

Harassment of Foreign Tourists in Cultural Triangle of Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Tourist safety is a critical determinant of destination choice, satisfaction, and repeat visitation, yet tourist harassment remains a persistent challenge in Sri Lanka. This qualitative, exploratory study examines the forms and consequences of harassment experienced by foreign tourists and explores stakeholder-based strategies to enhance destination safety in the cultural triangle in Sri Lanka. Guided by an interpretivist research philosophy, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and secondary sources, and analyzed using thematic analysis. The discussion draws on cognitive appraisal theory, destination image theory, and stakeholder theory as complementary frameworks for interpreting tourists' emotional appraisals, destination image dynamics, and stakeholder responsibilities. Findings reveal that harassment such as verbal abuse, intrusive solicitation, sexual advances, and overpricing generates fear, frustration, and avoidance behaviors, negatively shaping tourist experiences and perceptions of safety. Repeated negative encounters, amplified through social media and peer reviews, undermine Sri Lanka's destination image, while fragmented institutional responses contribute to underreporting and persistence of harassment.

Keywords: Tourist Harassments in Sri Lanka, Tourist Safety, Cultural Heritage Tourism, Destination image, Cultural Triangle, Sustainable tourism

Introduction

Tourism is widely recognized as a key driver of economic growth, employment generation, and cultural exchange across the globe. For many

developing countries, tourism functions not only as a source of foreign exchange but also as a mechanism for regional development and community empowerment. Sri Lanka, endowed with rich cultural heritage, biodiversity, and historical landmarks, has positioned tourism as a strategic pillar of national development (Samarathunga & Naria, 2025). Among its key attractions, the Cultural Triangle encompassing Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Sigiriya, Dambulla, and Kandy holds exceptional significance due to its UNESCO World Heritage sites and religious importance. However, the sustainability and competitiveness of tourism in these destinations are increasingly challenged by concerns related to tourist safety and harassment.

Safety is a fundamental component of the tourism experience and a decisive factor influencing destination choice, tourist satisfaction, and repeat visitation (George, 2003; Kozak, 2007). Tourists' perceptions of personal security directly shape destination image and behavioural intentions. When tourists encounter threatening or uncomfortable situations, such as harassment, their overall evaluation of the destination deteriorates, often resulting in negative word-of-mouth and avoidance behaviours (Alrawadieh et al., 2019). In the contemporary digital era, such experiences are rapidly disseminated through online travel platforms and social media, amplifying reputational damage far beyond the individual incident. Tourist harassment is broadly defined as unwelcome, intrusive, or aggressive behaviors directed at tourists, including persistent solicitation, verbal abuse, sexual harassment, physical intimidation, and illicit activities such as drug solicitation (De Albuquerque & McElroy, 2001; Kozak, 2007). Scarlett (2024) further conceptualize tourist harassment as unwanted contact legal or illegal that causes discomfort and disrupts the tourist experience. These behaviors represent not merely social inconveniences but serious service failures that undermine the principles of hospitality and ethical tourism (McElroy, Tarlow, & Carlisle, 2007). Existing literature identifies tourist harassment as a multidimensional and context-specific phenomenon. Otoo et al. (2019) distinguish between passive forms of harassment, such as repeated solicitation or invasion of personal space, and aggressive forms involving threats

or coercion. Kozak (2007) classifies harassment into five categories; vendor pestering, sexual solicitation, verbal abuse, physical aggression, and drug-related contact. Importantly, many incidents remain unreported due to normalization, resignation, fear of retaliation, or lack of confidence in local complaint mechanisms (Otoo et al., 2019).

Despite the presence of a Tourist Police Division and general legal provisions under Sri Lanka's Penal Code, there is no comprehensive legal or policy framework specifically addressing tourist harassment. As a result, many incidents go unresolved, reinforcing underreporting and allowing harassment to persist. Stakeholder coordination among tourism authorities, law enforcement agencies, local communities, and private-sector actors remains weak, further exacerbating the issue (Jamal & Stronza, 2009). From a theoretical standpoint, much of the existing literature on tourist harassment focuses on coastal or nightlife destinations, with limited attention given to heritage and religious tourism contexts such as Sri Lanka's Cultural Triangle. Moreover, while prior studies document the forms and impacts of harassment, fewer studies integrate tourists' cognitive and emotional responses with destination image outcomes and stakeholder responsibilities. This reveals a significant knowledge gap, particularly in understanding how harassment in culturally sensitive heritage destinations affects tourist perceptions and how coordinated stakeholder strategies can mitigate these impacts. In practice, addressing tourist harassment requires more than isolated law enforcement actions. Stakeholder Theory emphasizes that tourism safety is a shared responsibility involving government authorities, tourism businesses, local communities, and visitors themselves (Silva-Santisteban Mondoñedo, 2021). Without coordinated, stakeholder-based strategies supported by clear legal and institutional frameworks, efforts to enhance tourist safety remain fragmented and ineffective.

Given the growing importance of the Cultural Triangle to Sri Lanka's tourism economy and global image, there is an urgent need for a comprehensive investigation into tourist harassment within this context. In response to these gaps, this study has three primary objectives.

- To explore the different forms of harassment faced by foreign tourists visiting Cultural Triangle of Sri Lanka
- To identify the post-harassment behaviors and responses of foreign tourists following harassment incidents in Cultural Triangle of Sri Lanka
- To make recommendations for enhancing Sri Lanka's image as a safer destination for foreign tourists.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the forms and consequences of harassment experienced by foreign tourists in Sri Lanka's Cultural Triangle and to identify stakeholder-based strategies that can enhance destination safety, protect tourists, and strengthen Sri Lanka's image as a safe and sustainable tourism destination.

