

Visitor (Trader) Harassment: Two Drivers Not Examined.....Criminological Theories Explored

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Abstract

Prior to the 2020 Corona virus pandemic (COVID-19), the harassment of visitors by local micro-traders was of significant concern to tourism leaders around the world, and this was occurring while many of the factors fuelling such behaviours remain unknown. The goal of the present discourse was to introduce two criminological theories that may result in the discovery of drivers not yet examined through empirical research. In fact, the authors suggested that in addition to other factors the phenomenon may also be due to micro-traders experiencing low levels of self-control and negative strain, factors that could heighten post COVID-19.

Key Words: Trader harassment, visitor harassment, crime, social learning, control, strain theory

Introduction

Visitor harassment (VH), in particular trader harassment (TH), is an unwanted or undesired selling tactic directed toward a visitor by one or more micro-traders at a tourist destination (de Albuquerque & McElroy, 2001; Griffin, 2003). Prior to the 2020 Corona virus pandemic (COVID-19), the phenomenon was of concern to tourism leaders. The practice oftentimes leave visitors with varying degrees of anger, fear, and/or discontent (Nicely & Mohd Ghazali, 2014). Additionally, studies have found that the phenomenon can have a deleterious effect on visitors' loyalty toward a destination, in particular toward their intention to return to a destination and recommend a destination to others (Khairat, 2016; Kozak, 2007; Milman, 2015; Pathirana & Athula Gnanapala, 2015). There are at least 26 micro-trading behaviours visitors characterize as harassment, such as being pushed, pulled, trailed, and overcharged by micro-traders (Nicely & Mohd Ghazali, 2014).

Criminal harassment, in general and in the legal sense, is unwanted and intrusive acts or behaviour imposed on another in a manner which could cause an individual to feel distress and/or fear (Baum, Catalano, Rand, & Rose, 2009). Therefore harassment, whether it is sexual, racial, workplace or trader is not defined only by the behaviour of the perpetrator but also by the subjective reaction of the victim. Arguably, there are commonalities between criminal harassment, a harmful act or behaviour forbidden and punishable by law, and TH, an unwanted or undesired selling tactic by a micro-trader toward a visitor (de Albuquerque & McElroy, 2001; Griffin, 2003). For one thing, both result in the victim feeling distressed and/or fearful because of the action of another (Nicely & Mohd Ghazali, 2014). However, one important difference between the two is the former is legally forbidden while the latter is not always prohibited by law.

Though limited, over the last two decades there have been some scholarship in the area of TH of visitors at destinations. A few are cited here (Alrawadieh, Alrawadieh, & Kozak, 2019; Badu-Baiden, Adu-Boahen, & Otoo, 2016; Chepkwony & Kangogo, 2013; de Albuquerque & McElroy, 2001; Dunn & Dunn, 2002a, 2002b; Khairat, 2016; Kozak, 2007; Milman, 2015; Nicely, Day, Sydnor, & Mohd

Ghazali, 2015; Nicely & Mohd Ghazali, 2014, 2018; Otoo, Badu-Baiden, & Kim; Pathirana & Athula Gnanapala, 2015). Of the approximately 60 journal articles and theses on the topic only one proposed a theoretical model for reducing the practice at destinations (Nicely et al., 2015). The model was based on theories largely from the area of social psychology such as the theory of operant conditioning, social learning, and aggression among others (Nicely et al., 2015).

Hence, a deficiency in the present literature is the use of criminological theories to pinpoint drivers of TH. To date, there is only one other study that included a criminological theory, *hot spot theory*, to examine TH (Chepkwony & Kangogo, 2013; Crott, 1996). However, in that study the theory was not used to determine correlates of TH (Chepkwony & Kangogo, 2013).

The limited use of criminological theory in previous VH research may be attributed to a number of factors. First, it may be due to the pervasive view by certain stakeholder groups at tourist destinations (and among some academics) that the phenomenon is a misunderstanding on the part of visitors (de Albuquerque & McElroy, 2001; Nicely et al., 2015). Hence, for those sharing such thinking the phenomenon is not due to deviance and as a result criminological thinking has no place as far as this particular issue is concerned. The second reason for the limited use of criminological theory in TH of visitor research is the research stream is in a state of infancy, some 19 years since the topic first made its way into scholarly journals on tourism (Chambers & Airey, 2001; de Albuquerque & McElroy, 2001).

In this article, we advocate and advance the proposition that criminological theories do have a place in VH research. Specifically, we articulate the role and utility that criminological theories could play in determining some of the causes of TH as well as in identifying correlates of TH intensity at tourist destinations. We also highlight perspectives and insights not explored in previous VH research. We believe this discourse is timely as economies decline and travel slowly resumes due to the COVID-19 crisis as we expect the TH of visitor phenomenon to re-emerge. Most importantly, while we look at a few criminological theories, we believe micro-traders harassing

selling behaviours toward visitors are due to a multiplicity of factors, some outside the realm of criminology.

