

ORIGINAL

Tourist security perception by residents and tourists: The case of Guaranda City-Ecuador

Percepción de la seguridad turística por pobladores y turistas: El caso de la ciudad de Guaranda-Ecuador

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Guaranda, Ecuador, is an emerging tourist destination renowned for its cultural and natural wealth, where the perception of safety is a determining factor for its sustainable development.

Objective: the perception of tourist safety in Guaranda was analyzed, comparing the perspectives of local residents and visitors.

Method: a quantitative approach was implemented through the application of structured surveys to a representative sample of residents and tourists. The instrument evaluated six specific areas of tourist safety.

Results: divergent perceptions were identified between the two groups studied. Tourists expressed a general perception of greater safety at the destination, while local residents expressed more significant concerns, particularly in the areas of public safety and road safety.

Conclusions: the study contributed to knowledge about the perception of safety in emerging tourist destinations, highlighting substantial differences between residents and visitors. The findings provided relevant information for local authorities, tourism sector stakeholders, and the community, facilitating the design of strategies aimed at improving safety conditions and promoting sustainable tourism development in the destination.

Keywords: Tourism Safety; Perception of Safety; Tourism; Residents; Tourists.

RESUMEN

Introducción: Guaranda-Ecuador representa un destino turístico emergente reconocido por su riqueza cultural y paisajística, donde la percepción de seguridad constituye un factor determinante para su desarrollo sostenible.

Objetivo: se analizó la percepción de seguridad turística en Guaranda, comparando las perspectivas entre pobladores locales y visitantes.

Método: se implementó un enfoque cuantitativo mediante la aplicación de encuestas estructuradas a una muestra representativa de pobladores y turistas. El instrumento evaluó seis ámbitos específicos de seguridad turística.

Resultados: se identificaron percepciones divergentes entre ambos grupos estudiados. Los turistas manifestaron una percepción general de mayor seguridad en el destino, mientras que los pobladores locales expresaron preocupaciones más significativas, particularmente en los ámbitos de seguridad ciudadana y vial. **Conclusiones:** el estudio contribuyó al conocimiento sobre la percepción de seguridad en destinos turísticos emergentes, evidenciando diferencias sustanciales entre residentes y visitantes. Los hallazgos proporcionaron información relevante para autoridades locales, actores del sector turístico y la comunidad, facilitando el diseño de estrategias orientadas a mejorar las condiciones de seguridad y promover el desarrollo turístico sostenible del destino.

Palabras clave: Seguridad Turística; Percepción de Seguridad; Turismo; Pobladores; Turistas.

INTRODUCTION

Safety is one of the basic human needs⁽¹⁾ and manifests itself in two crucial dimensions: on the one hand, it faces chronic threats such as hunger, disease, and repression; on the other, it must deal with sudden and painful disturbances in daily life, whether in the family, work, or community environment.⁽²⁾ Korstanje⁽³⁾ argues that each culture, country, or human organization shapes its own perception of what is safe and what is dangerous.

The link between tourism and safety is essential. The actions of tourists and, therefore, destinations are significantly impacted by perceptions of safety, as well as by the implementation of safety measures, Security, and risk assessment.⁽⁴⁾

The need for safety and Security is a fundamental requirement for the development of urban tourism.^(5,6) Despite this, an increase in tourism can lead to an increase in crime levels in cities.^(7,8) However, a significant connection between an increase in visitors and crime rates is not always evident.⁽⁹⁾ Although Perry et al.⁽¹⁰⁾ warn of the possibility that tourism may contribute to an increase in crime, this concern is not central to debates on the relationship between crime and tourism in South Africa. Therefore, the dynamics surrounding crime and tourism vary from place to place. Pizam et al.⁽¹¹⁾ emphasize the crucial importance of the geographical dimension of security incidents in understanding and addressing security issues associated with tourism.

From the perspective of Crouch et al.⁽¹²⁾, who postulate the interconnection between tourism and development, Security emerges as an intrinsic component that synergistically merges with fundamental aspects, such as economic growth, preservation of integrity, and improvement of the quality of the tourist experience. This holistic perspective resonates with contemporary trends in tourism literature, which emphasize the importance of comprehensive strategies to promote the sustainable development of tourist destinations.^(13,14) Security in the tourism sector covers a broad and comprehensive spectrum, given that tourism, by its very nature, reflects respect for and safeguarding of the right to Security linked to freedom of movement. This discipline is based on the comprehensive protection of the life, health, physical, psychological, and economic integrity of visitors, service providers, and residents of host communities.⁽¹⁵⁾

