



ISSN: 0975-833X

Available online at <http://www.journalcra.com>

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL
OF CURRENT RESEARCH

International Journal of Current Research
Vol. 11, Issue, 02, pp.1740-1743, February, 2019

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24941/ijcr.34283.02.2019>

RESEARCH ARTICLE

PERCEPTION OF INSECURITY IN THE TOURIST IMAGE OF ACAPULCO, MÉXICO

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 15th November, 2018
Received in revised form
10th December, 2018
Accepted 19th January, 2019
Published online 28th February, 2019

Key Words:

Tourist destination, Image,
Insecurity, Travel alerts.

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Citation: Hernando Avilez Pineda, Teresa De J. Rivas Pérez, Ma. Elvia Chavarría Solís, and Ángel De J. Jaimes Compeán, 2019. "Perception of insecurity in the tourist image of Acapulco, México", International Journal of Current Research, 11, (02), 1740-1743.

ABSTRACT

Violence and insecurity in Acapulco, Mexico have perpetrated a devastating and terrifying image on tourist flows. The panorama of organized crime has not only affected the region's dynamic economy and competitiveness, but also deteriorated the perception of tourists. The objective of the research is to identify the reactionary measures taken by issuing destinations, and how they have contributed in generating the perception of insecurity. The methodology applied for this report is documentary exploratory through a series of stages in obtaining accurate data on the research topic, such as a variety of secondary sources from relevant institutions and nongovernmental organizations. The issue of insecurity – whether perceived or real – not only affects tourism, but also the economic and social development of a city since its main source of income comes from the issuing destinations that arbitrarily establish travel warnings. Therefore, the paper also explores how the domestic government should respond to external perceptions, such as developing effective public safety strategies to restore the confidence of international visitors.

INTRODUCTION

The first decade of the twenty-first century, it has been a difficult period in regard to global security, much of which has impacted human flows, particularly for tourism. The terrorist attack of September 11, 2001 in New York, United States presents a relevant example. Sturken (2007) argues that the attacks that took place in the United States, particularly against the World Trade Center in New York, not only caused immense human loss, but symbolic harm as well. The fragility of the twin towers represented the frailty of global trade, but fundamentally shifted the perspective of Americans on how their domestic safety and comfort could not be taken for granted. Mexico and the perceived safety by local residents was equally affected by the tragedy that occurred in the United States, as the country is geographically connected by a 3,185 km contiguous land border. Since those acts of terrorism, the United States has adopted the rhetoric of securitization and a strict application of the security systems within its borders and to any country where their citizens travel. The widespread fear experienced by Americans as a result of 9/11 and subsequent acts of terrorism have reinforced the discourse on security and obligated the government to take tangible steps and assuage the fear of citizens. This occurs when citizens are aware of warnings issued by their respective embassies or consulates when they wish to visit a tourist destination or are living in another country. Violence and insecurity have become issues of vital importance and public concern in the world's societies and Latin America is no exception.

These issues have come to occupy key positions in the discourse of politicians and parties, and are increasingly attracting the attention of experts. The growing anxiety about this is justified by the real increase in violent behavior and criminality, especially in the main cities of Latin America. Central America is known to be a violent region in which high crime rates, aggressive youth gangs, drug trafficking, and citizen insecurity impact daily life. Politicians, the media, and pundits both inside and outside the region often claim that the local population are indifferent or express apathy to the issues of public safety. Huhn and Peetz (2008) state that violence and criminality in public discussion play a very important role in all Central American States from Mexico and most Latin American countries. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2007) states that while Latin American countries are different, they are all affected to varying degrees by drugs, crime, and underdevelopment. While crime and corruption reign, drug money perverts the economy, the state has lost its monopoly over the use of force, and citizens no longer trust their leaders and public institutions. As a result, the social contract collapses and people take the law into their own hands, both to protect themselves and to commit crimes. According to Herrera (2003) public security strategies in Mexico have flaws that limit the strategies' effectiveness, and consequently resulted in increased violence and insecurity. Therefore, the image of a violent country is in the image of people, and the statistics that gather information, divulge it, causing the alteration of the perception of a city like Acapulco or the country. The scenes of violence in the tourist center of Acapulco have become daily and in certain periods as

