

TOURISTS' PERCEPTION OF PERSONAL SAFETY IN THE UNITED STATES – AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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The perception of safety, both personal safety and safety of a venue, is vital to the success of a tourist destination. This study assessed the perceptions of personal safety of cross border shoppers from Asia, Europe, Canada, Central and South American, and the Middle East visiting Central Texas and Las Vegas. A five-point Likert-type scale was utilized in the study. Although there was a significant difference on many items regarding personal safety, the perceived issues related to safety were minimal. The respondents generally disagreed with most items. The respondents did not feel physically threatened or have personal property stolen. Most respondents did not indicate safety as a factor in determining their traveling choices. These findings bode well for tourist destinations in the United States. Most cross border shoppers in this study were not concerned about safety when traveling in the United States.

KEYWORDS: *Perception of safety, venue safety, international tourist safety, cross border shoppers*

Crimes and violent acts occur at tourist destinations every minute of every day (Pizam, 1999). If an individual perceives an absence of safety and security, both domestic and international tourism are affected (Pizam & Mansfeld, 1996). Specifically, fear of crime leads to modifications of one's behavior (Kaufman & Lane, 1995). While tourists are often the victims of crimes, other victims include: businesses, local residents, political figures, and movie stars (Pizam, 1999). These serious acts of violence at a tourist venue can cause a drastic decline in tourist demand (Lankford, 1996; Pizam, 1999; Pizam & Mansfeld, 1996). If visitors are fearful of personal harm, businesses stand to lose loyalty, customers, and ultimately revenue (Kaufman & Lane, 1995).

Crimes against tourists can be classified into two broad categories: crimes of opportunity such as robbery, assault, and rape; and planned crimes such as terrorism (Flicker & Gardner, 2002). All countries face issues of safety and security in tourism development, but many face these issues with much more severity. With terrorist attacks occurring all over the world, terrorism does weigh on the minds of travelers. For example, both the *Bangkok Post* and the *New York Times* report the need to outwardly address safety issues after recent sexual assaults and killings of foreign tourists in Thailand (Jitpleecheep, 2007; Mydans, 2008). And the U.S. government warned travelers to avoid southern Thailand after a bomb exploded killing two and injuring many more. These warnings can affect the volume of travelers and ultimately the economy of these countries.

Crimes against tourists in the United States have gained international media attention and cover both crimes of opportunity and most notably the planned crime of the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Much attention over crimes during the last decade has led to the allocation of already limited resources to convince tourists that it is safe to travel (Flicker & Gardner, 2002; Tarlow & Muehsam, 1996).

Tourist Safety

Safety and security of tourists is an absolute prerequisite for a successful tourist operation (Yüksel & Yüksel, 2007). Tourists are considered to be vulnerable to victimization of crime due to varying behavior patterns, carrying large amounts of money, lack of familiarity with their environments, and they also tend to look different, standing out in a crowd (Brunt, Mawby, & Hambly, 2000; Pizam & Mansfeld, 1996). Some speculate that the propensity of tourists as victims comes from the simple fact that tourists spend more time outdoors, sightseeing, dining, and shopping (Brunt, Mawby, & Hambly, 2000). Additionally, many times tourists involve themselves in risky behavior. Tourists are less likely to be aware of the local laws and processes of reporting crimes and pressing charges against criminals. Therefore, the likelihood of gaining from a visitor is high while the risk of conviction and detection are low (Brunt, Mawby, & Hambly, 2000; Pizam & Mansfeld, 1996). All of these make tourists more susceptible to becoming victims of crime. While the consequences to the criminal may be very low, the consequences to the local business community can be devastating. For those individual victims, their future travel decisions may adversely be affected (Brunt, Mawby, & Hambly, 2000; Pizam, 1999). Even more disturbing is that negative publicity reduces the demand for the tourist destination (Bar-On, 1996).

Tourists as Shoppers

Almost all tourists shop while visiting a destination. Indeed, many tourists seem to travel just for the experience and enjoyment of shopping (Timothy & Butler, 1995). Shopping centers are thought to be areas of risk for planned crimes of terrorism due to the large number of people in one location. Furthermore, crimes of opportunity are evident since shoppers carry large amounts of money and purchases. Credit card information can also be stolen during transactions which can lead

to personal identity theft (Yüksel & Yüksel, 2007). One's perception of safety while shopping affects tourists' purchasing behaviors (Babin & Darden, 1995).

Two general types of risks are associated with shopping and affect a tourist's perception of safety, internal and external risks. Internal risks stem from interactions with salespeople and include trickery and poor treatment. The focus of this study mainly looks at the second, external risks (Yüksel & Yüksel, 2007). Both of Flicker's classification of crime, planned crimes and crimes of opportunity, fall within external risks associated with shoppers (Flicker & Gardner, 2002). Varying degrees of risks can be perceived and depend on many factors. Shopping facilities, local surroundings, the shopping district, activities occurring in the area, and limited experience in the area can all contribute to varying degrees of risks (Yüksel & Yüksel, 2007). As documented by previous research concerning relationships between physical store environments, shopper emotions, and subsequent shopping behavior, shoppers' perception of their safety can significantly impact tourism and revenues for tourist venues (Babin & Darden, 1995).

