

A study on Antisocial British tourists in Amsterdam

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I am a final year student studying at Hotel School The Hague in Amsterdam. As a British National living in Amsterdam I have a special interest in understanding Antisocial British tourists in Amsterdam.

Abstract

Objectives: To understand exactly which British tourists are responsible for antisocial behaviour in the Amsterdam. Why they come to Amsterdam and the deeper underlying causes of their antisocial behaviour.

Methods: Gather both qualitative and quantitative data through both surveys and interviews of British tourists in Amsterdam. This data was then analysed to demonstrate relationships and descriptive data.

Population: British tourists to Amsterdam, aged between 18 and 35.

Results: A clear group of men aged 18-30 travelling in single gender groups are far more likely to cause antisocial behaviour in Amsterdam, the larger the group the more likely they are to engage in antisocial behaviour. Their motivations for coming also explain their antisocial behaviour. These young men are drawn by the chance to escape normal life in a city where the laws are far more liberal. This perceived lawlessness attracts those looking for escapism and those willing to shirk the rules of normal society for a small period of time.

Conclusions: As long as Amsterdam maintains its liberal laws governing prostitution and cannabis, these will continue to be seen as beacons attracting those wishing to party away from strict laws and social norms.

Introduction

British tourists in Amsterdam

Amsterdam is a city of 820,000 people (eurostat, 2019) yet welcomes over 18 million tourists per year (de vries, 2018). After the recession Amsterdam encourage tourists to come to the city and now there is a clear economic reliance on inbound tourism. The European, cultural, short haul holiday destination is a crowded marketplace, one of the things that makes Amsterdam unique as a destination is the Red Light District (Faulkner and Tideswell, 1997). The fact that "Internationally it is perceived as a free-for-all zone of entertainment, a kind of 'theme park' for adult fun" (Aalbers and Sabat, 2012), means that Amsterdam stands out for many as a place to visit.

Amsterdam is a city that has reached a peak level of tourists, with the centre of

Amsterdam, now so saturated with tourists that the local government is attempting to redistribute tourists out of the city centre (Bolt, 2018). 18.5 million tourists visited the city in 2018 – up 11% on 2017. By 2025, 23 million are expected (de Vries, 2018).

According to the Foreign and commonwealth office Over 1 million British tourists visit Amsterdam every year (FCO, 2019), making British tourists the largest visitor group for Amsterdam every year (CBS, 2019).

Whilst they bring economic benefit, these British tourists have also brought with them a wave of antisocial behaviour (Iamsterdam, 2018). These British tourists see Amsterdam as a way to escape the rules that would govern them at home, in a tolerant, liberal space that

will allow them to act as they please (O'Leary, 2018). Due to the antisocial actions of these British tourists in Amsterdam, the local government has launched the 'enjoy and respect' campaign to target its most antisocial visitors, British and Dutch men aged 18-35. (Iamsterdam, 2018).

One of the driving forces behind people visiting Amsterdam is the Red Light District, in 2012 43% of tourists surveyed said the a main reason for coming to Amsterdam is to explore the Red Light District and a further 35% said it was to visit a cannabis shop (ACTB, 2012). This image of Amsterdam as being a place where tourists can do anything they please is helping to drive the rise in antisocial behaviour (O'Leary, 2018).

Attempts by British tourists to escape the rules at home and enjoy themselves in the Red Light District is creating further more serious problems. In May 2018, a 21 year old, drunk British tourist slipped and drowned in a canal whilst urinating (Berghuis, 2018). In 2014 3 British men died and a further 14 tourists were taken to hospital after taking what they thought was cocaine and turned out to be heroin (Thomas, 2014), these drugs were believed to have been bought in and around the Red Light District.

Amsterdam has long acknowledged problems associated with the Red Light District and has made attempts to close them before, in 2008 they were buying up the brothels in an attempt to reopen them as spaces for designers (PvdA, 2008) (Simmons, 2008). However this attempt was thwarted by the global crash as the local government had to end up selling them back at a loss. In 2010, the Amsterdam Authorities attempted to close, impose far stricter rules on sex workers in order to make sure that the workers of the Red Light District were not being exploited, (Clements, 2010).

With increasing safety and antisocial issues, the Amsterdam government must now rethink what the Red Light District

means to Amsterdam, and what issues closing it could have on the city.

Why do Brits behave the way they do?

Previous research has shown that the largest group of tourists taking part in antisocial behaviour in the city centre are British tourists aged between 18-35 (Iamsterdam, 2019). However, there is not more information detailing this group. There is much we don't know about those behaving antisocially, including their socio-demographic status and their mindset when visiting Amsterdam.

