

PERCEIVED IMAGE OF INTERNATIONAL VISITORS: THE CASE OF PALESTINIAN OCCUPIED TERRITORIES

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Received 13 July 2020; Accepted 23 July 2020; Published 25 September 2020

ABSTRACT

This study aims to form a complete image, which would help in understanding the situation of Palestine and Palestinians and provide a clear picture of the state's atmosphere for tourism. We obtain the image of Palestine from the international visitors' perspective. We ask the respondents about their image for Palestine. We adopt a seven-point semantic differential scale from Sonmez and Graefe (1998) to determine the respondents' perception of Palestine. We also use the scale proposed by Reisinger and Mavondo (2005) to measure this construct. They employed a seven-point semantic differential scale to measure travel anxiety.

Keywords: Palestine, Image of destination, International visitors, Palestinian authority.

INTRODUCTION

Since a breakdown of the peace between Israel and the Palestinian Authority in 2000, the Palestinian tourism sector is turning out to be chaotic and unexpected. The Middle East Business Intelligence Magazine (2008) declared that the number of tourists in Palestine was 400,000 in 2006, 700,000 in 2007, and approximately 1.3 million in 2008. They also presented the names and number of accommodations, travel agencies, and tour guides in the Palestinian cities in the territory.

MEED (2008), the economic magazine of the Middle East Business Intelligence, revealed that tourism revenues in Palestine have to increase this year to their highest level in 2008. Khoulood Daibes, the Minister of tourism and antiquities, also reported that the Palestinian Authority builds a new museum and thousands of accommodation rooms. Tourism revenues accounted for 7% of the Palestinian GDP in 2008. With these developments, the share of tourism revenues to the Palestinian GDP increased to 9% in 2009.

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PALESTINE

Palestine is in the north of the equator between the latitudes of 30° to 30° and 15° to 32° in the north and the longitudes of 15° to 34° and 40° to 35° in the east. The Mediterranean Sea and the geographical location of Palestine crossroads of three continents, namely, Asia, Africa and Europe, are in Western Asia on the southeastern coast. This territory also connects the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea (Al-Rimmawi, 2003; Palestine Wildlife Society, 2004; Shahin, 2006). The entire area of Palestine is 27,000 km². The area of the Palestinian territories is a little more than 6,000 km². The boundaries of historical Palestine state are Lebanon in the north, Syria in the northeast, and Jordan in the east of Palestine. The Arab Republic of Egypt and the Aqaba Gulf are in the south region. The Mediterranean Sea is in the west area.

WEST BANK

The West Bank area is approximately 5,844 km², including 348 km² from East Jerusalem. It is roughly 31-58 km east-west dimension and 441 km from north to south (MOPIC, 1999). The West Bank and the Gaza strip only represent 22% of historical Palestine. Zionism movement created the state of Israel on the rest of the country on May 14, 1948. The West Bank lies on the west of Jordan River and the Dead Sea. It extends from Ibn Amer plain and Jalout Valley in the north to Beersheba in the south. The Jordan River and the Dead Sea surround the West Bank from the east side, and the nearest city is Qalqilia that is almost 20 km away from the Mediterranean Sea. The highest point in the West Bank is the Ramallah governorate's Ashur Mountain that measures 1,022 m above sea level, whereas the lowest point is the Dead Sea that is approximately 408 m below sea level (PACE, 1999). The West Bank is representing a heart location of historical Palestine (**Figure 1**). According to PCBS (2005), the West Bank has three geographical divisions : The north, middle, and south regions. The West Bank governorates include Jenin, Tulkaram, Nablus, Jericho, Ramallah/Al-Bireh, East Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Hebron. The Gaza Strip has North Gaza, Gaza, Deir Al-Balah, Khan Younis, and Rafah (**Figure 1**). However, the West Bank and the Gaza strip are not connected to the land because the state of Israel separates them.

GAZA STRIP

The Gaza Strip situates on coastal land along the Mediterranean Sea. Egypt is the coastal land's south-west boundary and the state of Israel surrounds it from the south, east and north. The Gaza Strip has a total area of 365 km². Its width is 13 km² in the south region and 6 km² in the north, and its length is 45 km² from north to south (PACE, 1999). It is a coastal semi-rectangular area (**Figure 1**).

JERUSALEM

East Jerusalem is divided into two parts. The first part is controlled by Israel, which occupies the larger part. The second part is controlled by Palestinians in civil perspective. The status of Jerusalem is postponed to the last stage according to Oslo Accords.