There is no consensus or defined framework on who pioneered research into the relationship between Security and tourism. However, the first international studies on fear and safety date back to 1973 in the United States, through the National Crime Victimization Survey, and in 1994 in the United Kingdom with the British Crime Survey. These studies have shown that people who experience insecurity tend to change their habits, routines, and participation in certain activities.^(16,17)

Apprehension about crime reflects various social and political concerns, ranging from public concern about becoming a victim of crime to precautionary behaviors that involve avoiding certain situations or places.⁽¹⁸⁾ Corona⁽¹⁹⁾ examined the impact of violent crime on Mexico's tourism industry during the period 1990-2010, noting that while violent crime deters both domestic and international visitors, the impact on the perceptions of foreign tourists appears to be more pronounced. Media coverage of crime, both in general and targeting tourists, plays a crucial role in constructing the image of the destination as unsafe.⁽²⁰⁾ Incidents of murder, rape, and assault against tourists often make headlines in the international media.⁽²¹⁾ Tourists' fear of crime can stem from a variety of sources, including personal experiences, media influence, and word of mouth.⁽²²⁾ Fear of crime is linked to several factors, including gender, age, ethnicity, and the perceived severity of the consequences.⁽²³⁾

Limited theories and research are addressing the relationship between tourism and crime, and few studies have been conducted on this topic over the last three decades. Nearly twenty years ago, Pizam & Mansfeld⁽²⁴⁾ noted that "only a small number of empirical studies have explored the relationship between tourism and crime." Schiebeler et al.^(25,26) identified two theories widely applicable to crime in the tourism context: routine activity theory and hotspot theory, which provide a potential perspective on the connection between tourism and crime. According to routine activity theory, the key to minimizing crime lies in increasing law enforcement presence in high-risk areas, such as tourist destinations. The hotspot theory focuses on places that "offer converging opportunities where predatory crimes can occur".⁽²⁶⁾ Ryan⁽²⁷⁾ describes these spots as "crime-prone"

places that include bars, nightclubs, and tourist entertainment venues. The likelihood of tourists becoming victims of crime increases when visiting these areas.⁽²⁸⁾

In relation to the above, Ecuador proposes six areas for measuring safety in a tourist destination: i. Citizen Safety, ii. Health and Hygiene, iii. Economic Security, iv. Road Safety, v. Environmental Protection and Natural Disaster Protection, and vi. Human Rights and Social Inclusion.⁽²⁹⁾ These were considered to determine the perception of safety among residents and tourists in this study.

This research focuses on the city of Guaranda, situated in the Bolívar Province, Ecuador. This area is renowned for its fascinating culture, picturesque landscapes, and traditional festivals, making it a burgeoning tourist destination in the country. However, as in many tourist destinations, safety is a key concern for both residents and visitors.

In this context, the objective of this study is to analyze the perception of tourist safety among tourists and residents in the city of Guaranda, which was designated as a “Magical Corner” by the Ecuadorian Ministry of Tourism in 2023.

METHOD

For the study, a cross-sectional field research design with a descriptive-correlational approach was used. A quantitative analysis of the data collected through surveys was conducted, which requires a thorough analysis and understanding of the factors involved to comprehend the phenomena related to tourist safety. This approach aims to yield accurate and comprehensive results, enabling the development of effective security strategies for stakeholders in the sector in the future.

To assess the perception of safety, fundamental indicators were included in the following areas: Citizen Safety, for which the propensity to suffer criminal acts and knowledge of the location of Community Police Units were evaluated; Health and Hygiene, which investigated knowledge of the area of public health centers, the effectiveness of health services for tourists, and the quality of food and beverage handling in establishments; Economic Security, which examined the likelihood of being a victim of fraud or scam, as well as the perception of the prices of tourist services; In Road Safety, the propensity to suffer traffic accidents, the condition of transportation, and road signage were evaluated. In Environmental Protection and Natural Disaster Preparedness, the existence of safe areas in the event of adverse events and the safety of recreational spaces were investigated. In Human Rights and Social Inclusion, the infrastructure for the movement of people with disabilities and the perception of rights violations in the city were assessed.

These indicators enable a comprehensive and multidimensional assessment of safety perceptions in various contexts, offering a detailed understanding of the factors that influence safety in the city.

Numerical information was obtained, allowing for the diagnosis of statistics for subsequent analysis and calculation of percentages. This reflected accurate data on the investigation of various aspects related to the issue of tourist safety, establishing a link between the respondents and the researcher, and evidencing their perceptions and behaviors to reach relevant conclusions. Information was obtained through primary sources, and the data were collected through direct contact with the study subjects via two questionnaires administered to residents and tourists. Considering the study population of the sector, the urban area of the city of Guaranda, with a population of 65 551 inhabitants, was used as a reference.⁽³⁰⁾ Regarding the population of domestic and foreign tourists, according to information provided by the Ecuadorian Ministry of Tourism, between 2015 and 2019, a total of 25 000 tourists per year visited the city of Guaranda.