Literature Review

Tourist Harassment

Tourist harassment refers to any unwanted behavior directed at tourists that causes discomfort, fear, or distress and undermines the quality of the tourism experience (De Albuquerque & McElroy, 2001). It includes a wide spectrum of actions such as aggressive solicitation, verbal abuse, sexual advances, physical intimidation, drug-related approaches, and economic exploitation through overcharging or scamming (Kozak, 2007). Such behavior represents a breakdown in expected host-guest interactions and is often described as an "encounter failure" within tourism settings (Alrawadie et al., 2019). Research indicates that tourist harassment is particularly prevalent in destinations with large informal service sectors and weak regulatory enforcement. In Sri Lanka's coastal destinations, studies have identified multiple forms of harassment, including consumption-based selling pressure, vocal and sexual harassment, and persistent solicitation by unlicensed vendors and beach boys (Wijesundara & Gnanapala, 2020; Jayasinghe & Ratnayake, 2018). Similar patterns are observed globally, with studies from Turkey and the Middle East reporting reduced tourist satisfaction, negative word-of-mouth, and weakened destination loyalty following

harassment experiences (Çetinkaya & Öter, 2024; Alrawadieh et al., 2019).

Form	Definition	Common Areas	Main Effects	Key References
Aggressive Solicitation	Persistent, coercive selling behavior causing discomfort.	Beaches, markets	Anxiety, avoidance of local interaction	Scarlett (2024); Kozak (2007)
Verbal Abuse	Hostile or offensive language aimed at tourists.	Towns, coastal zones	Embarrassment, fear	Wijesundara & Gnanapala (2020); Kozak (2007)
Sexual Harassment	Unwelcome sexual comments, touching, or stalking.	Nightlife, beach areas	Trauma, restricted movement	Boakye (2010); Alrawadieh et al. (2019)
Overpricing/ Scams	Charging unfair prices or using deceptive tactics.	Shops, transport hubs	Financial loss, distrust	Arachchi (2020); Jayasinghe & Ratnayake (2018)
Drug Solicitation	Offering or pressuring tourists to buy illegal substances.	Beach parties, nightlife zones	Legal risk, discomfort	Wijesundara & Gnanapala (2020)
Physical Intimidation	Threatening presence or gestures to manipulate or scare.	Isolated paths, night areas	Fear, early departure	Kozak (2007); Alrawadieh et al. (2019)

Table I: Types of Harassments Summary Table

Beyond immediate discomfort, tourist harassment has long-term implications for destination image, visitor behavior, and community-based tourism benefits. Even isolated incidents, when shared through online platforms, can significantly damage destination reputation (Shen, et al. 2015). Consequently, tourist harassment is increasingly recognized not merely as individual misconduct, but as a structural and governance-related challenge within tourism systems.

Tourist harassment has serious psychological, behavioral, and economic consequences for both visitors and destinations. At the individual level, harassment undermines tourists' emotional well-being and overall travel satisfaction. Experiences such as verbal abuse, aggressive selling, or sexual advances often generate fear, anxiety, and embarrassment, disrupting leisure and relaxation (De Albuquerque & McElroy, 2001). Empirical studies show that repeated harassment significantly reduces tourist satisfaction and alters travel plans (Çetinkaya & Öter, 2024; Jayasinghe & Ratnayake, 2018). Harassment also negatively affects destination image and tourist behavior. Tourists who experience harassment are less likely to revisit or recommend a destination and are more inclined to share negative reviews online, amplifying reputational damage (Kozak, 2007; Arachchi, 2020). Research further indicates that harassment leads to avoidance behaviors, such as limiting outdoor activities or interactions with locals, thereby reducing tourist expenditure and community-level benefits (Badu-Baiden et al., 2016; Chepkwony & Kangogo, 2013). Tourist harassment weakens host-guest relationships, discourages cultural exchange, and poses a significant barrier to sustainable tourism development (Wijesundara & Gnanapala, 2020; Alrawadieh et al., 2019).

Tourist harassment is strongly influenced by gender and cultural factors, with women especially solo female travelers being at higher risk. Globally, female tourists often experience catcalling, sexual innuendos, and unwanted physical proximity, influenced by perceptions of their economic status and cultural background (Kozak, 2007; Çetinkaya & Öter, 2024). Cultural misunderstandings and local gender norms further exacerbate these risks, shaping both the frequency and severity of harassment incidents. In Sri Lanka, studies at destinations such as

Hikkaduwa reveal that female tourists are frequently followed, stared at, or persistently approached in beach and nightlife areas, often normalized by local service providers (Jayasinghe & Ratnayake, 2018; Arachchi, 2020). High-profile public incidents in Colombo in 2024, widely shared on social media, underscore the visibility and persistence of this issue (Daily Mirror, 2024; Sunday Times, 2024). Cultural differences in dress, behavior, and social interaction contribute to misinterpretation, while race and nationality also intersect with gender to shape harassment experiences (De Albuquerque & McElroy, 2001; Senewirathne, 2012). Addressing these gendered and cultural dimensions requires targeted training, awareness campaigns, and enforcement mechanisms to ensure inclusive and safe tourism environments (Wijesundara & Gnanapala, 2020).

Globally, tourist harassment produces similar consequences. In Petra, Jordan, tourists avoided vendors and spent less at attractions following harassment (Alrawadieh et al., 2019). Çetinkaya and Öter (2024) found that verbal abuse and persistent solicitation in Istanbul reduced satisfaction and loyalty, particularly for solo Western female travelers. In Egypt, Luxor tourists reported emotional distress and insecurity due to aggressive vendors (Kozak, 2007). McElroy, Tarlow, and Carlisle (2007) emphasized stakeholder cooperation, codes of conduct, and community awareness as essential mitigation strategies in the Caribbean and Morocco. Studies in Kenya (Chepkwony & Kangogo, 2013) and Ghana (Badu-Baiden et al., 2016) showed harassment limited tourist activities and local economic benefits, while Khairat (2016) highlighted negative effects on destination reputation. Collectively, these findings show that harassment universally undermines tourist satisfaction, loyalty, and destination sustainability.