The focus of this paper is on TH and not on the other forms of VH. Other forms of VH that are excluded from the present discourse are: institutional harassment (such as the bothering of visitors by local police and immigration officers); sexual harassment (such as non-trade related sensual advances toward visitors by locals at the destination) and beggar harassment (such as, the request for money by persons like the indigent at the destination). Additionally, our emphasis is on the use of criminological theories to account for TH and not to change how TH behaviours are perceived by tourists.

The remaining of this paper is organized as follows. First, we present a review of prior research on TH and highlight the gaps in the current literature. Next, we describe the two dominant criminological perspectives for consideration in future TH research and elaborate on general strain theory (GST) (Agnew, 2013), a perspective we believe is the most relevant and suitable framework to examine TH. We also delineate a set of testable propositions and key measures derived from GST. Finally, we outline our recommended areas for future research.

Review of Literature

Limited Use of Micro-Trader Samples and the Reasons Why

One factor that may explain the limited use of criminological theory in previous TH of visitor research is the avoidance of studies involving micro-trader samples. Of the 46 known journal articles published on TH at destinations only ten involved micro-trader samples. The studies were conducted in Britain (Harris, 2012), Jamaica (Dunn & Dunn, 2002b; Johnson, 2014; Nicely et al., 2015; Nicely & Mohd Ghazali, 2018), Malawi (Kirkesæther, 2018), Mexico (Milman, 2015), Sri Lanka (Pathirana & Athula Gnanapala, 2015; Sandaruwani & Gnanapala, 2016), and Vietnam (Truong, 2018). Therefore, the common practice was the use of visitor samples. In a panel

discussion held in April 2019 titled *Challenges in Visitor Harassment Research: Investigating Micro-Traders*, which the authors of the present article participated in, with the third member of the panel being a tourism professor and destination management expert. Four reasons were posited for the limited number of TH of visitor studies involving micro-trader samples. First, fear of negative publicity by local tourism officials hence their non-cooperation with facilitating such research. Second, security concerns, in particular the potential hostile and threatening reactions researchers may face when gathering data directly from micro-traders at destinations. This is of particular concern to young researchers. Third, the high cost associated with gathering data from a population that may have low literacy and trust levels. Fourth, the perception among young researchers that studying visitors is more appealing than studying micro-traders.

Four important takeaways were also recommended at the panel discussion that could lead to more studies examining the causes of TH using micro-trader samples and consequently to greater use of criminological theories in TH research. It was proposed that TH researchers invest time building relationships with members of micro-trading communities at tourist destinations as this will allow them greater access to these groups for research purposes. It was suggested as well that researchers interested in identifying important drivers of TH behaviours pursue more qualitative research, in particular participant observation and reflective conversation-type enquiries. In addition, researchers should give due consideration to the use of alternative terms to describe micro-traders' unwanted selling behaviours, in place of the characterization of "harassment", as this term is likely to evoke anti-cooperative responses from micro-traders. Finally, one major way to increase the number of empirical studies involving micro-traders, ultimately advancing the VH research stream, is if global tourism bodies (such as the United Nations World Tourism Organization) begin the process of systematically gathering and publishing datasets on TH intensity levels at tourist destinations around the world. The availability and accessibility of accurate and reliable data will not only increase the number of studies on the drivers of TH intensity levels at

tourist destinations but would also afford tourism leaders the opportunity to monitor the effectiveness of their TH mitigation initiatives as well. Of ten known studies that used micro-trader sample only one used criminological theories, namely social learning theory and the theory of aggression (Nicely et al., 2015).

Possible Driver 1: Low Levels of Self-Control

The field of criminology has produced many theories or “school of thoughts” on the causation of crime and deviance. The diversity in theorizing within criminology reflects the fact that crime and deviance is a complex phenomenon, potentially shaped by a range of factors that operate inside and outside an individual. Although commonalities across crime theories can be found, they often provide different, sometimes contradictory, explanations for why crime and deviance occur (Cullen & Agnew, 2006).

The two main theoretical perspectives currently dominate the field of criminology are control and strain. *Control theory* has its roots in the work of the late nineteenth-century French sociologist, Emile Durkheim, who maintained that since humans have no naturally occurring restraints over their desires, they must be “controlled” by society (Durkheim, 1933). Theories premised on the control framework are distinguishable from other crime theories in that they are theories of restraint and conformity rather than theories of deviance and offending. Stated differently, instead of asking “why do individuals break the law?” control theorists seek to determine “why don’t all of us violate rules and norms,” and the answer has to do with various sources of control. For a more fulsome discussion on control theories, see Kubrin, Stucky, and Krohn (2009).