Sample 1: Domestic and foreign tourists

Regarding the study sample, based on a population of 25 000 domestic and foreign tourists who entered the city of Guaranda, a probability sample for finite populations was used, with a 95 % confidence level and a 7 % margin of error. A total of 195 surveys were conducted.

Sample 2: Population of the urban area of Guaranda

Regarding the study population of 65,551 inhabitants of the city of Guaranda, a probability sample for finite populations was used, with a 95 % confidence level and a 5 % margin of error. This resulted in a total of 382 surveys being conducted.

A questionnaire with 20 items was used to collect the data. This instrument was subjected to reliability procedures to assess the consistency of the responses. Subsequently, using IBM SPSS Statistics software, Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient was used to identify items with low internal consistency in the group of reactions, which were eliminated, resulting in 14 items. The Cronbach's alpha value was 0,912 table 1, reflecting substantial reliability of the scale. This value falls within the range considered exceptional for the reliability of a scale, which ranges from 0 to 1. In this range, values closer to 1 indicate higher internal consistency among the items on the scale.⁽³¹⁾ Consequently, it can be inferred that the scale used in the study exhibits high internal consistency and is reliable for assessing the desired construct.

Table 1. Reliability analysis	
Reliability statistics	
Cronbach's alpha	N of items
0,912	14

After establishing the reliability of the data, Kendall's Tau correlation analysis was performed. It is important to note that this correlation was applied in the study to analyze the relationship between perceptions of public safety, health and hygiene, economic security, road safety, environmental protection, and natural disaster protection, and human rights and social inclusion in the city of Guaranda, both for the local population and for tourists. Kendall's Tau correlation is a non-parametric measure that assesses the association between two ordinal categorical variables, which is useful when data are classified.⁽³²⁾ This allows us to understand the relationship between these perceptions in the context of the study.

RESULTS

Descriptive analysis

Table 2 presents the descriptive characteristics of the visitors and local population that comprise the sample. This dataset provides a detailed overview of the specific characteristics of the tourists analyzed in comparison to the local population. A descriptive and comparative analysis is performed between both groups, focusing on key sociodemographic variables. The results reveal that the local population has a slightly higher average age (39,10 years) compared to tourists (35,41 years). In terms of gender, the local population exhibits an equal distribution, with 59,70 % men and 40,30 % women. In contrast, tourists show a slight female predominance (50,30 %). In terms of marital status, the local population exhibits a significantly higher proportion of married individuals (55,50 %), compared to tourists (41,54 %).

Additionally, tourists comprise a higher proportion of individuals with higher education (38,46 %), whereas the local population has a higher representation of people with secondary education (38,22 %). In terms of occupation, the local population is notable for the presence of homemakers (30,89 %), while tourists exhibit a higher proportion of public servants (36,41 %). These differences highlight the importance of considering the distinct sociodemographic characteristics of both groups, which significantly contribute to a comprehensive understanding of local and tourist demographic dynamics.

Table 2. Descriptive analysis of sociodemographic variables between the local population and tourists					
Local population			Tourists		
Variable	Mean	%	Variable	Average	%
Age	39,10	24,60	Age	35,41	29,70
Gender			Gender		
Female		40,30 %	Female		50,30 %
Male		59,70 %	Male		49,70 %
Marital status			Marital status		
Married		55,50 %	Married		41,54 %
Divorced		4,19 %	Divorced		2,56 %
Single		35,86 %	Single		35,38 %
Common-law marriage		4,19 %	Common-law marriage		17,95 %
Widowed		0,30 %	Widower		2,56 %
Level of education			Level of education		
Postgraduate		2,88 %	Postgraduate		4,10 %
Secondary		38,22 %	Secondary		30,77 %
Higher		18,06 %	Higher		38,46 %
Technology, Technical		9,16 %	Technology, Technical		26,67 %
Primary		31,68 %	Primary		
Occupation			Occupation		
Farmer		1,05 %	Farmer		0,51 %
Housewife		30,89 %	Housewife		7,69 %
Driver		0,26 %	Driver		0,51 %
Merchant		21,73 %	Merchant		14,87 %

Unemployed	19,11 %	Unemployed	4,62 %
Student	2,36 %	Student	9,23 %
Retired	0,52 %	Retired	3,59 %
Private server	12,30 %	Private Server	22,56 %
Public Server	11,78 %	Public servant	36,41 %