Tourist harassment and Sri Lanka Tourism

Tourist harassment, particularly against women, poses a significant threat to Sri Lanka's reputation as a safe and welcoming destination. High-profile incidents in Colombo and other urban areas have highlighted the vulnerability of solo female travelers, raising safety concerns that are echoed in both media reports

and academic studies (Daily Mirror, 2024). In coastal destinations such as Hikkaduwa, Mirissa, and Unawatuna, harassment by beach boys, vendors, and informal service providers has led to discomfort, fear, and reduced engagement with local communities (Jayasinghe & Ratnayake, 2018; Arachchi, 2020). The consequences extend beyond individual experiences. Harassment diminishes destination image, as tourists share negative feedback via word-of-mouth and online platforms, discouraging potential visitors and reducing repeat visitation (Kozak, 2007; Alrawadie et al., 2019). Economically, tourists often restrict activities to pre-arranged tours or hotel premises, limiting spending in local businesses and weakening community-based tourism benefits (Samarathunga, Schänzel & Perera, 2025; De Albuquerque & McElroy, 2001). Persistent harassment threatens visitor satisfaction, loyalty, and equitable economic distribution, undermining the long-term sustainability and competitiveness of Sri Lanka's tourism industry. Effective interventions through regulation, awareness, and stakeholder coordination are essential to mitigate these impacts.

Tourist harassment in Sri Lanka remains a critical challenge, partly due to gaps in legal and policy frameworks. While the Penal Code criminalizes verbal abuse, stalking, and assault, these provisions do not specifically address tourist-targeted harassment, resulting in inconsistent enforcement, particularly in informal spaces such as beaches, local transport, and markets (Wijesundara & Gnanapala, 2020). Recent administrative interventions include empowering the Tourist Police to monitor unauthorized service providers and unlicensed guides, as called for by the Tourism Ministry in 2022 (Sunday Times, 2024). However, enforcement remains limited due to under-resourced and under-trained personnel, and tourists often hesitate to report incidents because of language barriers or fear of inaction (Senewirathne, 2012). Comparative international practices suggest structured approaches are effective. Dedicated Tourist Police units, licensing schemes, and behavioral codes for vendors in countries such as India, Thailand, Morocco, and Caribbean islands have improved tourist safety and accountability (McElroy, Tarlow, & Carlisle, 2007). Scholars recommend that Sri Lanka adopt similar measures, including tourism-specific legislation, multi-language

complaint mechanisms, capacity-building for enforcement agencies, and awareness campaigns to foster a safer and more welcoming environment for tourists (Dissanayake & Samarathunga, 2021; Wijesundara & Gnanapala, 2020).

Theoretical Review

Cognitive Appraisal Theory explains how tourists interpret and emotionally respond to harassment. According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), tourists cognitively appraise whether an incident is threatening and assess their coping capacity. Studies show that harassment often triggers fear, anger, or embarrassment, leading tourists to adopt emotion-focused coping strategies such as avoidance, especially in destinations with weak reporting mechanisms (Boakye, 2010; Arachchi, 2020). These unresolved negative appraisals reduce satisfaction, word-of-mouth recommendations, and revisit intentions (Kozak, 2007). Destination Image Theory highlights how harassment damages both cognitive (safety, service quality) and affective (fear, discomfort) image components. Negative experiences, amplified through social media and online reviews, significantly harm destination reputation and loyalty (Crompton, 1979; Echtner & Ritchie, 1993). Stakeholder Theory emphasizes that tourist harassment reflects governance and coordination failures among tourism authorities, law enforcement, businesses, and local communities. Effective mitigation requires collaborative, inclusive stakeholder engagement rather than isolated interventions (Freeman, 1984; Wijesundara & Gnanapala, 2020). These theories frame tourist harassment as a psychological, reputational, and governance challenge, justifying an integrated analytical approach.

Research Gaps

Despite the use of frameworks such as Cognitive Appraisal Theory, Destination Image Theory, and Stakeholder Theory, existing studies show significant theoretical limitations. Most research applies these frameworks in isolation, failing to capture the multidimensional nature of tourist harassment,

which spans psychological, institutional, socio-cultural, and media-related factors (Alrawadieh et al., 2019; Kozak, 2007). While gender is sometimes considered, overlapping identities such as race, nationality, age, and socio-economic background are rarely integrated into a cohesive theoretical model. Additionally, the role of media and technology particularly social media's influence on destination image and exposure of harassment incidents has not been systematically incorporated. Current theories predominantly focus on tourists' responses, leaving the motivations and socio-economic drivers behind local actors' harassing behaviors largely unexamined (De Albuquerque & McElroy, 2001).

Empirical studies are often geographically and temporally limited, focusing mainly on southern Sri Lankan beach areas and short observation periods (Jayasinghe & Ratnayake, 2018). Research rarely considers diverse tourist groups, such as solo women, LGBTQ+ travelers, or visitors from different cultural backgrounds, limiting understanding of varied harassment experiences. Stakeholder perspectives, including hotel staff, police officers, and street vendors, are underrepresented. Effectiveness of existing legal measures, safety programs, and digital tools remains largely unassessed (Senewirathne, 2012; Wijesundara & Gnanapala, 2020). Moreover, the attitudes of local communities toward tourist behavior and harassment are insufficiently studied. These gaps highlight the need for integrative, longitudinal, and multi-stakeholder research to inform comprehensive prevention and policy strategies.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative, exploratory methodology to investigate tourist harassment in Sri Lanka's Cultural Triangle, encompassing Kandy, Polonnaruwa, and Anuradhapura. A qualitative approach was selected to capture the subjective, emotional, and context-dependent experiences of foreign tourists and key stakeholders, including Tourist Police officers, government officials, and private sector actors such as hoteliers and tour operators (Creswell

& Poth, 2017; Farrow, De Liddo, & Okada, 2020). The interpretivist research philosophy guided the study, emphasizing that reality is socially constructed and that knowledge emerges from the interactions and interpretations of participants (Jansen, 2023; Rashid, 2023). This philosophical orientation is particularly suited to exploring harassment experiences, where perceptions and meanings vary across individuals and stakeholder groups.

