

ROUTLEDGE ADVANCES IN TOURISM

Destination Marketing

An international perspective

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Destination Experience for Middle-East Tourists

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Abstract

In this chapter, the authors try to explore the experiences of Middle East tourists in Istanbul using phenomenology. The chapter begins first by reviewing the literature on customer and tourist experiences and is followed by the definition and importance of Middle East as a tourist generating region. After the exploratory study based on content analysis of lived experiences of participants, the study findings suggest five dimensions of experiential dimensions for Middle East tourists in destinations – namely culture, social interactions, nature, quality service, and shopping.

Introduction

The services and products the market offers have become increasingly commoditized with little to distinguish them beyond price and availability (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). There is a general acknowledgement in literature concerning the transformation from services to experiences within the markets. This shift requires organizations to differentiate their offerings to meet the desires of more sophisticated and demanding clients (Volo, 2009). The role of satisfaction and quality on positive customer behaviours have been replaced by experiences offered as by-products.

There are various definitions of customer experiences. For example Pine and Gilmore (1999) define them as memorable events that engage customers in a personal way. Various authors also suggest that experiences are remembered for a while and shared with others (e.g. Cetin & Dincer, 2014; Oh, Fiore & Jeong, 2007). Thus experiences are extremely relevant in tourism industry (Cohen, 1979; MacCannell, 1973; Smith, 1994; Uriely, 2005; Urry, 1990). Tourism destinations should be able to offer positive experiences in order to keep and increase the number of visitors they attract. Tourist experiences are able to differentiate destinations from alternative regions. They also enable destinations to create loyal clients that share their experiences, and recommend the destination to other potential travelers.

Although experiences are critical for destinations' success, offering a theoretical framework of tourist experience has been difficult task for researchers. Creating, managing and evaluating tourist experiences have also been a challenging objective for destination planners and travel trade. Tourists have different personal characteristics and they hold various needs and expectations, making the concept of experience a relative attribute. There is

not a single experience, but several experiences for different market segments (Vega, Casielles & Martin, 2015).

Tourism is a growing international activity despite economic crises, political conflicts and natural disasters. Travelling is also becoming more global, with advancements in technology and relaxation on visa processes, the dominance of western tourist generating countries international tourism is shifting. Far East, Middle East and CIS countries' growth rates of outbound tourism are remarkable. Although the importance of these emerging regions has been acknowledged, research on tourism has long been focused on western tourists. There is a lack of knowledge particularly on the needs, experiences and behaviours of Middle East tourist segment.

This study adopts a qualitative method to facilitate closing the gap between importance of and research in tourist experience through exploring the experiences of tourists from Middle Eastern countries. The chapter first briefly conceptualizes the structure of tourist experience concept. Then Middle Eastern tourists' experiences are discussed in the framework of factors found after analysis of qualitative data acquired from in-depth interviews.

Literature Review

Tourists are recognized as consumers as they are involved in various service exchange relationships during their travels (Gunn, 1988; Mossberg, 2007). Because of inseparability characteristic of tourism, consumer experiences necessitate active involvement of the tourist (Brunner-Sperdin & Peters, 2009). Tourist destinations can be framed as an amalgam of services and activities (e.g. lodging, attractions) that create an overall experience of the area visited. Tourist experience is actually an output as well as a process, however it is expected that there will be a final destination experience which is created through interacting with different elements in the destination (Hosany & Gilbert, 2010). Thus experiential value is explained based on a single experience extracted from the overall trip. Determining experiential attributes for different tourist segments would facilitate a more precise understanding of tourists and better decision making for destinations.

One of the emerging markets for international tourism activity is travellers from Middle Eastern countries. The Middle East region is one of the World's smallest, yet fast growing, tourist generating regions, with an average annual growth rate of 9.9% between years 2000–2010. Middle East region has supplied 36.2 million tourists in 2010, an increase from 8.2 million in 1990. The growth rate is the highest in the world, well above the global average of 3.4% per annum for the same period, reflecting a dynamic growth trend. With a population of more than 250 million, expected to increase over 400 million by 2050, the region promises to stay as an attractive and lucrative market for tourist destinations. Outbound travel from the Middle East has more than quadrupled from 8.2 million in 1990 to 36.2 million in 2010 (UNWTO, 2012).

World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) defines the Middle East market to include 14 countries: Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syrian Arab Republic, United Arab Emirates and Yemen. Within the Middle East, major tourist generating markets are the Gulf countries; Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar. These tourists from Gulf constitute about 60% of all outbound travel and around 75% of total international tourism expenditure spent by tourist from the Middle East countries (UNWTO, 2012).