Table 3. Correlation in the area of public safety			
Public safety		Do you know where the different Community Police Units are located?	
		Local population	
Do you consider the city of Guaranda to be prone to crime?	Kendall's Tau_b		0,794
	Sig. (bilateral)		0,041
	Tourists		
	Kendall's tau_b		0,011
	Sig. (bilateral)		0,850

According to the data shown in table 3, a strong and significant positive correlation was identified in the local population between knowledge of the location of Community Police Units and the perception of susceptibility to crime ($\tau = 0,794$; $p = 0,041$). In contrast, among tourists, the correlation was close to zero and not significant ($\tau = 0,011$; $p = 0,850$), reflecting clear differences between the two groups.

Table 4. Correlation in the area of health and hygiene			
Health and hygiene		Do you consider health services to be effective for tourists?	Do you consider that food and beverage establishments handle food and beverages correctly?
		Local population	
Do you know where the different public health centers are located in the city of Guaranda?	Kendall's Tau_b	0,798	0,814
	Sig. (bilateral)	0,042	0,033
	Tourists		
	Kendall's tau_b	0,756	0,712
	Sig. (two-tailed)	0,045	0,043

The results presented in table 4 show positive and significant correlations in both groups. In the local population, knowledge of health centers was associated with the perception of service effectiveness ($\tau = 0,798$; $p = 0,042$), and knowledge of food outlets was associated with the perception of proper handling ($\tau = 0,814$; $p = 0,033$). Similar correlations were found among tourists, with high and statistically significant values ($\tau = 0,756$; $p = 0,045$; $\tau = 0,712$; $p = 0,043$).

Table 5. Correlation in the area of economic security		
Economic Security	Based on your experience, how do you rate the prices set for different tourist services?	
Do you think that in the city of Guaranda you are likely to be a victim of fraud or scam?	Local population	
	Kendall's tau_b	0,727
	Sig. (bilateral)	0,044
	Tourists	
	Kendall's tau_b	0,040
	Sig. (bilateral)	0,535

According to table 5, a significant positive correlation ($\tau = 0,727$; $p = 0,044$) was found among the local population between the perception of tourist service prices and the belief that they had been victims of fraud or scams. Among tourists, however, the correlation was low and not significant ($\tau = 0,040$; $p = 0,535$). This reflects that the association between the two variables was only evident in the local population.

Table 6. Correlation in the area of road safety

Road safety	Based on your experience, how would you rate the condition of the means of transport used in the city?	Based on your experience, what do you consider to be the condition of road signs in the city of Guaranda?
Do you consider the city of Guaranda to be prone to traffic accidents?	Local population	
	Kendall's tau_b	0,759
	Sig. (bilateral)	0,047
	Tourists	
	Kendall's tau_b	0,025
	Sig. (two-tailed)	0,695
		0,813
		0,037
		0,097
		0,123

The values reported in table 6 indicate that, among the local population, the perception of the condition of transportation was significantly associated with the propensity to suffer traffic accidents ($\tau = 0,759$; $p = 0,047$). Similarly, perceptions of the condition of road signs showed a significant correlation with the propensity to have accidents ($\tau = 0,813$; $p = 0,037$). Among tourists, the correlations were low and not significant ($\tau = 0,025$; $p = 0,695$; $\tau = 0,097$; $p = 0,123$).

Table 7. Correlation in the area of environmental protection and natural disasters

Table 7. Correlation in the area of environmental protection and natural disasters		
Environmental protection and natural disaster preparedness	Do you consider that the city of Guaranda has safe recreational areas?	
Based on your experience, do you consider that the city of Guaranda has safe areas in the event of adverse events?		Local population
	Kendall's tau_b	0,820
	Sig. (bilateral)	0,039
		Tourists
	Kendall's tau_b	0,105
	Sig. (bilateral)	0,081

Table 7 shows that among the local population there was a significant positive correlation between the perception of having safe recreational spaces and the consideration of the city as a safe area in the event of adverse events ($\tau = 0,820$; $p = 0,039$). Among tourists, the correlation was low and not significant ($\tau = 0,105$; $p = 0,081$).

Table 8. Correlation in the area of human rights and social inclusion

Table 8. Correlation in the area of human rights and social inclusion		
Human rights and social inclusion	Do you consider that your rights have been violated in the city of Guaranda?	
Do you consider that the city of Guaranda has adequate infrastructure for the free movement of people with disabilities?	Local population	
	Kendall's Tau_b	0,165
	Sig. (bilateral)	0,122
	Tourists	
	Kendall's tau_b	0,974
	Sig. (bilateral)	0,132

Table 8 presents the results for the area of human rights and inclusion. Among the local population, a low and insignificant positive correlation was found between the perception of adequate infrastructure for persons with disabilities and the perception of rights violations ($\tau = 0,165$; $p = 0,122$). Among tourists, a high correlation value was recorded ($\tau = 0,974$), although it did not reach statistical significance ($p = 0,132$).