An inductive research approach was adopted, allowing theory to emerge organically from empirical data rather than imposing preconceived frameworks (Vijayamohan, 2025; Saunders et al., 2019). This approach aligns with the study's theoretical foundation, including Cognitive Appraisal Theory, Destination Image Theory, and Stakeholder Theory, all of which emphasize the interpretation of emotions, social interactions, and institutional roles.

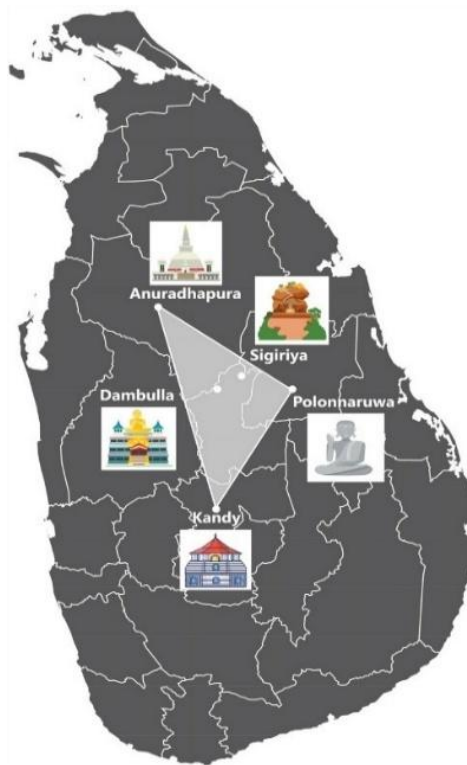


Figure I: Cultural triangle of Sri Lanka

Source: Alahakoon & Udunuwara (2021)

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection instrument, providing flexibility for participants to share detailed narratives and insights into harassment incidents, institutional responses, and perceived safety concerns (Kallio et al., 2016). Non-participant observations complemented interviews, enabling the researcher to record real-time tourist-local interactions, environmental conditions, and enforcement practices without interfering in natural behaviors (Angrosino, 2007). Secondary data sources, including government reports, media articles, and academic publications, were also analyzed to contextualize findings and triangulate primary data (Saunders et al., 2019).

The research design followed a qualitative exploratory framework, appropriate for investigating under-researched, socially complex phenomena such as tourist harassment (Rahi, 2017). An exploratory case study strategy was applied across three key destinations within the Cultural Triangle. This multi-site approach allowed for the comparison of experiences, stakeholder responses, and institutional practices across diverse socio-cultural and operational contexts (Yin, 2018; Baxter & Jack, 2008). The study's population included four main stakeholder groups: foreign tourists who had experienced or witnessed harassment, government tourism officials, Tourist Police officers, and private sector actors. A purposive, maximum variation sampling technique was used to select 23 formal participants, ensuring diversity in perspectives, roles, and institutional affiliations (Patton, 2014; Etikan, 2016; Palinkas et al., 2015). In addition, informal conversations with 65 tourists were conducted to supplement observational insights, although these were not included in the core qualitative dataset.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in both Sinhala and English, depending on participant preference. Interviews were audio-recorded or documented through detailed note-taking based on consent and contextual feasibility. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions, designed to elicit participants' perceptions, experiences, and recommendations regarding

tourist harassment. Observations were structured using checklists that recorded environmental settings, visible forms of harassment, responses by authorities, and interactions between tourists and locals. This multi-method approach ensured data triangulation, increasing the credibility and richness of findings (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The data collection took place mainly at the key tourist destinations within the cultural triangle including Kandy, Polonnaruwa, Habarana, Dambulla and Anuradhapura from February 2025 to May 2025.

Stakeholder Category	Description	Number of Participants (n)
Foreign Tourists	International visitors who experienced or witnessed harassment in Kandy, Polonnaruwa, or Anuradhapura.	2
Government Officials	Officials from the SLTDA and local tourism-related government units responsible for planning and safety.	8
Tourist Police Officers	Officers from the Tourist Police Division stationed in major tourism zones within the Cultural Triangle.	4
Private Sector Stakeholders	Tour operators, hoteliers, and other licensed service providers regularly engaging with tourists.	9
Total		23

Table II: Sample Summar

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. The process involved familiarization with transcripts, generating initial codes, collating codes into potential themes, reviewing and refining themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report.

This approach facilitated the identification of patterns related to harassment types, emotional impacts, stakeholder responses, and institutional gaps, while remaining inductive and data-driven. Trustworthiness was ensured through strategies addressing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). Techniques included prolonged engagement, thick description, peer debriefing, member checking, audit trails, and triangulation across stakeholder groups.

Results/ Findings

Harassments

The theme of Harassments captures a range of unethical, intrusive, and exploitative practices encountered by foreign tourists during their interactions with local individuals and service providers within Sri Lanka's Cultural Triangle.