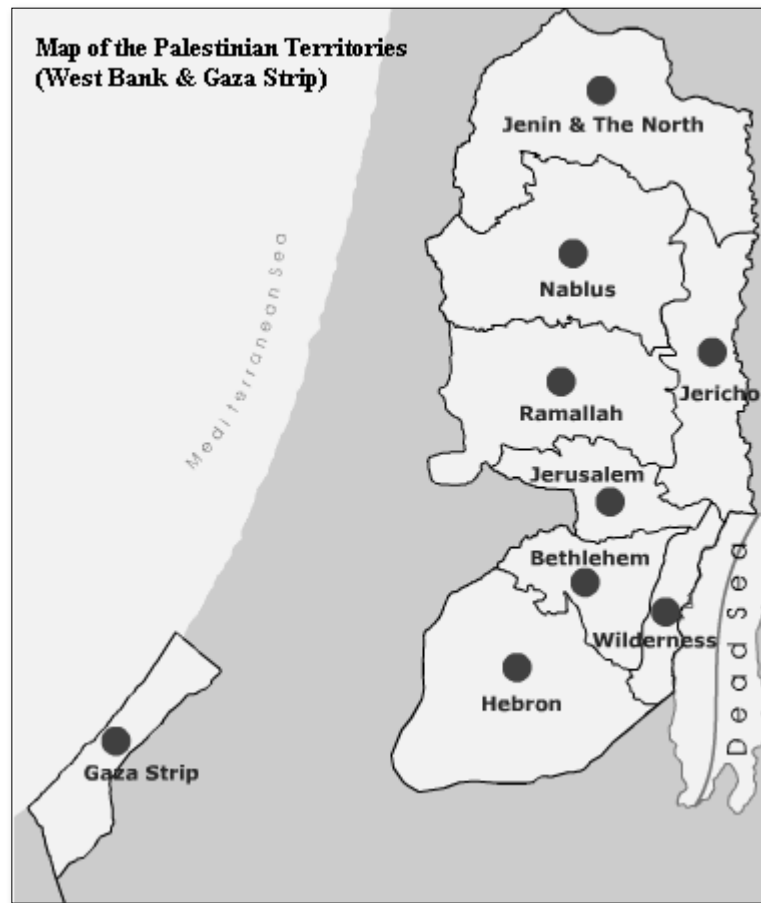


Figure 1. Map of the Occupied Territories.

Source: By author

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

In this section, we discuss tourist destination images in general and review previous studies that dealt with tourism images to identify the factors influencing travelers' intention to visit a destination and the challenges they encounter, especially during crisis events. We focus on the effect of the aspects of a crisis on tourism images and show some examples related to it.

Crompton (1979) and Sonmez et al. (2002) defined image as "a mental conception held in common by members of a group and symbolic of a basic attitude and orientation". WTO (1979) also defined it as the worth of positive images for tourist areas that can be used by product and service providers. Therefore, image is considered a source of capital to a state. Echtner and Ritchie (2003) defined the image of a destination as "perception of an area" or "impression of a place". Sonmez et al. (2002) mentioned images in the tourism literature and explored the tourism in Turkey from tourists' choice of destination by measuring their images and perceptions of the destination. They argued the image change and formation in previous studies (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Chen & Hsu, 2000; Sirgy & Su, 2000). A prior study also indicated the importance of image to tourists' choice of destination with the relationship between intention to visit a destination and destination image (Milman & Pizam, 1995).

Researchers also focus on the measurement of destination image and the factors influencing it and the relationship between destination image and sociodemographic variables and between tourists' behavior and destination image

through past travel experiences (Driscoll, Lawson & Niven, 1994; Echtner & Ritchie, 1993; Baloglu, 1997). However, further investigation is needed to identify and understand the factors influencing the image to help segment the market to let tourism policymakers promote a destination (Kotler et al., 1993; Stern & Krakover, 1993).

As cited by McLellan and Foushee (1983), Baloglu and Mangaloglu (2001) reported that the destination image influences tour operators and customers. They identified the image weaknesses and strengths of four Mediterranean countries (Turkey, Egypt, Greece and Italy) that are handled by travel agents/tour operators vending these tourist destinations. They focused on the images of travel agents/tour operators by using unstructured and structured measurement techniques to understand the components of the destination image construct. They concluded that tourism authorities in Egypt, Greece, Italy, and Turkey should be making and upgrading marketing strategy to target the members of distribution channels. The decision process of choosing a destination relies on the destination's strong positive image (Woodside & Lysonki, 1989).

Figure 2 shows the components of a destination image by using Nepal as an example. It includes intangible and tangible aspects of the destination that refers to psychological and functional characteristics (Echtner & Ritchie, 2003).

