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21 November 2022

Staycationers Behaving Badly

COVID-19 has changed how we holiday: out with crowding into airports to fly to distant resorts; in with staying close to home. Although this might seem an effective way to support local tourism while containing the virus, research by Ph.D. student Mr Wilson Au, Dr Nelson Tsang and Dr Clare Fung of the School of Hotel and Tourism Management (SHTM) at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University reveals a downside of “staycationing”. In Hong Kong, many holidaymakers confined to local hotels during the pandemic have begun to behave badly, taking a toll on staff’s mental health. This timely study highlights the need for hotels to remove incentives for staycationers to cause trouble and create an environment that brings out the best in guests.

Even before the outbreak of COVID-19, staycationing was a growing trend. “Since the early 1900s,” the authors note, “many Americans have taken short trips to enjoy summer vacations within their usual place of residence”. Once ignored by tourism researchers, staycationing is now recognised as an important market segment. Framing a short-distance trip as a special kind of vacation can help people see familiar places in a new light. Moreover, in uncertain times, holidaying in your hometown is less vulnerable to disruption and more environmentally sustainable than travelling abroad.

As in the West, staycationing has surged in Hong Kong since 2020 because of pandemic-related restrictions on travel and leisure. However, the researchers warn of a dark side to the tourism industry’s home-grown pandemic solution. Focusing on the Hong Kong hotel sector, they explored the interaction between the recent staycation boom and an old problem in hospitality: “jaycustomer” behaviour.

“The term ‘jaycustomer’ is a customer-specific form of ‘jaywalker’”, the researchers explain. It refers to customers who act antisocially in service settings such as hotels, bars, and airports, making life difficult for staff. Jaycustomer behaviour ranges from the boorish to the criminal, encompassing everything from breaking rules, rudeness to staff, and refusing to settle the bill to theft and even vandalism. Hotels are especially vulnerable to jaycustomer behaviour, say the researchers, because they are “characterised by a close but short-term service provider–customer relationship”.

Combine a jaycustomer and a staycationer and you get a toxic visitor whom the researchers dub a “jaystaycationer”. While staying at hotels in their own cities, jaystaycationers abuse the hospitality of their hosts and cause physical and/or emotional damage. The SHTM team was inspired by a local example of disorderly guests in 2020. “One large group of staycationers held what was described as ‘a wild birthday party’ at the Peninsula Hong Kong,” report the researchers, “with stains on every electric device in the room”.

Jaycustomer issues have intensified during the pandemic, partly because travel restrictions have put businesses in a perilous position. Those who continue to patronise local establishments may feel like saviours, giving them the sense of a licence to misbehave. “With such strong perceived

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bargaining power in the marketplace,” say the researchers, “individuals are less likely to comply with organisational regulations and social norms, which stimulates their jaycustomer behaviors”. Recognising the harm that such hotel guests can cause to other customers, staff and business operations, the researchers set out to classify jaystaycationer problems and identify their causes and how staff react.

The authors conducted individual telephone interviews with 10 staff members from four- and five-star hotels in Hong Kong. Had they experienced trouble with staycationers? Under COVID-19 restrictions, the city’s luxury hotels have seen a surge in bookings from Hong Kongers unable or unwilling to travel abroad. However, whilst a foreign guest in normal times would spend most of their time roaming the city, pandemic staycationers are confined to their hotels almost 24/7. Had staff noticed anything unusually demanding about these guests, the researchers asked, and if so, what did they think of it?

Staff responses to guest behaviours are subjective and dependent on the individual. Hence, the authors were concerned with capturing both their interviewees’ unique personal experiences and the broader context of social disruption in which these events occurred. Their approach needed to be objective and rooted in established theory. To meet these demands, they settled on constructivist grounded theory, a popular framework for obtaining qualitative insights in tourism studies. This approach enabled them to “highlight the existence of multiple realities and elicit the views of each participant’s ‘subjective world’”.

Analysis of the interviews revealed four types of jaystaycationer. “Attention seekers” and “benefit seekers” were defined by their underlying need to get something from hotel staff. Attention seekers attempted to meet *intangible* emotional needs by, for example, emphasising how virtuous it was for them to support local hotels despite the risk of catching COVID-19. Benefit seekers, taking things further, sought *tangible* rewards by exploiting hotels’ weak position during the pandemic to demand free upgrades and special services. A similar distinction between tangible and intangible separated “rule breakers”, who transgressed when the opportunity arose, e.g. by holding large parties, and “property abusers”, who progressed to physically damaging property by, for example, cooking in their rooms and setting off the sprinkler system.

Predictably, the spread of COVID-19 was a recurring theme of the interviews. Hotel guests found ways to belittle staff through both under- and over-compliance with safety rules. One interviewee – a housekeeper at a five-star hotel – was made to fear for their safety by the carelessness of jaystaycationers around face masks: “Staycationers refused to follow our hotel’s policies. They did not wear masks and argued with me without their masks on.” In contrast, a front desk officer at another hotel felt dehumanised by the hygiene obsessions of guests checking in: “Jaystaycationers kept using disinfectant spray to clean everything on my desk, such as my pen. It’s so disrespectful; I am not the virus.”

The staff responded to these unpleasant guests in several ways, which the researchers categorised as practical and psychological. In practical terms, they could either stand up to the jaystaycationers or acquiesce, while their emotional reactions ranged from trying to thoughtfully



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understand their guests' positions to simply giving up hope or avoiding contact. These findings offer novel insights into the psychological effects of dealing with jaystaycationers. "Three emotional responses (i.e. sense of thoughtfulness, sense of powerlessness, and self-isolation)", the researchers report, "may bridge the relationship between jaycustomer behaviors and hotel workers' negative responses".

Finally, the interviews revealed two types of causes of jaystaycationer behaviour: personal and environmental. Jaystaycationers could be motivated by a triad of negative emotions: fear of COVID-19, arrogance and greed. Conflict could also arise from three environmental causes: the nature of staycationing (confinement in a hotel almost 24/7), the rules around infection safety (which were new to both guests and staff), and the ambiguity and complexity of the holiday packages offered to staycationers, which jaystaycationers tried to take advantage of.

This last point suggests a possible way to combat the problem. "Instead of just recording staycationers' dining credits internally," the researchers suggest, "hotel operators could consider making them transparent for staycationers to monitor on the hotel's website".

Although irresponsible customers are nothing new, this is the first study to analyse the jaycustomer problem in the specific context of staycationing. The findings offer actionable insights for hotels into avoiding environmental triggers of jaystaycationer behaviour. By paying attention, for the first time, to the psychological as well as practical strategies that beleaguered staff use to cope with this problem, the study may also help hotel owners take better care of their employees during stressful periods such as pandemics. This preliminary study points the way to a deeper understanding of the causes and consequences of a crucial emerging problem in hospitality.

Au, Wai Ching Wilson, Tsang, Nelson K. F., and Fung, Clare (2021). Exploring Jaystaycationer Behaviors: Cause, Typology, and Hotel Workers' Responses. *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research*, Vol. 26, Issue 11, pp. 1207-1224.

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