contemplates (Rivapalacio, 2012), criminal gangs that dispute the territories for the sale of drugs, extortion, and kidnappings as an option to get fast money, activates terror in the citizens who are defenseless before the panic that implies going out to the streets and although the authority does not admit it there is curfew, because leaving home at 10 o'clock at night generates fear of not seeing anyone in the streets of the city. And it's not that criminals murder whoever, the targets are defined, because you are either addict or owe money from the drug sale and you have to pay with money or with life. As a result, Acapulco has seen its tourist image altered, following the constant sanguinary (bloody para los ingleses es maldito/maldición) information that comes from the systematic violent deaths that occur daily, detonating information that collapses any attempt at crisis management, which government tourism offices can do. Information that impacts on the potential of national and international tourism, on the one hand, international tourism decreases its presence each year especially in Acapulco, where literally has lost tourism in the United States and Canada, who were the most important country issuers. For many years, Acapulco has suffered in decrease numbers of tourists including those on Spring break and cruises. The main sources of tourism to Acapulco are from the United States and Canada. These countries' travel warnings, dissuaded tourists travelling to various destinations in Mexico. The State of Guerrero mentions the danger and precautions that should be taken into consideration when visiting Acapulco. Therefore, it has been encouraged that only urgent or medically necessary trips be made. There has been recommendations to not leave the Costera Miguel Alemán Avenue, which is a main tourist destination.

Table 1: Comparison of arrivals on cruise ships and spring Breakers

2005	Tourist	2015	Tourists
144 Cruise ships	259,282	16 Cruise ships	15,282
Spring breakers	25,000	Spring breakers	0



Figure 1. Map of Mexico and location of Acapulco

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The methodology used for the research was documentary-exploratory, where a series of steps were proposed to answer the objective of the investigation. In order to obtain accurate data on the research topic, different secondary sources were obtained from different agencies and institutions, such as, the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI), the National Public Security Secretariat (SENSP), the Citizen's Council for Public Security and Criminal Justice (CCPSJP), among others. The universe of study was Acapulco. The first

phase was documentary research, including the collection and analysis of insecurity news from the Port of Acapulco. The statistical analysis research method was used, to deconstruct and isolate key variables, and provide holistic results (Hernández, 2006). The analytical method is the observation and examination of facts, it distinguishes the elements of a phenomenon and allows to check each of them separately and allows the execution of an analytical investigation through several continuous phases. This method was achieved by synthesizing news broadcasts from national and international media and organizations in regard to the insecurity of Acapulco. In the second phase, an exploratory study was conducted on the United States Department of Homeland Security, where travel alerts are issued. In May 2016, a personal interview was conducted with the employees of the department to obtain accurate information.

Image and perception of a tourist destination

According to the Royal Spanish Academy (RAE) image is defined as: representation, likeness and appearance of something; Recreation of reality through imaginary elements founded on an intuition or vision. RAE states that the perception is: inner sensation that results from a material impression made on our senses. The tourism image has been defined from different perspectives by tourism scholars, who according to their research, give the following definitions:

The image of a tourist destination is created and disseminated by mass media, either because it is considered an overall impression or the set of individual impressions. In addition, the concept of perception has a special interest within the definitions of tourist destination image (Coshall, 2000). Following this line, Molina (2002) states that the image includes the personal perception of the multiple components of the tourist destination and, on the other hand (Sánchez and Aguilar, 2016), that the image of a tourist destination is the global perception of the tourist about place.

Perception of violence, insecurity and fear of a tourist destination

As Jiménez affirms (2012), etymologically, he proposes that the term violence comes from the Latin word "violencia" that derives from the root "violo", meaning "to attack" or "to violate." Nowadays, there are multiple definitions of the term violence from a simple to an interdisciplinary (social and psychological). A concept of violence developed by Arraigada (2008) states that it is the use or threat of use, physical or psychological force, with the intention of recurring harm and as a way of resolving conflicts. The growing wave of unemployment in Acapulco has enabled the victimization of citizens through organized crime. According to Basombrio, (2004) citizen insecurity is defined as the fear of possible assaults, aggressions, kidnappings, violations, of which we may be victims.