Young British tourists when they go on holiday feel the freedom to act however they please. They believe that what you do on holiday is separate to everyday life, and therefore the normal rules of good behaviour do not apply. British tourists also develop a mentality of self-validation where they encourage each other's bad behaviour pushing them into more and more antisocial behaviour (Briggs, 2013). Whilst this was a study conducted into young British tourists in Ibiza, it is still valid as it studies the mentality of young Brits on holiday. Young British tourists are more willing to use drugs and alcohol abroad and take personal risks (Kelly, Hughes and Bellis, 2014).

Young Brits more predisposed to heavy drinking and violence when compared to their counterparts in Europe (Hughes et al., 2008). Briggs (2013) went so far as to suggest that large parts of this antisocial behaviour are ingrained in these people at home. Many of these Brits who on holiday engage in heavy drug taking and drinking also have done so at home.

One study on violence in nightclub holiday destinations in Spain has been able to identify several key markers that will make someone more disposed to holiday violence (Hughes et al. 2008). These are being British, aged between 16-19, being male, getting drunk frequently during the holiday and recreational drugs. Briggs (2013) agreed that young males engaged in drinking and drug taking are more likely to engage in

violence. One other factor suggested one is that they are likely from a working class background, with a work hard during the week, and live for the weekend lifestyle.

Why the British behave worse on holiday is a complex one, however one ethnographic survey on this has established that there are several reasons for this (Briggs, Turner, 2012). Firstly it provides an escapism from the day to day, and therefore, behaviour can be different to the everyday. Secondly, that the stories that arise from these trips help them to create 'life biographies' which help to build a social identity (ibid). Brits want to be able to have these stories to tell when they get home as it can be seen as giving them a social credit. Brits may also feel a pressure when with a group of their friends from back home to engage in binge drinking as to not do so would be seen as strange (Briggs et al., 2011).

What is antisocial behaviour?

There has been little done to actually define and characterise the antisocial behaviour of tourists. When we think of antisocial British tourists an image immediately comes up and it is simple to understand the basics of antisocial behaviour it is important to define which behaviours are relevant to tourists in Amsterdam.

In the UK antisocial behaviour is defined '*Acting in a manner that caused or was likely to cause harassment, alarm or distress to one or more persons not of the same household*' (RDS, 2004). This definition is easily applicable to tourists in Amsterdam if the term household is replaced with 'group'.

The RDS categorised all forms of domestic antisocial behaviour and the ones relevant to tourists in Amsterdam are: Drug/substance misuse, Street drinking, kerb crawling, Intimidation and harassment, Noise, Rowdy behaviour, Criminal damage, Litter (ibid). When combined with the targets of Iamsterdam's campaign littering, noise, street drinking, public urination (iamsterdam, 2019). A clear pattern form of antisocial behaviour that could be expected to be seen in British tourists.

The impact of antisocial behaviour on Amsterdam

Mass tourism and antisocial behaviour by tourists has a negative impact on the people of Amsterdam. Residents in the in the centre of town whilst understanding that tourism as a whole does benefit the city economically are annoyed by tourists (Ouweland, 2018). The residents in the centre of Amsterdam whilst happy with the behaviour of cultural tourists are mostly annoyed with Brits, party tourists and stag dos. This is clearly showing that it is a certain type of tourists that is negatively affecting those who live in Amsterdam (ibid).

Methods

Population and sample

Iamsterdam launched the 'enjoy and respect' campaign targeted at British Tourists aged 18-35. Their own findings were that this group were causing a large amount of antisocial behaviour in the city. This was used to create the population of inbound British tourists to Amsterdam aged 18-35.

Due to my own limitations in gathering data a small sample size of 81 tourists were randomly approached and asked to fill in the survey.

Having analysed the results of the interviews and found those in single gender groups and predominantly males, were likely to cause antisocial behaviour I used judgemental sampling to interview 4 young men aged 18-30 and 1 woman aged 18-30. This sampling meant picking people who were identified in survey's as the people most likely to cause antisocial behaviour in Amsterdam.

Data Collection

In order to gather a range of data two different methods were used. A Survey was used in order to gather quantifiable data. It also included descriptive answers to be able to help shape the interviews. The survey's included a mix of demographic data, and travel patterns to try and gain a greater understanding as to who the people coming to Amsterdam

are, and how likely they are to behave antisocially.

The interviews were conducted in a semi structured manor to allow for open questions and the ability to explore different topics that would arise during the interview.

Data analysis

The survey results were analysed using several methods. The quantitative was analysed to provide a clear picture of exactly which characteristics were likely to be associated with antisocial behaviour in Amsterdam. The qualitative data in the surveys was analysed to show patterns in the results in order to help understand why the tourists were coming to Amsterdam, what their intentions were in the city and how likely they were to misbehave. Further data was also analysed to help structure the questions for the interviews.