DISCUSSION

The results of this study reveal substantial differences between the local population and tourists in their perception of tourist safety in Guaranda. In general, residents showed statistically significant associations in most areas analyzed, whereas among tourists, these correlations were weak or did not reach significance. This divergence indicates that familiarity with the territory, degree of exposure, and everyday experience condition the way in which risks and the quality of tourist services are evaluated.

In the area of public safety, the local population attaches particular importance to knowing the location of Community Police Units, as this is an indicator of confidence in institutional responsiveness. Tourists did not establish significant associations in this regard and based their sense of security on more immediate signals during their visit. These findings align with those of Marchan et al.⁽³³⁾, who note that visitors' perception of safety depends less on police infrastructure and more on the perceived availability of visible resources in the environment.

In terms of health and hygiene, both residents and tourists agreed that the presence of health services and adherence to good food sales practices were positively related to a favorable perception of safety. The consistency of the results in the two groups reaffirms the findings of Boakye et al.^(5,6) who emphasize that sanitary quality is an essential factor in building visitor confidence and loyalty, as well as protecting the local community.

The economic dimension, on the other hand, reflected apparent differences: while residents associated the perception of prices with the risk of fraud, tourists did not show the same sensitivity. This result reinforces the findings of Gursoy et al. and Kim et al.^(34,35) in noting that price fairness is a crucial component of social acceptance of tourism. In destinations where abuses or non-transparent practices are perceived, tourism can generate tensions with the host population.

In terms of road safety, residents associated the state of public transport and signage with the possibility of accidents, a concern not observed among tourists. This contrast can be explained by the fact that city dwellers face recurring infrastructure limitations, while visitors use it on an ad hoc basis. Studies, such as those by George et al.^(22,36) had already warned that daily exposure is a determining factor in assessing road safety.

Regarding environmental protection and disaster management, residents established a link between the existence of safe recreational spaces and the perception of the city as a protected environment from natural hazards. Tourists did not replicate this association, probably because their short stay did not allow them to gauge their exposure to threats. In line with the findings of Proaño et al.⁽³⁷⁾, accumulated experience with risks strengthens residents' critical awareness of the safety of their territory.

In the area of human rights and social inclusion, no statistically significant correlations were identified between the perception of accessibility and the violation of rights. Even so, a high, albeit inconclusive, association emerged among tourists, suggesting that accessibility may have a greater impact than is evident in the data. This indication warrants further exploration in future research, as it aligns with the findings of D'Mello et al., Buhalisa et al. and Darcy et al.^(30,38,39) who emphasize that accessibility is more than a requirement for inclusion; it is also a strategic element for the competitiveness of destinations. Its impact, however, is not always perceived uniformly by the various stakeholders involved.

Examining the results as a whole, it is evident that tourism safety is a multifaceted phenomenon. It does not depend on a single factor, but rather on the interaction between h, institutional, health, economic, road, environmental, and social dimensions. This complexity necessitates the formulation of public policies from a comprehensive perspective, one that can address the diverse sensitivities of residents and visitors. To ignore this diversity would be to lose sight of how safety is experienced and valued by those who live in the destination and those who visit it temporarily.

CONCLUSIONS

The research shows that tourism safety in Guaranda is not perceived uniformly. Residents tend to place greater value on institutional presence, road infrastructure, and disaster prevention measures, while tourists focus their attention on healthcare quality and the level of attention they receive. This difference in perspectives confirms that tourism safety is a heterogeneous phenomenon, conditioned by each group's own experiences and the expectations with which they approach the destination.

This contrast shows that the management of tourist safety in the city cannot be based on a single perspective. Integrating the perceptions of residents with those of visitors provides a more comprehensive framework for designing public policies and management actions. Only with this approach is it possible to sustain Guaranda's recognition as a Magical Corner and turn it into a destination that combines competitiveness with confidence and inclusion.

In practical terms, the study enables us to identify three priority areas for action: strengthening institutional proximity and presence in terms of citizen security; ensuring verifiable quality standards in health and hygiene across various tourist services; and promoting accessible infrastructure that guarantees genuine inclusion. These steps would not only strengthen the confidence of those who visit the city but also improve the quality of life of its inhabitants, consolidating Guaranda as a benchmark for safe and sustainable tourism.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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