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TOURISM SECTOR IN PALESTINE: PROFILING VISITOR CHARACTERISTICS IN NABLUS AND RAMALLAH

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ABSTRACT

This study focused on identifying the visitors' profile of two Palestinian cities, namely, Nablus and Ramallah, and investigating the biographical characteristics of visitors and their motives for visiting the two Palestinian cities. Moreover, this research adopted a quantitative methodology using questionnaires as study instrument. A total of 202 tourists participated in this research, comprising foreign and Arab tourists, who had been targeted through English and Arabic questionnaires, respectively. Major findings revealed that the majority of the tourists visiting both Palestinian cities during the study period were from European countries, relatively young (with age range of 25–34 years) and had visited the two cities for meetings, incentives, conferences and events purposes. Therefore, political stability in Palestinian areas was recommended to increase and encourage tourists to visit the State of Palestine. Profound implications for Palestinian authorities were also provided to enhance effort in encouraging visitors and allow diversity in Palestinian services.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism means travelling from an existing environment for relaxation and satisfaction (Huete-Alcocer & Lopez-Ruiz, 2019; Kelly, 1986). The tourism market presently exhibits rapid growth and importance in enhancing economic development in various countries, particularly because it helps distribute revenues to the inhabitants, stimulate the manufacturing industry and enable diverse resources that provide advantages (Bunghez, 2016; Suwan, 1996). Consequently, planning and development in the tourism industry are

important, given that solid tourism strategies lead to tourism sustainability (Muhanna, 2006; Wanhill, 1994).

Hospitality and tourism in Palestine has been a continuously growing industry for the past 20 years. This industry is one of the country's main sources of foreign currency. The Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities (MOTA) leads in tourism improvement strategies through the implementation of global tourism marketing campaigns, and through functioning, preserving and guarding all Palestinian historical and cultural attraction sites which under control of Palestinian Authority's (PA) besides encourage tourism activities in Palestine (Palestinian Economic Council for Development and Reconstruction (PECDAR, 2000). Over the past few years, these strategies have changed, and new tourism and hospitality sectors have been supported, including cultural heritage tourism (targeting international tourism), ecotourism (introduction of walking and hiking trails) and politics tourism, which is recognised as one of the major domains to be established (Alternative Tourism Group, 2008).

The current research aimed to identify visitors to the Palestinian territories because only a few previous studies have focused on quantitative data in Palestine and interviewed visitors in various places. Moreover, this study attempted to provide the owners of tourism services and tourism representatives in the public and private sectors the opportunity to identify their needs.

State of Palestine

The State of Palestine is located the north of the equator between latitudes 30° to 30° and 15° to 32° and longitude 15° to 34° and 40° to 35° in the east. Palestine is located in three continents, namely, Africa, Asia and Europe. It also joins the Mediterranean Sea with the Red Sea (Isaac et al., 2015; Al-Rimmawi, 2003). The entire historical Palestine area is 27,000 km² (Ministry of National Economy, 2020).

The Alternative Tourism Group (2008) indicated that the area of the Palestinian territories (commonly recognised as the State of Palestine) is approximately 5,661 km². East Jerusalem as the capital of the state, and the West Bank and Gaza Strip are part of the Palestine. The majority of the areas claimed by Palestine have been occupied by Israel since 1967, because of the Arab war. However, Palestine currently comprises two physically divided landmasses, namely, Gaza strip and the West Bank, with areas of 5,661 km² and 362 km², respectively. The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS, 2018) indicated that the West Bank is bordered by Israel to the north, south and west; and the Jordan Hashemite kingdom to the east. Gaza Strip is a coastal region at the eastern extreme of the Mediterranean Sea on the edge of the Sinai Desert. This region is bordered by Israel to the north and east, Egypt to the south and the Mediterranean Sea to the west (PACE, 1999).

After the signing of the Accords in 1993, the Palestinian National Authority was formed the following year to govern areas A and B in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The State of Palestine was acknowledged by 136 members of the United Nations (UN). Since 2012, Palestine has gained a status of a non-member observer state in the UN, which is considered a de facto or implicit recognition of statehood (Louis, 2012).

Tourism indicators in Palestine: current status

Palestine comprises numerous sites of ancients, cultural heritage and sacred implications, thereby leading this region to be called 'the holy land' (Abahre & Burqan, 2019; Suleiman & Mohamed, 2011). Al-Rimmawi (2003) stated that Palestine is a cradle of civilisation and a land full of archaeological, cultural and natural attractions. Palestinian cities, such as East Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Jericho, Ramallah and Nablus, have diverse tourism suppliers, thereby enabling them to receive tourists from all over the world.