Deterioration of the tourist image in Mexico and especially the case of Acapulco due to insecurity

When criminal acts are repetitive in a tourist destination, homicides, robberies, assaults, kidnappings, extortions are generated, this creates a situation of fear and loss of security and confidence among the inhabitants living in the zones of violence.

Table 1. List of conceptual contributions on the tourist destination image

Lawson, and Baud-Bovy (1977)	<i>Expression of knowledge, impressions, prejudices, imaginations and emotional thoughts of the individual about a place.</i>
Assael (1984)	Global perception of the destiny formed by the individual through various sources of information over time.
Dichter (1985)	The concept of image can be applied to a public candidate, a product and a country. It does not describe the singular characteristics or virtues but the overall impression that an entity causes in the mind of the people.
Reynolds (1985)	An image is a mental scheme developed by the consumer, based on a few selected impressions among the alluvial of all impressions.
Phelps (1986)	Perceptions or impressions about a place.
Embachter, and Buttle (1989)	Ideas or conceptions individually or collectively owned by the tourist destination.
Gartner (1993, 1996)	The images of a destination are developed with three hierarchically interrelated components: cognitive, affective and intentional.
Kotler, Haider, and Rein (1994)	Sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions of a person about a certain place.
Parenteau (1995)	Favorable or unfavorable prejudice of the audience and the distributors on a tourist destination.
Murphy, and Pritchard (2000)	Sum of associations and pieces of information related to a tourist destination.
Tapachai, and Waryszak (2000)	Perceptions or impressions of tourists about a destination regarding the expected benefits and their consumption values.

Source: Elaboration by Olga F. Millet in her research "The image of a tourist destination as a marketing tool" from Gil, Gallarza and Calderón (2002), Molina (2002) and San Martín (2005).

This also reaches the potential tourists who causes the cancellation of travel to the affected destination. The feeling of fear of becoming a possible victim of some criminal act induces the decrease of visits and the economic spill, which reduces the income of the companies related to the sector, increases unemployment thus creating a scenario of economic instability and social development for society and the region (Brito Osuna 2001). Likewise, the multiplication of violent acts in tourist destinations, their dissemination through the media facilitates that the perception of insecurity about such destinations is taken as negative by potential tourists; this diminishes the possibilities of choosing the site to enjoy your vacation. In addition, homicides caused by clashes between armed groups, executions, and assaults, are more than symptoms that expose the high degree of social decomposition in the state. Such events are negative signals that inhibit the development of tourism. According to Medina (2013), Tourism in Mexico is an important economic activity for the country and is one of the largest in the world, placed tenth in the world in terms of arrivals of international tourists. Tourism contributes 8.2% of national GDP; 45% of this activity is oriented to the coastal zone. In the ranking of the 2011 Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index (TTCI), which measures factors that make it attractive to invest or develop businesses in the travel and tourism sector of a specific country. Mexico reached the 43rd place at the level World, being the first classified among countries of Latin America and the fourth in the American continent.

Table 2.

Tourist liability by nationality 2005	
International tourist markets of Acapulco	
Visitors January - December	
Nationality	Tourists
American	109,732
Canadian	21,753
British	5133
German	236
Italian	571
Total	137,425

Source: Ministry of Local Tourism, based on data provided by the Regional Delegation of the National Institute of Migration in Guerrero.

Table 3.

Tourist liability by nationality 2015	
International tourist markets of Acapulco	
Visitors January - December	
Nationality	Tourists
American	6,451
Canadian	4,187
British	56
Italian	36
French	23
Total	10,753

Source: Ministry of Local Tourism, based on data provided by the Regional Delegation of the National Institute of Migration in Guerrero.