Middle East market is also an important generating region for Turkey. This segment is critical for Istanbul as these tourists tend to visit the city during summer months which is among the shoulder periods for Istanbul considering international tourism demand. According

to Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism (2014, p.8), more than 15% of visitors to Istanbul are from Middle East. The total number of visitors from Middle East to Istanbul has jumped from around 700.000 in 2010 to 1.700.000 in 2013. Table 13.1 shows the growth of Middle Eastern tourists travelling to Turkey between years 2008 to 2012. According to the table the total number of arrivals from Middle Eastern countries more than doubled despite the increased political unrest in the region during recent years (Cetin & Sunar, 2012).

Table 13.1

Methodology

In order to explore the Middle East travellers' overall tourism experiences in Istanbul, a qualitative technique based upon semi-structured, in-depth interviews was chosen. Travelers from Middle Eastern countries were interviewed about their experiences; as events and perceptions in Istanbul that are personal, memorable, unique, and worth sharing with friends. Interviews were all electronically recorded with respondents' consent, and transcribed verbatim within the same day by one of the authors. This whole procedure filled 96 pages in total. Transcripts and field notes were then analyzed multiple times and coded by each author to reach a consensus on overall dimensions, concerning experiential attributes of tourists' visit to Istanbul. Istanbul is a popular destination for international travellers and it is also attracting a large share of Middle East tourist market mainly because of cultural and geographic proximity. The city is attracting more than ten million international travellers and it offers diverse products and services (e.g. heritage, cultural events, natural attractions, shopping, night life and business). Hence Istanbul can be considered as a good domain to study experiences.

Interviews were conducted between August to October 2013 for a period of 13 weeks. The screening criteria used for the interviewees were being above 18 years old, and to have stayed in Istanbul for more than one full day. In the case of this study, after interviewing 61 tourists, and transcribing relevant data, authors agreed on the data saturation level and that no additional interviews would provide new findings (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Interviews took around 25 to 40 minutes in duration and were conducted randomly at multiple well-known cultural sights in the city centre (e.g. Topkapi Palace), at transfer vehicles to/from excursions, as well as hotel lobbies and two international airports.

After the analysis and discussion phase is over, common themes and significant statements were extracted from the transcribed data and were coded, singled out and grouped under broader content related categories (Cozby, 2004; Creswell, 2007). Data were then compared with previous literature for deduction and validation. At the end of this categorizing process, 43 items were merged under five themes: culture, social interaction, shopping, nature and service. The results of the research are discussed in the next section.

Results

This study attempted to comprehensively explore the experiences of travellers from Middle East and offers valuable insights. The interview questions also included demographic information as well as questions related to experiences. Out of 61 total respondents 39 were male, their ages differed between 19 and 67. 34 of them hold a university degree and majority (88%) had more than €20.000 annual income. They were in Istanbul for leisure purposes mainly; six of them were on business trip. They can also be considered as experienced travellers, travelled outside their home country approximately 3.3 times on the average in 2012.

A total of five main categories describing the experiential elements for Middle Eastern travellers in Istanbul are found. As shown on Figure 13.1, these are culture (e.g. heritage, food, modernity, arts, entertainment, night life, religion), social interactions (e.g. social local people, hospitality, safety, friendliness), nature (e.g. location, Bosphorus, islands, sea, climate, natural sights), quality service (e.g. hotels, recreation and health facilities, convention centres, service quality), and shopping (e.g. grand bazaar, shopping malls, variety, quality, value for money, brands). These dimensions are explored further below.

Figure 13.1

Culture

Local culture was perceived as an important part of travel experience by most of the participants. The heritage, monuments, architecture, and history of the city were frequently mentioned by respondents as unique characteristics of the city. Being a melting pot for different civilizations the city also reflects a diverse background of traditions, religions, arts, food and entertainment. Particularly the variety, taste, freshness and cooking styles of the local food were perceived as positive factors by Middle Eastern travellers. Although local gastronomy was first conceptualized as a separate theme in this study, after negotiation and discussion, authors agreed that this dimension should be a subgroup of culture dimension in line with previous literature (Cetin & Bilgihan, 2014). Local food represents an intangible cultural heritage and an important part of destination experience as well (Binkhorst & Dekker, 2009). Quan and Wang (2004) also discuss culture and heritage as important components of destination experience for tourists.

Social Interactions

Interactions with locals were also expressed as one of the factors affecting respondents' experiences in Istanbul. The locals' friendliness, helpfulness, sincerity, goodwill and kindness were frequently mentioned by Middle East tourists. Turkish people were perceived as hospitable. Turkey also shares the same dominant religion (Islam) as most of Middle East countries. Rather than being strangers, the tourists are perceived as guests and highly respected. Traditional hospitality, protection and special care for guests has been a typical characteristic of Turkish people that survived for generations. Social interactions with locals during the trip are also reflected as one of the main desires of travellers by various authors (Butler, 1980; Crompton, 1979). Local hospitality in the traditional sense is assumed as an important part of tourist experience (Mill & Morrison, 1985) and it has also been found as an important dimension of destination's competitive advantage (Kozak & Rimmington, 1999).

