On the days I visited, Chatuchak was packed with shoppers. There were many more shoppers than vendors. According to previous VH research, one reason vendors harass visitors is the low ratio of shoppers to vendors (Dunn & Dunn, 2002). Too few customers to vendors pose other challenges than little to no sales. For example, it stymies vendors' ability to practice good selling when taught (Nicely, Day, Sydnor, & Mohd Ghazali, 2015). The following is therefore proposed.

***P6:** The ratio of shoppers to vendors may be an important determinant of VH intensity levels at local markets. The higher the ratio of shoppers to vendors, the lower the VH intensity levels reported will be.*

2.7 Expectancy shaped

The seventh factor that may have contributed to my positive interactions with vendors at Chatuchak is "I was prepared". Before visiting Chatuchak the bellman at my hotel suggested that I take water and a portable fan as it could get hot. While at the market, the attendant at the information booth informed me of areas I could rest as well as of the length of time it would take to go through the space. In other words, I was prepared for eventualities that could negatively influence my interaction with the vendors. Also, the food vendors were dispersed throughout the market. Therefore, as I walked through this large market I could easily find areas where I could have something to eat. The following is proposed.

***P7:** The extent visitors were prepared for negative eventualities while they shop (i.e. heat, thirst, hunger, physical strain, etc.) may be important determinants of perceived VH intensity at local markets. The more visitors are sensitized as to the negative eventualities to expect at the market and how to minimize them, the lower the VH intensity levels reported will be.*

2.8 Advocates present, visible, and available

The eighth and final reason I believe little or no VH was experienced or witnessed at the Chatuchak Market was I had advocates. On the first day, my advocate was a Thai student from

my university. And on the second day, my advocate was the attendant in the information booth at the market (Figure 5). The Thai student stayed with me and the other student from my university throughout Day 1 and from time to time conversing with the vendors on our behalf. And on Day 2 the attendant at the entrance to the market provided me with the information I did not know I needed and made me feel I could talk to her any time during my visit. Therefore, advocates could be a key deterrent to VH in markets. The following is proposed.

P8: True and sincere visitor advocates may be an important determinant of VH intensity at local markets. The more visitors feel they had a sincere and trustworthy advocate at the location, the lower the VH intensity levels reported will be.



Figure 5. Information booth at Chatuchak Market

The reason I think the above eight propositions are plausible is of all the markets I have visited, experienced, and witnessed intense VH, in different parts of the world (in particular, in the Caribbean, South America, Southeast Asia, and Africa), the opposite of one or more of the eight factors named dominated (Figure 6).