The results of the surveys were categorised into 12 different categories.

These categories were decided upon after going through all of the surveys and recognising the broad themes that kept repeating themselves.

1. **Accommodating** = Amsterdam being a place where Brits can drink
2. **Liberal** = the different drug and sex laws, and the myth of Amsterdam
3. **Escapism** = Brits wanting to get away from it all
4. **Holiday mode** = Brits behaving differently on holiday than they would at home
5. **Social context** = how trips away are part of growing up
6. **Convenience** = the accessibility of Amsterdam
7. **Tourist zones** = Places where you can behave as a tourist
8. **Nice city** = people actually appreciate the city
9. **Legal trouble** = how Brits react to fines and the police
10. **Brit abroad** = Understanding Brits relationship with the Stigma

11. **Own behaviour** = Brits understanding their own behaviour in the city, and what effects this

12. **Amsterdam's competition** = where else these people might go

These led to sub conclusions which could then be analysed against the main research question.

Results

Who is behaving badly?

Bad behaviour is more prevalent in single gender groups - particularly males, aged between 18-30 (over 30 behaviour tends to improve). People who actively seek out the red light and base their accommodation around there behave the worst. They also tend to stay in Hostels.

Why are they coming?

Whilst there are deeper reasons why Amsterdam attracts antisocial tourists there are also simple reasons that will attract tourists of all types. It is located near the UK with flights being less than an hour, it is a small city which is easy to navigate and nearly everyone in the city speaks English.

Antisocial tourists are attracted by Amsterdam's more unique qualities. Due to the historically liberal laws of Amsterdam, British people see it as a city of sex and drugs and this makes it a seemingly ideal place to party. Amsterdam is also seen as a safe city, so that if you are to misbehave in Amsterdam it doesn't matter as you are unlikely to end up getting into too much trouble. Described by 1 interviewee as 'a soft play area for adults' - somewhere you can do what you want and can't get hurt.

Why do they behave this way?

British tourists have a desire to party in their own style rather than assimilate to the local culture. They find Amsterdam an ideal place to do this as it is very accommodating of these British tourists. British people enjoy the ease at which it

is to find a bar in the centre of town where they can drink. British people enjoy that whilst Amsterdam provides new surrounds they can still drink and party in a similar way to how they would at home.

There are many who see coming to Amsterdam for four days as an escape, and this includes a break from the laws and social norms back home. On holiday it is totally fine to start drinking with breakfast and continue all day as you do not have responsibilities. Due to the short length of most visitors' stays it is simply a matter of getting maximum enjoyment in a short period of time.

Some are more likely to see coming to Amsterdam as an escape than others, those working manual labour jobs and part timers are far more likely to behave differently when they come.

Fear of consequences?

British tourists enter what they feel as a holiday mode when they go abroad. This manifests itself in several ways, firstly Brits feel as if their actions do not have the same consequences they would at home, therefore they feel more willing to take risk. One example of this in Amsterdam was during the white heroin period, where despite the warnings British tourists continued to buy and die from white heroin sold on the streets of Amsterdam as cocaine. Also when on a holiday they are there to enjoy themselves so are less likely to care how their actions affect others.

Another part of this holiday mode is that British tourists will drink heavily on their holidays every day, something that they would obviously not do at home where they have day to day responsibilities.

"Party areas"

Brits feel that there are parts of Amsterdam where they are fine to behave in any way that they want, namely the Red Light District. It is seen as an area for partying and debauchery where any behaviour can be tolerated. Locals can just ignore the red light if they don't like

seeing this behaviour. British tourists feel that any locals who choose to live there should understand that it's a party neighbourhood and therefore shouldn't complain. In these areas British tourists feel totally free to behave in any way they want.

Amsterdam's competition

When young British tourists are looking for places to enjoy their freedom several other destinations are frequently considered. Namely, Prague, Budapest, Dublin and Barcelona.

For these tourists Amsterdam is more appealing for several reasons, it is perceived to be far safer than other destinations, especially those in Eastern Europe. This means the Brits believe that when they are drunk the damage they can do to themselves is less than in more dangerous destinations. This perceived safety will also encourage worse behaviour as they feel safe to drink more.

Many factors also make Amsterdam far more convenient for British travellers. It is closer from to the UK than nearly all other holiday destinations. Unlike other cities there is no language barrier for Brits travelling to Amsterdam.

Even though Amsterdam may be an expensive city to live in, the prevalence of cheap flights and hostel accommodation mean it is not an expensive holiday destination. This means Brits do not feel the need to travel further afield for a holiday they can afford.