Nature

Although Istanbul is a crowded city hosting more than 17 million inhabitants, the nature of the city is so unique that it has attracted attention of the respondents as well. Istanbul is situated between Asia and Europe with Bosphorus waterway dividing the two continents. The city is also surrounded with woods (Belgrad, Yildiz etc.) as well as Islands (a total of nine which are together called as Prince Islands), that are among other natural attractions which make the travel experience in the city unique. MacCannel (1999) reflects tourism activity as a desire for authenticity, novelty and change. According to Urry (1990) gazing of tourists is actually a process of turning ordinary local objects into sacred ones by tourists. Nature is also a part of tourist experience; it represents locality and novelty (Perkins & Thorns, 2001).

Therefore, nature, places and scenery are among phenomena that are important for tourists' experience. Istanbul also offers various unique natural sights and scenery. For

example Bosphorus the waterway that divides the city into two as Europe and Asia can be enjoyed from most of the tourist districts. The Prince Islands spread into the Marmara Sea and visible from the city are also able to attract millions of visitors every year (Demiroglu et al. 2007).

Quality Service

The tourism related services (e.g. hotels, restaurants, transportation, recreation, landscaping) in Istanbul were also perceived to be high quality. Respondents frequently mentioned how satisfied they were with their hotel, the cleanliness of the streets, and professionalism of the service in general. The hotels in Istanbul have been receiving various international awards (e.g. Conde Nast, Leading Hotels of the World, World Travel Awards), the prestigious facilities of international brands are also located in Istanbul (e.g. Four Seasons, Swiss, Kempinski, Ritz Carlton, Hilton) (Cetin & Walls, 2015). These member facilities in Istanbul are considered among the top facilities in the international brand portfolio of chain hotels considering service quality. Tourism related services were seen as hygiene factors of an experience according to McCabe (2002), the overall experience might be ruined if supporting services are not up to a standard. Although travellers desire authenticity and novelty in their experiences they also seek a degree of quality, safety, comfort and predictability (Dearden & Harron, 1994). Hence both tangible and intangible service quality influence tourist experience.

Shopping

Shopping is also mentioned as a part of tourist experience in Istanbul by travellers. Istanbul offers a wide variety of alternatives to shoppers, from modern shopping malls, to traditional shopping complexes such as Grand Bazaar. As Turkey has been an important textile exporter the city is also considered to be one of the centres of World fashion. Besides the local brands, major design brands also have branches in the city. Most participants also expressed shopping as an interesting activity in Istanbul. Shopping has emerged as the second common leisure activity after visiting heritage attractions of the city. The participants mentioned that they liked the shopping experience in Istanbul even when they do not have any intention to buy; this also corroborates with Yuksel and Yuksel (2007). Especially the traditional shopping experience in Grand Bazaar, negotiation process, the variety of brands and products, infusion of different colours and noises during shopping attracted tourists' attention.

Conclusion

Identifying experiential attributes in destinations has important implications for tourism industry and service design. Various studies have established positive relationships between customer experiences, customer value, loyalty and recommendation (e.g. Cetin & Dincer, 2014; Hosany & Gilbert, 2010; Walls, 2009). However destination attributes affecting overall travel experience have not been clarified in the literature so far. Especially the differences of Middle East segment as a tourist generating region have long been neglected. Different clients might desire different experiences depending on different backgrounds and motivations (Cohen, 1979). This study proposes valuable empirical findings for destination planners and industry professionals as well as scholars for implications and future research concerning the experiential needs of the Middle East tourist market.

As a result of the exploratory study conducted in Istanbul, five constructs were found to be the main determinants of Middle East tourists' experiences in Istanbul. These are social interaction, nature, quality service, culture and shopping. It should also be stated all respondents were very satisfied with their experiences in Istanbul; they also expressed their

return intention as well as tendency to spread positive-word-of-mouth to others. Hence the findings can facilitate a better planning, decision making and product design for tourism professionals and destination planners who intent to attract more visitors from Middle East as a growing market segment.

The findings of the study might also be used by policy makers and travel trade in order to differentiate destinations and their products. Facilitating local contact, rather than creating isolated tourist bubbles (as in the case of Sultanahmet region of Istanbul) is one of the implications. Sultanahmet is among most visited places in in the city. It has been an old settlement for locals but as the tourism investments (e.g. hotels, restaurants, leather and rug shops) flourished, the area has commercialized rapidly and many inhabitants had been forced out of the area because of the increased rents. Currently there are very few locals living in Sultanahmet, and it has been turned out to be a ghost neighbourhood during especially at nights. During the day time tourists still visit the area in order to see the monuments located in the region to satisfy their desires concerning the culture dimension. However the streets literally die after 6 AM, when the cultural sites in the region close.