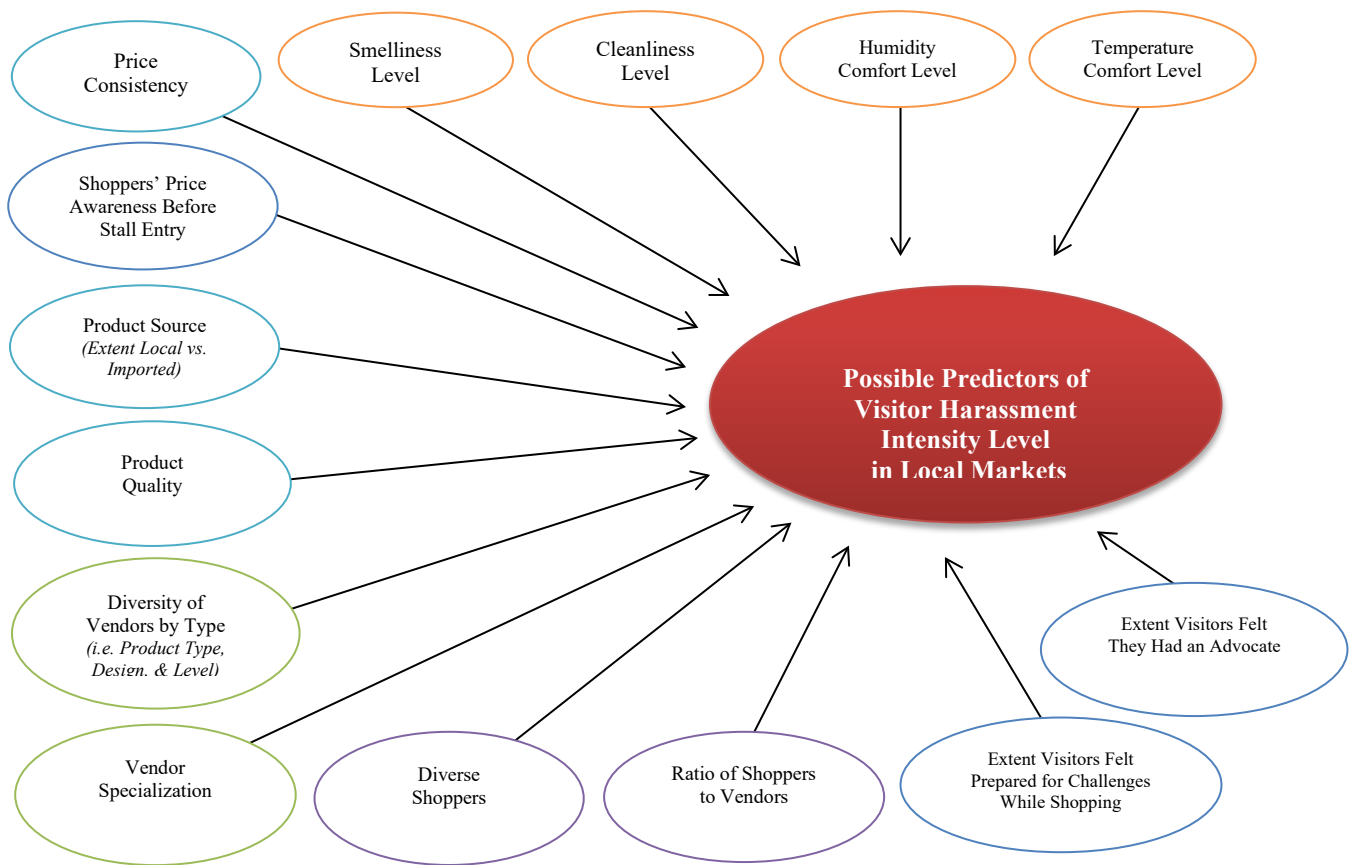


Figure 6. Possible predictors of visitor harassment intensity levels at markets among visitors from the Western world

3. Conclusion

In closing, it is felt that eight broad factors may reduce VH intensity levels in local markets. They are if: 1] the humidity and temperature levels are comfortable, smelliness low, and cleanliness high; 2] visitors are aware of the cost of products and services before they approach vendors' stalls and if the prices advertised remained consistent throughout the sale transaction; 3] most vendors in the space sell good quality locally made items; 4] the displays across vendors are diverse and each vendor specializes in particular types and level of products; 5] the shoppers in the space are from various source markets internationally as well as domestic; 6] the ratio of shoppers to vendors is high; 7] visitors in the space are adequately prepared for negative eventualities that may occur during shopping, and 8] visitors in the space feel they have sincere and trustworthy advocates available to them. It is also the view of the author, that the more of these factors exist in a market, the significantly lower the VH intensity levels reported in the area will be. As mentioned earlier, none of the eight factors highlighted have been explored in the previous TH of visitor research.

The following is therefore recommended. First, destination management organizations (DMOs) should commission studies to test the veracity of the propositions listed. So, a few markets should be selected, the changes made, and the VH intensity levels checked before and after the changes for any difference in reported VH intensity levels. Members of the academic community should conduct similar studies as well. Therefore, the next step for research in this area studies confirming or refuting the propositions made in this research note.

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