Cross Border Shoppers

The genesis of research associated with cross border shoppers was Reilly's work (1931). Converse (1949) and Huff (1964) expanded on Reilly's line of thought. These three studies form the basis of the macro-analytical approach to the study of cross border shopping. Hermann and Beik (1968) continued research on cross border shoppers and concluded this group of consumers had higher incomes, fewer children living at home, more out-of-town charge accounts, and negative attitudes concerning the price selection of merchandise available to them in the local area. Thompson (1971) added the demographic description of the cross border shopper. Most cross

border shoppers are employed in higher status occupations, are more highly educated, have fewer children and as a group were younger than the remainder of the population.

Cross-border shoppers are tourists who cross another country's border for the explicit purpose of shopping. Traditional definitions of international tourists are normally defined with an element of temporary travel, involve crossing an international border, and often include pleasure as a purpose of the trip (Ganster and Lorey 2005). Typically, the definition of tourism does not include shopping as a motivator; however, in recent years, shopping has become increasingly important as a tourism motivator. While shopping may not be the only motivating force in North America and Europe, shopping is frequently a powerful factor in the decision to plan a cross-border trip. For many tourists, shopping is the primary motive, if not the only significant one, in the decision to cross a border for a trip. According to the Tourism Industries/Trade Administration, international visitors spend about \$18 billion dollars annually while shopping in the United States. Nearly 90% of overseas travelers engaged in shopping as an activity (Brookman 1998).

Although cross border shoppers are motivated by a number of factors, common motivations are: The most important reasons cited by the respondents were similar to that of previous studies: (1) lower prices, (2) better quality, (3) goods and services not found in home area, (4) better customer service, (5) comfortable shopping environment, and (6) convenient opening hours (Wang, 2004).

This paper focuses on cross border shoppers entering the United States during the month of February 2007. The two venues for the collection of data were Las Vegas, Nevada and Central Texas.

METHODOLOGY

Data were collected using the intercept survey methodology during the weekend of Chinese New Year, February 15-17, 2007, in a major shopping center in a casino complex in Las Vegas, Nevada. Las Vegas attracts a number of international visitors, especially during Chinese New Year. In addition to the Chinese New Year festivities in Las Vegas a major sporting event also took place, the National Basketball Association (NBA) All-Star game. With this event a very large number of basketball enthusiasts, including celebrities and hip hop artists, attended the event and spent the weekend in Las Vegas. This unexpected change in demographics hindered the collection of data as the number of people in the shopping venues was much greater than the shopping center marketing director anticipated.

Data were also collected using the intercept survey methodology during the weekend of February 23-25, 2007, in a major outlet shopping center in Central Texas. Central Texas attracts a number of international visitors throughout the year, many of whom arrive via automobile, bus, and airplane. Shoppers were approached using the intercept technique in the food court area of the shopping center. Although the weather in this area is usually very temperate at this time of year, this weekend was chilly due to the thunderstorms. The inclement weather limited the number of shoppers on the first day of data collection.

Research assistants confirmed the respondents were international shoppers prior to completing a survey at both sites. After the completion of the survey, the respondents received an incentive valued at \$10.

Instrument

The instrument was developed by the researchers after studying many articles, books, and several other studies based on the subject of cross-border shopping. While most of the available studies and journal articles were related to cross-border shopping in either Canada or Europe, the techniques and data collected were very similar in focus. The instrument used in this study was available in English, Spanish, and Chinese. The Spanish and Chinese versions were translated and back translated by persons skilled in translating English to Spanish and English to Chinese. Respondents were asked to indicate the importance of factors in regard to their personal safety when traveling using a 5-point scale (ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 strongly agree).

Sample

In Las Vegas 153 respondents completed the survey and in Central Texas 151 respondents completed the survey for a total of 304 surveys, with 287 usable. The respondents were coded by geographic region of the world. The group representing Canada, Central, and South America was the largest with 150 persons, the next group was Asian-Pacific Islanders with 105 persons, in addition there were 27 Europeans and five from the Middle East, specifically Egypt. The majority of the respondents had a college degree of a Bachelors or higher (75%), and the majority were married (60%). The respondents were fairly evenly distributed among adults: aged 21-30 (23%), Aged 31-40 (29%), 41-50 (18%) and 51 and older (20%), the remainder were under 21 (8%). The majority were female (65%).

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

This paper focuses on travelers' assessment of their personal safety. Research questions 1-5 were analyzed using independent samples t-Tests, equal variances were assumed. A summary of the t-tests are found in Table 1.

Research Question 1: Based upon data collection site, is there a difference in the respondents' assessment of being personally threatened while traveling?

There was a significant difference in the two groups; the mean score for the respondents in Las Vegas was 2.0268 and in Central Texas the score was 1.4490 on a scale of 1 to 5.