Theme	Focus Codes	Open Codes
Harassments	Financial Deception	Overcharging, Dishonest Pricing, Misleading Services, Scams
	Intrusive & Unwanted Approaches	Persistent Pressure, Solicitation, Verbal Harassment
	Sexual harassment	Touched my breast, touched my leg, showed me his penis, touched her bud, Violence against women
	Property Infringement	Money being stolen, Stealing tourists' bags and cameras, Steal cameras and wallets

Table III : Theme 1 - Harassments

Evidence from interviews and field observations indicates that these experiences stem largely from tourists' unfamiliarity with local norms, language barriers, and reliance on informal or weakly regulated services. Such practices undermine core principles of hospitality and negatively affect tourists' sense of comfort, safety, and trust. Four interconnected focus areas emerged under this

theme: financial deception, intrusive and unwanted approaches, sexual harassment, and property infringement. Financial deception was the most frequently reported form of harassment. Tourists commonly experienced overcharging, dishonest pricing, and misleading services, particularly in transport, guiding, and informal retail settings. Interview data revealed the presence of inflated prices for foreign visitors, the absence of transparent pricing mechanisms, and deceptive practices designed to extract higher payments.

Observations in Dambulla and Habarana further confirmed that the lack of meters, price displays, or standardized service rates enabled arbitrary and discriminatory pricing. Intrusive and unwanted approaches constituted another dominant pattern. Tourists reported persistent solicitation and pressure from vendors, drivers, and informal guides, even after clear refusals. These approaches often involved repeated following, verbal insistence, and disregard for personal boundaries. Observational data from Sigiriya and Polonnaruwa corroborated these accounts, showing that tourists were frequently approached multiple times within short distances, contributing to discomfort and reduced freedom of movement. Sexual harassment, though reported less frequently, emerged as a serious concern, particularly affecting female tourists. Interview participants described incidents involving inappropriate verbal remarks, boundary violations, and unprofessional conduct within certain service contexts such as transport and wellness facilities. These incidents were predominantly associated with informal or unlicensed service providers and were reported to cause significant emotional distress and feelings of insecurity. Property infringement was also identified as a notable issue. Reports included theft of money, bags, cameras, and personal belongings at major attractions. A recurring pattern involved theft occurring in crowded sites or moments of distraction, occasionally involving breaches of trust within service relationships. These findings demonstrate that harassment in the Cultural Triangle manifests through multiple, interconnected forms that compromise tourist safety, satisfaction, and destination image.

Tourist Experiences, Responses and Impact

The theme Tourist Experiences, Responses and Impact reflect how foreign tourists respond to harassment incidents and how such experiences influence their emotions, behaviors, communication practices, and perceptions of Sri Lanka as a destination.

Theme	Focus Code	Open Code
Tourist Experiences & Impact	Emotional & Psychological Strain	Mental Pressure & Distress Anger & Frustration
	Behavioral Adaptations	Increased Caution & Vigilance, Self-Regulation & Polite Avoidance
	Reporting & Dissemination	Delayed & non-reporting Online Sharing & Reviews
	Impact on Destination Perception	Negative Image of Sri Lanka Reduced Revisit & Recommendation

Table IV : Theme 2 - Tourist Experiences, Responses & Impact

Findings from interviews and observations indicate that harassment produces immediate psychological effects, prompts adaptive behavioral strategies, shapes reporting practices, and contributes to longer-term reputational consequences for the destination. Four interconnected focus codes emerged: emotional and psychological strain, behavioral adaptations, reporting and dissemination, and impact on destination perception. Emotional and psychological strain was a prominent outcome of harassment experiences. Tourists reported mental pressure, discomfort, fear, and emotional distress following persistent solicitation, deception, or boundary violations. Several respondents described visible emotional reactions such as anxiety and distress when recounting incidents. Anger and frustration were also frequently expressed, particularly in

response to perceived unfair treatment, dishonesty, and verbal hostility. These emotional responses indicate that harassment disrupts the sense of relaxation and safety typically associated with leisure travel.

Behavioral adaptations constituted a common coping response. Tourists reported increased caution and vigilance, including heightened suspicion toward strangers, avoidance of certain locations or times of day, and closer attention to personal belongings. Self-regulation and polite avoidance strategies were also widely used, such as limiting eye contact, offering brief refusals, changing routes, or entering shops to disengage from persistent individuals. These adaptive behaviors reflect attempts to minimize risk while maintaining non-confrontational interactions. Reporting and dissemination patterns revealed a strong tendency toward delayed or non-reporting of incidents through formal channels. Emotional distress, time constraints, perceived inconvenience, and reluctance to engage with legal or administrative processes were cited as key barriers. Instead, many tourists opted to share their experiences through online platforms, including travel review websites and social media. These channels were commonly used to express dissatisfaction and warn other travelers. Harassment experiences significantly influenced destination perception. Respondents associated repeated negative encounters with a diminished sense of safety and trust, contributing to a negative image of Sri Lanka. This perception was closely linked to reduced intentions to revisit and a reluctance to recommend the destination to others. Collectively, these findings demonstrate that harassment has enduring consequences that extend beyond individual incidents, shaping tourist behavior, communication, and destination image.

Strategies for Mitigation & Prevention

The theme Strategies for Mitigation & Prevention presents stakeholder-identified measures aimed at reducing tourist harassment and strengthening Sri Lanka's image as a safe and responsible destination.

Theme	Focus Code	Open Code
Strategies for Mitigation & Prevention	Enhanced Transparency & Information	Clear Pricing & Guidelines Accessible Tourist Information Cultural Awareness for Tourists Digital Information System & App
	Stronger Enforcement & Accountability	Increased Police Presence & Visibility Strict Legal Action & Punishment Licensing & Registration of Providers
	Collaborative Stakeholder Engagement	Stakeholder Awareness Programs Improved Inter-Institutional Coordination Training for Service Providers
	Addressing Root Causes	Promoting Ethics & Discipline Controlling Drug Use
	Infrastructure & Security Measures	Improved Lighting & CCTV Tourist Police Mobile Service

Table V: Theme 3 - Strategies for Mitigation & Prevention

Findings indicate that effective prevention requires a combination of transparency, enforcement, collaboration, and structural improvements. Five interconnected focus codes emerged: enhanced transparency and information, stronger enforcement and accountability, collaborative stakeholder engagement, addressing root causes, and infrastructure and security measures. Enhanced transparency and information were widely emphasized as preventive mechanisms. Stakeholders highlighted the need for clear pricing guidelines, standardized transport fares, and visible price displays to reduce overcharging and financial disputes. Accessible tourist information points, including safety guidance and emergency contacts, were identified as essential for empowering tourists. Cultural

awareness initiatives were also recommended to reduce misunderstandings related to dress, behavior, and local norms.