Among the contemporary control theories, low self-control theory, which was proposed by Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990), is the most ambitious as well as the most tested perspective (Pratt & Cullen, 2000). According to this theory, crime and delinquency are caused by low self-control, which is defined as “the tendency of individuals to pursue short-term gratification without

consideration of the long-term consequences of their acts” (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990, p. 177). That is, offenders are impulsive and short-sighted individuals who tend to have a here-and-now outlook toward life. Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) also claim that their theory could account for not only crime and delinquency but also behaviours that are analogous to crime such as having unprotected sex, driving recklessly, being an alcoholic, etc. To date, criminologists and researchers have utilized low self-control theory to examine a wide range of illegal and deviant behaviours ranging from cutting classes to binge drinking to stalking to homicide, and overall, the theory has received strong empirical support (Pratt & Cullen, 2000). Although the theory’s plausible connection with why micro-traders harass visitors has not been explored, we believe low self-control could be a salient factor to account for unwanted and harassing selling behaviours among micro-traders toward visitors.

Possible Driver 2: Strain

Strain theory maintains that criminal and delinquent behaviour occurs when there is a disjunction between structures of opportunities and culturally prescribed aspirations (Cullen & Agnew, 2006). Specifically, the theory proposes that crime and deviance is the by-product of the stressor or pressure that individuals experience when they are unable to achieve culturally valued goals (such as monetary success, career advancement) using legitimate means. Hence, implicitly implied in this theoretical framework is the notion that society can encourage crime and deviance among its citizens (Merton, 1938).

Arguably, the most influential contemporary strain theory is Robert Agnew’s (1992) general strain theory (GST). GST is an expansion of the traditional strain perspectives proposed by Robert Merton (1938), Albert Cohen (1955), and Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin (1960). According to the theory, strain (defined as events and conditions disliked by individuals such as being bullied at school, experiencing racial discrimination, living in a high crime neighbourhood, etc.) leads to a host

of negative emotions (such as anger, fear, depression, etc.) and these emotions create pressure for corrective action with crime being one method of coping. It is important to note that GST asserts that the majority of strained individuals engage in legal coping most of the time as well as the likelihood of criminal coping among strained individuals depends on a host of factors including the availability of legal coping mechanisms, the nature of the strain and the emotions that it prompts, as well as the characteristics of the strained individual and his/her social environment (such as problem-solving and social skills, level of self-control, association with criminal others, beliefs regarding crime, etc.). Further, among the negative emotions, GST suggests anger is the emotion most likely to lead to criminal coping (Agnew, 1992). Similar to low self-control theory, the efficacy of GST in accounting for crime, delinquency, and deviance has been strongly supported by research evidence (Kubrin, Stucky, and Krohn, (2009). One study has identified a range of socio-economic factors that might cause micro-traders to engage in harassing selling behaviours; however, the researchers did not use GST as its basis (Dunn & Dunn, 2002a). In addition, there are a number of elements proposed by GST, as highlighted above, that have not been explored in previous TH research such as the types of legal coping mechanisms and characteristics of micro-traders. These factors could potentially be the key ingredients to reduce micro-traders' engagement or lower their desire to engage in harassing selling behaviours when interacting with visitors at the destination. To date no TH study had examined these factors.

Hypotheses and Research Questions to Consider

Given that the criminological perspectives described in the above section have been successfully applied to a wide range of illegal and deviant behaviours, they should also be applicable to the inquiry on TH. For instance, employing low self-control theory, researchers could examine the hypothesis that micro-traders who engage in improper and undesired selling tactics are individuals with low levels of self-control.

However, the most suitable perspective to study and understand TH, in our opinion, is Agnew's GST. GST is most appropriate to examine TH because the theory recognizes and attempts to capture the complexities and challenges in understanding human behaviour. To be sure, GST is not a parsimonious theory and to provide a full test of the theory would require a costly and far-reaching dataset. A full test of the theory would also impose large demands on the data and computational programs to estimate linear, nonlinear, reciprocal, and interactional effects. Given these facts, researchers should conduct partial tests of the theory. We recommend the following research questions for tourism researchers to explore:

Proposed Research Question 1: Types of Strain Micro-Traders Experience

What types of work-related strain (such as the inability to meet basic business and living expenses and uncomfortable work settings) do micro-traders experience?

Proposed Research Question 2: Types of Negative Emotions

What types of negative emotions (such as frustration, apprehension, despair, anger, etc.) are associated with work-related strain experienced among micro-traders?

Proposed Research Question 3: Types of Coping Mechanisms

What types of illegitimate (such as taking advantage of visitors limited knowledge of authentic local craft as well as of the local currency, significantly inflating prices charged to visitors for goods and services, etc.) and legitimate coping mechanisms (such as being patient until the visitor makes a purchase) do strained micro-traders engage in to alleviate the stressor?