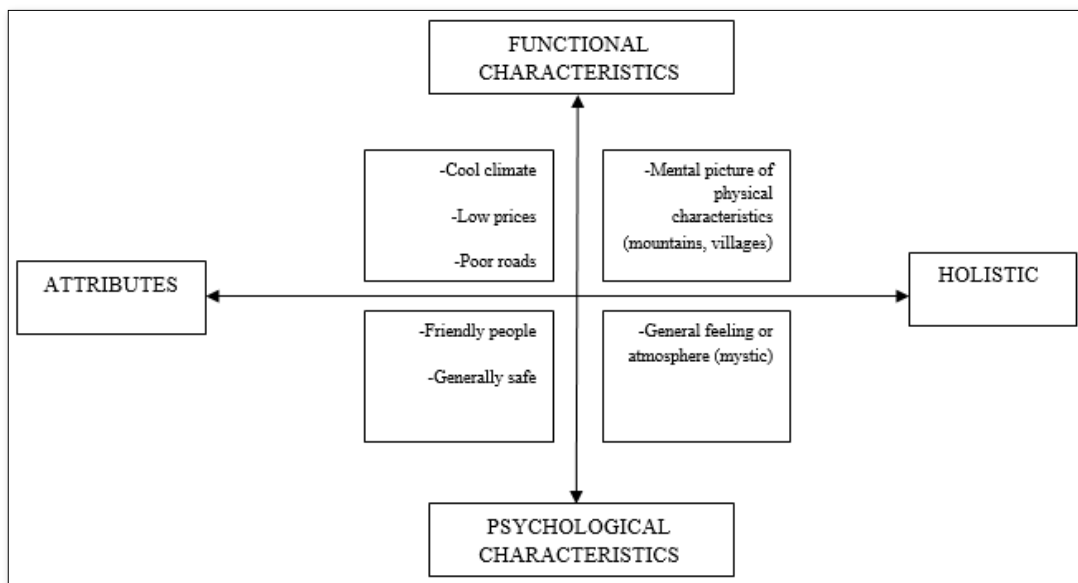


Figure 2. Illustrative example of the four components of a destination image (Nepal).

Source: Echtner & Ritchie (2003)

In line with considerable research, Sonmez and Graefe (1998) stated that image is a factor in the destination selection process. Perception of safety and risk can affect a destination image and influence travelers to select a convenient destination. Sonmez and Graefe (1998) applied and established theoretical support by using protection motivation theory (PMT) proposed by Rogers (1975, 1983) and information integration theory (IIT) proposed by Anderson (1981, 1982).

However, they also argued that both theories (Anderson's IIT and Rogers' PMT) posit that future travel behavior could be affected by images of risk and safety that individuals have of a region or might have developed from a prior travel experience. Rogers' PMT concentrates on protection motivation that highlights

three cognitive processes experienced by individuals in a risky decision process. Anderson's IIT states that individuals develop psychophysical and value judgments through a complex decision-making process.

Personal and stimulus factors influence the formation of tourists' destination image. Personal factors include the psychological and social characteristics of the perceiver, whereas stimulus factors consist of information sources, previous experiences, and distribution (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999).

STUDY METHODS

This study aimed to identify the image of Palestine from international visitors' perspectives. We used a seven-point semantic differential scale to determine international tourists' attitudes toward their image of Palestine. A previous study (Mohamed, 2008) used this scale to conduct an online survey on visitors' perceptions of selected Malaysian cities and towns. We also adopted this scale from another literature (Sonmez & Graefe, 1998). Similarly, Reisinger & Mavondo (2005) used this scale to measure travel anxiety. We modified the questionnaire to target international visitors in Palestine. We conducted a random sampling technique by using a questionnaire survey on visitors in Ramallah and Bethlehem cities in the West Bank in Palestine. We collected a total of 293 questionnaires from the respondents. We entered these data into the SPSS program for analysis. Finally, we used percentage and frequency statistics to measure the variables in this study.

RESULTS OF THE SURVEY

Regarding international visitors' image of Palestine, the survey results demonstrated that the image exhibited the greatest influence on their decision was green or desert ($m = 4.4$), followed by ordered or chaotic ($m = 3.4$), quiet or noisy ($m = 3.2$), safe or dangerous ($m = 3.1$), and secure or risky ($m = 3.1$). These items are illustrated in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Ranking importance and standard deviation of the image of palestine among respondents (N = 293).

Item	Mean score	Standard deviation	Rank
Image (Green–Desert)	4.4	1.325	1
Image (Ordered–Chaotic)	3.4	1.311	2
Image (Quiet–Noisy)	3.2	1.49	3
Image (Safe–Dangerous)	3.1	1.417	4
Image (Secure–Risky)	3.1	1.617	4
Image (Reassuring–Scary)	3.0	1.394	5
Image (Comforting–Terrifying)	3.0	1.441	5
Image (Non-threatening–Threatening)	2.7	1.503	6
Image (Exciting–Gloomy)	2.6	1.298	7
Image (Interesting–Boring)	2.3	1.493	8

CONCLUSION

We conducted this study to understand international tourists' image of Palestine and identify the factors influencing their perception during the visit. Our results could provide information to tourism policymakers in public and private sectors and help them understand the challenges experienced by visitors in Palestine. Further studies in this area would help in developing the Palestine tourism industry. A good destination image of Palestine could attract international visitors.

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