Additionally, the development of digital information systems or mobile applications was proposed to provide verified service listings, transparent pricing, safety alerts, and simplified reporting mechanisms. Stronger enforcement and accountability emerged as a critical deterrent to harassment. Respondents stressed the importance of increased police presence and visibility in high-traffic tourist areas to enhance surveillance and immediate intervention. Strict legal action and consistent punishment for offenders were identified as necessary to establish deterrence and restore tourist confidence. Mandatory licensing and registration of guides, drivers, and service providers were also emphasized to improve professionalism, traceability, and accountability within the tourism sector.

Collaborative stakeholder engagement was identified as essential for sustainable prevention. Stakeholder awareness programs targeting local communities and tourism workers were recommended to highlight the economic and reputational consequences of harassment. Improved inter-institutional coordination among police, tourism authorities, and local councils was emphasized to ensure efficient complaint handling and consistent enforcement. Training programs for service providers focusing on ethics, hospitality standards, communication skills, and cultural sensitivity were also highlighted as key capacity-building measures. Addressing root causes focused on promoting ethics and discipline and controlling substance abuse in tourist areas. Stakeholders linked unethical behavior and weak disciplinary action to recurring harassment incidents and emphasized the need for moral education and enforcement. Drug use among informal operators was identified as a contributing risk factor requiring targeted control measures. Infrastructure and security measures such as improved lighting, CCTV coverage, and mobile tourist police services were highlighted as practical interventions to enhance visibility, rapid response, and overall tourist safety.

Perpetrators, Vulnerable Environments & Victim Characteristics

This theme examines the interrelated roles of perpetrators, spatial contexts, and tourist characteristics in shaping harassment experiences faced by foreign tourists. By integrating stakeholder perspectives on who engages in harassment, where it most commonly occurs, and which tourists are most vulnerable, this section provides a structured understanding of risk patterns that influence both the occurrence of harassment and tourists' subsequent responses.

Theme	Focus Code	Open Code
Perpetrators, Vulnerable Environments & Victim Characteristics	Perpetrator Profiles	Informal/Unlicensed Service Providers Unemployed/ Drug- Addicted Individuals
	Vulnerable Locations & Settings	Public Commercial Areas Isolated Places, Hotels Areas Lacking Police Presence Nighttime/ Less Supervised Areas
	Victim Vulnerabilities	Solo Female Travelers Independent Travelers Lack of Cultural Awareness

Table VI : Theme 4 - Perpetrators, Vulnerable Environments & Victim Characteristics

Stakeholders consistently identified informal and unlicensed service providers including uncertified guides, three-wheeler drivers, and street vendors as primary perpetrators. Their operation outside regulated systems limit accountability and enable persistent solicitation, overcharging, and deceptive practices. Respondents noted that the majority of formal complaints involve such operators, while observations confirmed repeated pressure on tourists and inflated pricing despite clear refusals. The lack of registration and monitoring mechanisms was repeatedly linked to weak deterrence and difficulty in addressing misconduct. In addition, unemployed and drug-affected individuals were associated with

aggressive and unpredictable behavior toward tourists. Stakeholders connected harassment in public spaces to broader socioeconomic challenges, suggesting that unemployment and substance abuse contribute to opportunistic and hostile conduct in tourist areas. The analysis further highlights vulnerable locations and settings where harassment is more prevalent. Public commercial areas, such as markets and souvenir zones, were identified as hotspots due to high tourist concentration, constant transactional interactions, and limited regulation.

Tourists frequently reported feeling pressured by repeated approaches, while observations documented aggressive sales tactics. Isolated places, including poorly lit or sparsely populated paths, were perceived as particularly risky, as the absence of witnesses and supervision emboldens perpetrators. Hotels, despite their reputation for safety, also emerged as vulnerable settings, with reported incidents involving staff misconduct, unwanted attention from other guests, and inadequate access control. Additionally, areas lacking visible police presence and less supervised environments at nighttime were consistently linked to heightened harassment, with reduced surveillance increasing both actual risk and tourists' feelings of vulnerability. Victim vulnerabilities were shaped by gender, travel style, and cultural awareness. Solo female travelers were identified as the most at-risk group, with stakeholders reporting a disproportionate number of harassment cases involving women, particularly in isolated or nighttime settings. Independent travelers, including backpackers and budget tourists, were also highly vulnerable due to their reliance on public transport, informal services, and street-level interactions. A lack of cultural awareness further increased susceptibility, as unfamiliarity with local norms, dress expectations, and social cues limited tourists' ability to disengage from unwanted interactions. The findings demonstrate that tourist harassment arises from the interaction between unregulated perpetrators, high-risk environments, and specific tourist vulnerabilities, underscoring the need for targeted, context-sensitive interventions.