Table 1: Independent Samples Test

<u>T-test for Equality of Means</u>				
Research Question	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
1. Personally felt physically threatened	5.878	294	.000	.57787
2. Friend or relative felt physically threatened	5.691	295	.000	.62747
3. Personal property stolen	5.093	295	.000	.54693
4. Friend or relative property stolen	2.765	293	.000	.3782
5. Overall perception of safety	4.072	294	.000	.64096

Research Question 2: Based upon data collection site, is there a difference in the respondents' assessment of a friend or relative being threatened while traveling?

There was a significant difference in the two groups; the mean score for the respondents in Las Vegas was 2.1342 and in Central Texas the score was 1.5068 on a scale of 1 to 5.

Research Question 3: Based upon data collection site, is there a difference in the respondents' statement of having property stolen while traveling?

There was a significant difference in the two groups; the mean score for the respondents in Las Vegas was 2.0537 and in Central Texas the score was 1.5068 on a scale of 1 to 5.

Research Question 4: Based upon data collection site, is there a difference in the respondents' statement of a friend or family having property stolen while traveling?

There was a significant difference in the two groups; the mean score for the respondents in Las Vegas was 2.1959 and in Central Texas the score was 1.8231 on a scale of 1 to 5.

Research Question 5: Based upon data collection site, is there a significant difference in how respondents assess the perception of safety of a specific locale and how this perception determines their traveling choice?

There was a significant difference in the two groups; the mean score for the respondents in Las Vegas was 3.3893 and in Central Texas the score was 2.7483 on a scale of 1 to 5.

One-way ANOVA was performed to determine significance of differences for research questions 6-10. Means were separated by Fisher's least significant. Difference method and differences were considered significant at $p < .05$. The three groups were Asian-Pacific Islanders, Europeans, Egyptians, and Americans (Canadians, Central and South Americans).

Research Question 6: Based upon geographic region of origin, is there a difference in the respondents' assessment of being personally threatened while traveling?

The ANOVA indicated a significant difference. Fisher's LSD indicated a difference in Asian-Pacific Islanders and Americans, Asia-Pacific Islanders and Europeans, Asian-Pacific Islanders and Egyptians.

Research Question 7: Based upon geographic region of origin, is there a difference in the respondents' assessment of a friend or relative being threatened while traveling?

The ANOVA indicated a significant difference. Fisher's LSD indicated a difference in Asian-Pacific Islanders and Americans and Asian-Pacific Islanders and Europeans.

Research Question 8: Based upon geographic region of origin, is there a difference in the respondents' statement of having property stolen while traveling?

There was no significant difference between the groups. Apparently, none of the three groups, Asian-Pacific Islanders, Europeans, Egyptians, and Americans (Canadians, Central and South Americans), were targeted more so than the others by thieves.

Research Question 9: Based upon geographic region of origin, is there a difference in the respondents' statement of having a friend or family member having property stolen while traveling?

There was no significant difference between the groups. As with Research Question 8, none of the groups were targeted as by thieves based upon country or region of origin.

Research Question 10: Is there a difference in the respondents' assessment of their perception of safety affect upon their traveling choices?

The ANOVA indicated a significant difference. Fisher's LSD indicated a difference in Asian-Pacific Islanders and Americans.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Although there was a significant difference in the two groups in regard to venues, the mean for both groups fell along the disagree assessment of the item. Although all travelers are concerned about safety when travelling, the respondents in this study did not appear to feel unduly threatened or targeted as vulnerable tourists. This apparent comparative feeling of safety and security in the United States is important to the tourism industry. Because both cities were viewed as safe destinations for international travel and both cities are tourist meccas, this is very important for the economy of the cities. When comparing geographic origin, the major differences were between citizens from the Asia-Pacific region and other regions. Citizens from the Asia-Pacific region were slightly more apprehensive, which may be the lack of familiarity with the country and language. In addition, many Mexicans travel to the United States frequently so their attitudes may be skewed slightly.

The image of a destination is significantly affected when crimes occur regularly and a decline in tourist arrivals can be expected (Pizam, 1999). No individual or group can ensure visitors' safety, but many groups can work together to reduce security risks and ultimately improve a destination's image. Law enforcement agencies, local businesses, local community members, the tourism industry as a whole, and tourists can all work together to protect each others' interests (Brunt, Mawby, & Hambly, 2000; Pizam, 1999). By educating travelers and combining marketing with

public relations, a venue can help protect their proprietary interests with regard to safety concerns (Pizam, 1999).

This study does not look at the crime rates and perception of safety in one's home country in comparison to the United States. Since a significant difference was found between various nationalities and their perception of safety in the United States, the researchers plan to examine whether these are only cultural differences or if the differences might be based on previous encounters with crime and security issues in one's home country. As this study was conducted prior to the recent violence in Mexico, conducting another study may yield different results. With the recent security challenges and crimes against tourists and citizens in Mexico, a study comparing the perceptions of safety when traveling in the United States as compared to Mexico would be timely and interesting. Finally, a limitation of this study is due to the data collection method, intercept surveys. The respondents may not have been representative of all tourists from their countries/geographic origin for several reasons. There may have been a halo effect because they were approached by Spanish speaking and Chinese speaking researchers and because they were given an incentive.

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