Implications in society by the insecurity

The feeling of insecurity according to Rico (1998) presents the following aspects: a) The criminal phenomenon is usually one of the main social problems, barely overcome by the economic theme (unemployment, poverty, cost of living) b) All groups and categories of citizens estimate that crime is constantly increasing; C) the majority of citizens consider that the main causes of the increase in crime are unemployment and the use of drugs as well as insufficient and inefficient police intervention among others. Violence and insecurity have been one of the main causes that border companies and small shops to close their businesses, which at the same time generates unemployment and the migration of citizens to other parts of the country and even to leave the country, putting at risk likewise his life. The geographical proximity, historical and border ties shared with the United States have placed it as the main recipient of drug use and money laundering. The complexity of the problem of being large Mexico and Central America producers of narcotics and having the United States as a highly consuming country is also an element that has disrupted Mexican society and that has convulsed in a war that seems to have no end impacting the economy, employment (Laurel, 2017) states that at least 900 small and medium-sized enterprises closed in 2016, drastically decreasing the influx of international tourism. Acapulco is the Mexican metropolitan area where the population feels more insecure; 854 homicides were recorded in 2016 (El Economista, 2017). In addition, if there is no security, there are no airlines interested in arriving in Acapulco, acknowledges (Falcón, 2017). Trade and nightclubs have been affected, some clubs have decided to open only in high season and others have decided to lower the blind for the extortion of organized crime.

What are travel alerts and why are they issued?

According to the United States embassy publishes travel alerts when there are short-term events that consider, the tourist must take into account before visiting any country. Examples of reasons for issuing travel alerts include, an election season that will be marked by strikes, demonstrations and riots, a health alert, evidence of a high risk of terrorist or deadly firearm attacks in areas of tourist influx. When these short-term events end, the travel alert is canceled. The Mexican government has deployed federal, military, and gendarmerie police throughout the country as part of its efforts to combat organized criminal groups. US or Canadian citizens traveling on Mexican highways and motorways by car or bus can find government checkpoints, serviced by military or law enforcement personnel, it is recommended cooperating at all checkpoints. Recent violence in Mexico, specifically in the port of Acapulco, has prompted governments in several countries to alert travelers to insecurity. This is highlighted by the

(Universal, 2017) which mentions that the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy and Canada indicate that the deterioration of security has reached an alarming level. Nonetheless, millions of US citizens visit Mexico each year for study, tourism and business, including more than 150,000 people who cross the border every day. The US Department of State has issued 4 alerts in the past two years where it warns US citizens about the risk of traveling to certain locations in Mexico, including Acapulco, due to security threats stemming from criminal organized groups in the country. This has been at the detriment of the destination's image as the reception of national tourism is affected by up to 99%. Although the poor image of the destination still persists, Acapulco continues being the destination of coastline preferred by Mexicans, arriving to count up to nine million in 2016 (Compendium of statistics of the Secretariat of Tourism of Acapulco). The Mexican government devotes significant resources to protect visitors to major tourist destinations, and there is no evidence that organized criminal groups have attacked American or other visitors based on their nationality. Tourist areas in Mexico generally do not see the levels of drug and crime-related violence reported in the border region or in areas along the main trafficking routes to the United States, given that the US is the main source of exports.

Conclusion

Insecurity is a consequence of the irregularities that exist inside and outside the organizations of security, education, economy, public and private institutions. Mexico, being in his government a country with reforms in labor, educational, economic, and petroleum reforms, has not generated a network of intelligence to solve the problem of insecurity, which positions it as one of the countries with the highest rate of violence. The lack of cooperation between federal, state, local, business and civil society authorities are the main causes that impede the improvement of security in the country and Acapulco. Entrepreneurs, employees, students, families and citizenship are also guilty by circumventing values and ethics. The situation of insecurity that persists in Mexico, and mainly in the state of Guerrero, has given enabled perception of poor image towards Acapulco. Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen public safety, education and preservation of the destination. These actions will help the recovery of the tourist economy, and the programs in which citizen participation is involved. Public safety is one of the fundamental human rights, and the three levels of government and local communities should adopt effective policies to prevent and reduce crime and victimization. It is important to set aside political interests and demonstrate a collective concern to tackle violence and insecurity.

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