Discussion

The discussion interprets the findings by explaining why harassment

occurs, how tourists cognitively and emotionally respond, and so what these outcomes mean for destination reputation, governance, and sustainable tourism development. From the perspective of Cognitive Appraisal Theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), tourist harassment functions as a significant psychological stressor that challenges visitors' perceptions of safety, autonomy, and control. The study revealed that tourists appraise harassment not merely as isolated inconveniences but as violations of expected host–guest norms. Financial deception, intrusive solicitation, sexual harassment, and property-related incidents were cognitively evaluated as threats, triggering emotional responses such as fear, anger, frustration, and helplessness. These emotional reactions subsequently shaped coping behaviors, including avoidance, withdrawal from public spaces, restricted mobility, and disengagement from local interactions. Importantly, the findings extend CAT by demonstrating that tourists' coping strategies are shaped not only by the severity of harassment but also by their appraisal of institutional responsiveness. Many tourists avoided reporting incidents due to low confidence in enforcement mechanisms, perceiving authorities as ineffective or inaccessible. This perceived lack of institutional support intensified feelings of vulnerability and encouraged passive coping strategies, such as silence or early departure. Thus, harassment in Sri Lanka operates as both a personal stressor and an institutional trust issue, reinforcing CAT's relevance in tourism safety research. Destination Image Theory provides a broader interpretive layer by explaining how these individual stress appraisals accumulate into collective reputational damage. Recurrent experiences of overcharging, verbal harassment, sexual misconduct, and theft contributed to the formation of a negative cognitive image of Sri Lanka as unsafe, poorly regulated, and exploitative. These findings support Kozak (2007) and Alrawadie et al. (2019), who argue that negative micro-experiences can override large-scale branding efforts. The affective dimension of destination image was particularly eroded among female and independent travelers, for whom fear and discomfort replaced anticipated enjoyment. The role of user-generated content further amplifies this process. As Shen, et al. (2015) note, tourists increasingly rely on peer reviews rather than official promotions. This study

confirms that harassment narratives shared on social media and travel platforms significantly influence destination choice, revisit intention, and recommendation behavior. Even when incidents were described as “minor,” their frequency and visibility transformed them into powerful deterrents, illustrating how destination image degradation occurs incrementally rather than through singular crises. Through Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984), harassment emerges as a symptom of systemic governance failures rather than individual misconduct alone. The dominance of informal and unlicensed service providers as perpetrators reflects weak regulation, fragmented oversight, and limited stakeholder coordination. These findings align with Jayasinghe and Ratnayake (2018) and Wijesundara and Gnanapala (2020), who emphasize that gaps between tourism authorities, police, local government, and community actors enable unethical behavior to persist. The study further reveals that even formal stakeholders such as hotel staff and licensed guides can become sources of harassment when accountability and monitoring mechanisms are weak, challenging the assumption that professionalism guarantees ethical conduct.

The findings strongly confirm existing international and local literature identifying tourist harassment as multidimensional. Consistent with De Albuquerque and McElroy (2001) and Kozak (2007), financial exploitation through overpricing and scams remains a dominant form of harassment. Similar to Wijesundara and Gnanapala (2020) and Arachchi (2020), this study found persistent verbal harassment and aggressive solicitation by informal operators in high-traffic tourist zones. Sexual harassment findings align with Boakye (2010) and Calafat et al. (2013) who documented disproportionate targeting of female tourists. However, this study extends prior research by identifying harassment within hotels, spas, and guided services spaces traditionally perceived as safe. This contradicts earlier Sri Lankan studies that largely confined harassment to beaches and informal public spaces, indicating a deeper institutional vulnerability. Property-related harassment and theft further corroborate De Albuquerque and McElroy (2001), yet the involvement of authorized intermediaries in some cases represents a novel contribution. This challenges the assumption that structured

tourism environments inherently reduce risk and highlights erosion of trust even within regulated systems.

Theme	Findings from Study	Supporting Literature	New Insights from Study
Harassments	Overcharging, persistent solicitation, sexual harassment, theft including by guides	Kozak (2007); Arachchi (2020); Wijesundara & Gnanapala (2020)	Theft by trusted guides; harassment inside hotels by staff
Tourist Experiences & Impact	Emotional distress, behavioral avoidance, low formal reporting, negative destination image	Kozak (2007); Alrawadieh et al. (2019)	Visible tourist frustration; strong influence of online reviews
Strategies for Mitigation	Need for cultural awareness, stronger enforcement, stakeholder coordination, addressing root causes, improved infrastructure	Senewirathne (2012); Arachchi (2020); Boakye (2010)	Emphasis on public penalties, drug addiction linked to harassment
Perpetrators & Vulnerabilities	Unlicensed operators, drug-addicted individuals, vulnerable locations including hotels, solo female and independent travelers most at risk	Wijesundara & Gnanapala (2020); Kozak (2007); Calafat et al. (2013)	Drug addiction as a key driver; hotels as unexpectedly risky

Table VII : Literature Discussion Summary

One of the most significant and unexpected findings was that formal tourism environments are not immune to harassment. Contrary to dominant assumptions, licensed guides and hotel staff were occasionally implicated in

misconduct. This contradicts earlier literature that framed informal actors as the primary risk group and suggests that ethical lapses are not limited to marginal actors but may occur across the tourism hierarchy. Another contradiction emerged in tourists' responses to harassment. While CAT predicts active coping when resources are available, many tourists chose silence despite clear distress. This indicates that perceived institutional inefficiency overrides personal agency, resulting in disengagement rather than confrontation or reporting. This finding highlights a disconnect between theoretical expectations of coping and the realities of tourism governance in developing destinations.

This study contributes meaningfully to all three theoretical frameworks. It extends Cognitive Appraisal Theory by demonstrating that tourists appraise harassment as a breach of hospitality trust rather than merely physical or financial harm. The findings also reveal that appraisals of institutional failure significantly shape emotional outcomes and coping behavior, suggesting the need to integrate governance perception into CAT applications in tourism. The study advances Destination Image Theory by illustrating how repeated low-intensity negative encounters cumulatively undermine destination branding. It emphasizes the growing dominance of user-generated content in shaping global image, reinforcing arguments by Alrawadieh et al. (2019) that destination reputation is now co-produced by tourists rather than controlled by authorities. The research refines Stakeholder Theory by positioning informal tourism actors as powerful yet neglected stakeholders whose actions disproportionately affect destination credibility. It also identifies tourists themselves as active stakeholders who enforce accountability through digital platforms when formal systems fail.