Proposed Research Question 4: Emotion-Harassment Intensity

Does a specific type of negative emotion (especially anger) increase the likelihood of TH

among strained micro-traders?

Proposed Research Question 5: Strain-Emotion-Coping Strategies-Harassment Intensity

Do negative coping strategies and emotions moderate or mediate the relationship between strain and TH intensity levels?

In addition to the core propositions of GST described above, researchers and tourism scholars could also investigate the association between objective strains (such as events and conditions that are disliked by most people in a given group), subjective strains (such as events and conditions that are disliked by the individuals experiencing them), and negative emotions among strained micro-traders. GST recognizes that individuals often differ in their subjective evaluations of the same objective strains but the theory maintains that subjective strains should have a greater impact on criminal and illegal coping behaviours than objective strains. Researchers and tourism scholars could also examine the impact of micro-traders' characteristics and their social environment (such as their socioeconomic status, the availability of legitimate coping avenues, level of social support, beliefs regarding TH, etc.) on the likelihood of engaging in TH. GST contends that the above factors do influence or condition the effect of strain on illegitimate and legitimate coping. Finally, researchers and tourism scholars could explore the types of strain most likely to lead to TH. Similar to the proposition that anger is the negative emotion most conducive to crime and delinquency, GST claims that strains that are high in magnitude (for example, strains that are severe, frequent, of long duration, expected to continue into the future, etc.) are most likely to lead to crime and delinquency.

Direction for Future Research

Two possible drivers of TH of visitors at destinations, worthy of further research, are self-control and strain. In fact, we believe the above proposals represent a judicious and promising agenda to

advance the study of TH. Although we underscored GST as the most prominent perspective to examine TH at destinations, it is instructive that we concede the equally relevance and significance of Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) self-control in understanding this phenomenon. As such, we encourage researchers to apply the theoretical constructs from these theories to future TH of visitor research, recognizing that such research could be challenging without the support of tourism officials at destinations.

As we alluded previously, GST is a complex theoretical framework and a full test of the theory is most likely not attainable at this time. Hence, the best approach is to test the theory in bits and pieces. In conducting partial tests of GST, the following requirement and measures are warranted. *First*, the study must involve a sample of micro-traders with a representative sample being an absolute requirement if the researchers are interested in generalizing their findings to the larger population of micro-traders. *Second*, the study should include measures for strain, negative emotions, and coping strategies. *Third*, pertaining to the negative emotions, the study must include measures for anger as it is hypothesized to be the emotion most likely to lead to illegal and deviant coping tactics. *Fourth*, the study should distinguish between trait-based (that is, the relatively stable characteristics of individuals) and situational-based (that is, the characteristics that individuals display in response to strain) measures of negative emotions as there is evidence that trait-based negative emotions are related to situational-based negative emotions (for example, angry people tend to react to strain with anger). *Fifth*, relating to coping mechanisms, the study should contain measures of both illegitimate and legitimate tactics.

We also recommend future research to employ the mixed-method approach in assessing the efficacy of criminological theories in accounting for TH. For instance, prior qualitative studies on GST conducted by criminologists, sociologists, and psychologists have provided insights into the circumstances where criminal coping is most likely as well as the individuals' characteristics that are most conducive to criminal coping among strained individuals (Agnew, 2013). The supplement

of qualitative data, particularly data describing the nature and interpretation of the stressor, the circumstances surrounding the stressor, and the strained individual's overall propensity toward criminal coping, in tests of GST on TH will help substantiate the interpretation of quantitative data. We also encourage future research to explore interactional and conditioning effects among GST variables because the core argument of the theory is that *certain* individuals experience *certain* types of strain in *certain* situations are likely to adopt illegal coping (Agnew, 2013). That is, crime and deviance are due to a *combination* of factors and the identification of this combination is pertinent and warranted. Lastly, we also advocate for the implementation of vignette experimental designs to explore current beliefs and attitudes micro-traders share toward TH. There are advantages and disadvantages associated with vignette studies (for a discussion on this topic, see (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014)), but when they include an experimental design (such as having control and experimental groups), they possess a high internal validity. Vignette studies could potentially address the controversy on whether or not TH is simply a misunderstanding on the part of visitors.

This article could have important implications. For one thing, it is hoped as a result of the ideas shared studies will emerge looking strain and self-control as possible predictors of TH intensity levels at destinations. The discussion could have implications for practice as well with tourism leaders taking a closer a look at the role strain ad self-control may have in their micro-traders' interactions with visitors. As tourism leaders prepare for the next wave of high TH of visitor levels post COVID-19 we might see initiatives being implemented and monitored that are focused on reducing strain and improving micro-traders level of self-control. Hence, the next for research in this stream are studies looking at the two constructs the focus of the discussion and their role in TH intensity levels at destinations.

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