Discussion

In general we can see that antisocial behaviour is most likely to be centred around a specific group, men traveling with other men aged 18-30 staying in and around the Red Light District. Their motivations for coming are clear, they are looking for an escape from day to day life back home and whilst looking for this escape the find Amsterdam's liberal laws appealing.

Other studies of Brits abroad (Briggs, 2013) have shown that Brits are happy to take risks abroad as they do not attribute consequence to their activities. In Amsterdam that lack of consequence manifests itself as an ability to drink and behave as much as they would like without fear of anything they do following them home.

Young British tourists in Amsterdam can only be fully understood by looking at the wider social context they are operating in. They are young men who are experimenting going away and having freedom for the first time. Wherever they go these young men will be badly behaved and for some that means choosing Amsterdam as a place to blow off steam. Once these tourists have decided that Amsterdam is the place to let off steam then it is very hard to control these tourists.

The results have shown that antisocial British tourists coming can impact other British tourists. Those that are better behaved and here for a cultural experience can be put off by seeing these tourists. Well-meaning cultural tourists can be embarrassed by seeing their compatriots walking around upsetting the locals, which will put them off coming again.

With over 1 million British tourists coming a year there are many who behave very respectfully towards the city. Many British tourists aged 18-35 who are automatically labelled as trouble makers, are very well behaved when they are here. They are attracted by many of the same qualities as those that will act antisocially. Namely the convenience of the city and relaxed liberal atmosphere. Making British tourists feel unwelcome could well end up putting off these tourists who do not negatively impact the city.

Those with jobs that are considered hard on mundane, such as part time jobs or manual labour were far more likely to come to Amsterdam seeking escapism. Their behaviour was more likely to differ from that at home.

Many British tourists who travel to Amsterdam are well behaved and some want to respect the locals, these tourists can in fact be put off by these stag do groups. They are embarrassed to see These 'Brit's abroad' and may next time go to a city where these groups are not prevalent.

One aspect of British culture abroad that has been seen especially in football fans is the need when going away to congregate and 'take over' parts of the city. English football fans feel no shame in forcing the locals out of part of a city, this is reflected in their attitudes towards the Red Light District. These tourists feel that they should be allowed to behave as they like in the Red Light District, rather than allow the locals to define the rules of good and bad behaviour.

Conclusions

The phrase that came up repeatedly was accommodating, these tourists are eager to impart their own form of enjoyment on the city. Amsterdam has become a city that is accommodating to these British tourists, the entire centre of town feels like as one tourist put 'a soft play area for adults' that exists only for the enjoyment of tourists. It's a city that accommodates their drinking for 4 days, without needing to look hard for it, all the bars and clubs they could need for 4 days consecutive drinking are just their waiting for them.

It's a large scale problem and requires large scale solutions. The only way to prevent these tourists behaving antisocially is to stop them coming. Other cities in Europe meet the description of party cities however, they are neither as safe nor as convenient as Amsterdam, obviously Amsterdam can do nothing about its size, safety or location Amsterdam's so it must look for other ways to stop these tourists coming. The best way to do that is to change the perception of what the city of Amsterdam is. The enjoy and respect campaign may go some way to explain that some things are definably illegal in Amsterdam however this is something that they will only see once they are here. Amsterdam must go further to closing the liberal

symbols of the city for as long as the symbols of legalised weed, and open prostitution still exist, tourists looking to behave badly will continue to be attracted.

It is impossible to estimate exactly how many British tourists behave antisocially in the city. It appears that the reputation British tourists have in Amsterdam is caused by a vocal minority that drink and disrespect the city centre. This is because a well behaved majority do not make for newsworthy headlines and instead go about the city peacefully.

The move to ban legalised weed for British tourists post Brexit is potentially a huge one, but given the ease with which it is possible to buy other recreational drugs illegally the potential impact is still doubtful. Although the technicalities of buying weed for Brits will become harder Amsterdam will continue to be seen as a city where buying weed is legal.

Some British tourists when they leave the UK know and even want to behave antisocially. These tourists believe that acting in this way is entertaining, and do not care about the effect this would have on the local populous. As such education will have no effect on how they will behave. Therefore stronger solutions are required to deal with those that willingly behave antisocially. Only with strong laws that would put these tourists off choosing Amsterdam would the city be able to rid themselves of this element.

The greatest symbol for antisocial tourists continues to be the Red Light District, it is where they stay and where they drink. Even though they may not be interested in sleeping with prostitutes they understand that if they come to the Red Light District it is a neighbourhood where they can have fun and party. Until the windows are closed the Wallen will continue to be a bright shiny red beacon for English loutishness.

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