Practically, the findings underscore that harassment prevention cannot rely solely on policing. Instead, it requires integrated strategies combining licensing reforms, ethical training, community education, visible enforcement, and digital reporting systems. Consistent with Arachchi (2020) and Wijesundara and Gnanapala (2020), improving stakeholder coordination particularly between SLTDA, Tourist Police, and local authorities is essential. Formalizing informal actors, introducing mandatory codes of conduct, and strengthening hotel

accountability mechanisms are critical steps toward restoring trust.

Despite its contributions, the study has limitations. The qualitative design limits generalizability, and findings reflect stakeholder perceptions rather than direct victim narratives. The geographic focus on selected tourism hubs may exclude experiences from less-visited regions. Additionally, social desirability bias and sensitivity surrounding harassment topics may have constrained full disclosure. Future research should incorporate mixed methods, longitudinal designs, and direct tourist interviews to strengthen empirical depth. This study demonstrates that tourist harassment in Sri Lanka is a psychologically distressing, reputationally damaging, and institutionally embedded phenomenon. Addressing it requires recognizing harassment not as isolated misconduct but as a governance and destination image crisis that demands coordinated, theory-informed intervention.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Harassment of foreign tourists has emerged as a critical challenge for Sri Lanka's Cultural Triangle, encompassing the heritage cities of Kandy, Polonnaruwa, Sigiriya, Dambulla, and Anuradhapura. These destinations form the core of Sri Lanka's cultural tourism identity, yet the research revealed that harassment is a persistent and multidimensional issue, threatening both visitor safety and the reputation of the region. Harassment manifested in various forms, including verbal abuse, persistent solicitation, sexual advances, overpricing, unwanted physical proximity, and even drug-related approaches. Incidents were frequently observed in public spaces, transport hubs, and sacred sites, areas that should reflect hospitality and cultural pride but often become sources of discomfort, particularly for solo and female travelers.

Applying Cognitive Appraisal Theory, the study found that tourists emotionally processed these encounters as psychological threats, resulting in fear, anxiety, anger, and embarrassment. These emotional responses often led tourists to adopt avoidance behaviors, such as limiting exploration of public spaces, cutting short visits, or restricting interactions with locals. Such behaviors not only

reduced cultural engagement but also diminished the local economic benefits derived from tourism. In addition, Destination Image Theory highlighted the broader reputational consequences of harassment. While Sri Lanka promotes the Cultural Triangle as a cradle of ancient civilization and spiritual heritage, repeated negative experiences create a gap between tourist expectations and reality. This gap, amplified by social media, blogs, and online reviews, contributes to emotional disappointment and long-term reputational damage, with the betrayal felt in sacred environments having a particularly strong impact on visitor perceptions. Stakeholder Theory further revealed that institutional responses to harassment were largely fragmented and reactive. Although the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority, Tourist Police, local councils, and private actors are involved in tourism governance, coordination is weak and resources are insufficient. Frontline staff, including informal guides and tuk-tuk drivers, often operate without proper training in ethics, customer service, or hospitality, further perpetuating unsafe and uncomfortable situations.

The study also highlighted gendered and cultural vulnerabilities, with solo female and Western tourists being particularly at risk. Harassment in sacred or culturally significant spaces, coupled with institutional insensitivity and societal silence on gender norms, reinforces a culture of impunity. Media representation plays a critical role in shaping perceptions, as viral posts and videos of harassment incidents often overshadow official tourism promotions, contributing to an unfiltered and sometimes negative portrayal of the destination. Collectively, these findings underscore that harassment is not merely an individual safety issue but a structural problem affecting destination authenticity, visitor satisfaction, and the long-term sustainability of Sri Lanka's tourism industry. If left unaddressed, such incidents threaten to undermine the country's cultural integrity and its global tourism potential.

Addressing this issue requires a holistic and coordinated approach among all stakeholders in the tourism ecosystem. Promoting cultural sensitization through community workshops and tourist orientation materials can foster respectful interactions between hosts and visitors. Strengthening complaint and

reporting mechanisms, including multilingual hotlines, mobile applications, and visible complaint counters, ensures that tourists can report incidents safely and receive timely feedback. Standardizing pricing, increasing transparency, and implementing ethics and communication training for licensed and informal tourism personnel are crucial to reducing exploitation and harassment. Enhancing the visibility of Tourist Police, deploying gender-balanced patrols, and providing regular sensitivity training are key measures to deter harassment. Technology-based safety solutions, such as official tourism safety apps and incident response dashboards, can facilitate real-time reporting and coordination among authorities. Coordination between government agencies, local councils, hotels, and community representatives should be institutionalized through district-level tourism safety committees, with clear accountability and monitoring mechanisms. National awareness campaigns can educate the public on the social and economic impacts of harassment, fostering a culture of respect. Legal reforms, including tourism-specific legislation defining harassment and enforcement powers, alongside fast-track judicial processes, can strengthen institutional response. Finally, empowering local communities through vocational training, alternative livelihoods, and inclusion in safety monitoring addresses socio-economic factors that contribute to harassment.

Future research could extend these findings by examining harassment in other regions of Sri Lanka, employing mixed-method approaches for broader generalizability, and investigating the experiences of specific tourist demographics such as families or LGBTQ+ travelers. Studies focusing on perpetrators' motivations and evaluating the effectiveness of interventions, including increased policing, awareness campaigns, and community programs, would further inform policy and practice. Longitudinal research tracking harassment trends and their impact on destination image and tourist loyalty would provide additional insights critical for sustainable tourism development. By implementing these recommendations, Sri Lanka can strengthen visitor safety, preserve its cultural heritage, and enhance its global reputation as a responsible and welcoming destination.

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