Therefore interaction with locals is also a part of the tourism experience and locals' rights to their neighbourhood should be balanced with the level of tourism-based commoditization. This situation has also been confirmed by the tripographic characteristics (location of hotels participants chose to stay) of the respondents, most of them (47 respondents) stayed in more crowded and inhabited neighbourhoods of the city (Beyoglu and Besiktas), where locals also spend their free time and socialize outdoors. Thus travel trade for example would promote hotels located in regions where residents live; use restaurants that locals also patronize in their packages. Tour operators might also use public transportation where convenient. The locals' use of tourism facilities and their visits to tourist attractions would also be encouraged through utilizing resident discounts and other means in order to improve the level of host-guest interaction.

The natural attractions in the destination (Bosphorus, woods and islands in the case of Istanbul) also make up an important part of the Middle Eastern tourist experience. This might be attributed to the fact that the nature is not very generous to Middle Eastern countries and Middle Eastern tourists consider nature as a part of their experiences; they like being outdoors, enjoying scenery with woods and water. The quality of professional (commercial hospitality) and public services (transportation, cleanliness, security) were also mentioned as important factors. This reflects the need of coordination between public and private authorities to cooperate in order to create the desired experiences to Middle East tourists. The service theme can also be considered as the supporting experiences that augment the overall tourist experience. Without a proper level of quality in public services (e.g. security, cleanliness) and commercial hospitality (e.g. professionalism, physical facilities, courtesy), a positive destination experience is not possible.

Culture dimension is also mentioned as a unique characteristic of Istanbul that Middle East tourist would remember and share with others. Food, heritage, arts, music, religion, traditions should be supported in destinations through incentives, festivals and other means in order to increase visibility of culture of a destination. Although usually overlooked in literature, shopping is mentioned as a way to experience the destination. Most tourists go shopping at a destination, whether they buy or not. The shopping expenditure makes up around 1/3 of tourist spending (Wong & Law, 2003). Istanbul offers a wide variety of traditional and modern shopping alternatives from design clothing to hand-made products. Middle East tourists were especially satisfied with the shopping opportunities in Istanbul; the city was also expressed as "shopping paradise". Thus shopping alternatives should be promoted (e.g. shopping festivals, discounts) and made convenient (e.g. transportation, operating hours) to Middle East tourists.

This study was conducted on travellers from Middle East only; future studies might investigate other market segments from different generating countries. A comparison between different market segments would also offer interesting findings. This exploratory study used phenomenology to identify dimensions of Middle East tourists' destination experiences, thus the importance of different attributes were not analyzed. Future studies involving a quantitative measurement of experiences might offer insight into relative importance of these themes.

A limitation of the study would be considered as the locality interviews were conducted. Although Istanbul is an international destination attracting more than ten million travellers per year, experiences might differ based on the characteristics of each destination. Personal, social, cultural and geographical settings might influence tourist experiences. The findings of this study need to be validated by studies conducted in other destinations. Nevertheless for scholars, this manuscript is among the first research concerning experiences of tourists from Middle East region conducted in a destination with diverse offerings. Future studies investigating various destinations and travellers with different backgrounds might offer valuable insight in distinguishing different market segments.

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Table 13.1. Arrivals from Middle East to Turkey (2008-2012)

| Gulf Countries | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 |
|------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| SAR | 55.636 | 66.938 | 84.934 | 116.711 | 175.467 |
| Kuwait | 22.084 | 26.801 | 27.281 | 41.617 | 65.167 |
| BAE | 19.676 | 22.051 | 30.480 | 35.579 | 48.071 |
| Bahrain | 8.081 | 9.090 | 9.375 | 9.712 | 13.342 |
| Qatar | 4.862 | 4.902 | 6.043 | 7.661 | 13.971 |
| Other Countries | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 |
| Iraq | 250.130 | 285.229 | 280.328 | 369.033 | 533.149 |
| Lebanon | 53.948 | 71.771 | 134.554 | 137.110 | 144.491 |
| Syria | 406.935 | 509.679 | 899.494 | 974.054 | 730.039 |
| Jordan | 74.340 | 87.694 | 96.562 | 94.914 | 102.154 |
| Yemen | 4.971 | 6.181 | 6.344 | 8.066 | 11.826 |

Source: Istanbul Culture and Tourism Directorate, 2013.

Figure 13.1. Experiential attributes for Middle East tourists