In September 1993, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Israel signed the Oslo Accords. Both sides agreed the compulsory establishment of PA, which will assume control of the Palestinian areas (i.e. West Bank and Gaza Strip). Moreover, permanent status negotiations were pursued on issues related to borders, refugees and Jerusalem. Consequently, tourism and hospitality experienced growth, in which tourist trips expanded to include Palestinian areas and Arab-owned tourism-related industries, particularly hospitality services (Al-Rimmawi & Butcher, 2015). However, the tourism industry declined beginning in September 2000 owing to the collapse in the peace process between both sides. From Second Intifada in 2000 to 2009, several hospitality and tourism markets in Palestine experienced a downturn. However, the tourism sector has demonstrated an upward trend since 2009. Al-Rimmawi and Butcher (2015) explained that the tourism sector gradually recovered owing to the return of relative stability in the region.

Table (1) shows the main indicators for hotel activities in the West Bank in 2018, including the numbers of guests, guests' nights, hotels, rooms, workers and beds. PCBS (2018) reported that approximately 653,744 guests stayed in Palestinian hotels in the West Bank, 283,845 of whom were from European Union countries.

Table 1 ain indicators of hotels in the West Bank (2018)	
Indicators	Values
Operating hotels	130
Average number of employees	7,404
Number of guests	653,744
Number of guests' nights	1,833,687
Average room occupancy	1,625.4
Average bed occupancy	5,023.8
Percentage of room occupancy (%)	22.0
Percentage of bed occupancy (%)	30.9

LITERATURE REVIEW

Market segmentation is typically used to determine the profiles of visitors (Tkaczynski et al., 2009). Profiling tourists is one of the stages in market segmentation (Perera, Vlosky & Wahala, 2012). The segment should identify individual characteristics, which considerably differ between and/or amongst the analysed groups (Dolnicar, 2008). Moreover, tourist profiling can be used to identify tourists' behaviour and potential travel behaviour (Suleiman & Mohamed, 2011). Therefore, the manner by which visitors behave following their attitudes to assured products and their reactions by utilising these products represent the characterisation of travel behaviour (George, 2004). The profiling of tourists in academic study is essential for management purposes to classify what drives tourist behaviour. Marketers and academicians in marketing have worked to develop ideal tourism policies and discover potential visitors (Chandler & Costello, 2002). The profiling of segments complements the advantages sought by tourists, and helps tourism dealers form travel packages that are considerably matched with understandings, incentives and attitudes of travellers (Sarigollu & Huangm, 2005). Furthermore, the profile of tourists offers an opportunity to estimate their travel performance. Socio-demographic factors (e.g. age, revenue, countries of tourists and education) have been measured as relatively functioning because measuring them is easy (Lawson, 1994). Moreover, these factors have been acknowledged as proper determinants of tourist performance (Kastenholz, 2002; Baloglu & Brinberg, 1997; Gitelson & Kerstetter, 1990). The collection of an appropriate segmentation source, such as the characteristics according to which segments are notable, is needed for a considerable shaping of the market. Thereafter, tourism studies have suggested several factors (Pender, 1999). Hospitality and tourism studies have regularly utilised demographic and behavioural variables to profile tourists in terms of gender, age, marital status, careers, education and ethnic relations (Thirathanaphak et al., 2009). Previous studies have discussed intention to travel to destinations, and highlighted the dimensions that influence tourists' perception to select destinations to visit (Woodside & Lysonski, 1989; Sonmez & Graefe, 1998; Qi, 2005; Reisinger & Mavondo, 2005). Woodside and Lysonski (1989) suggested that travellers' perceived possibility of visiting

particular tourist destinations depends on the period when the intention to travel develops. George (2009) found that visitors' attitudes towards risks do not affect their perception of crime safety in Cape Town, given that visitors are expected to return to the destination. Hence, the reaction to a doubtful situation may change across situations and may be influenced by the types of risk perceived by decision makers (Roehl & Fesenmaier, 1992). Mill and Morrison (1992) explained that if either destinations in the same country or countries adjacent to each other are apparent as choices to be the same as holiday choices, then only one of them based on the experiences of tourists may either encourage or discourage another destination to be visited. Kozak (2001) proposed a model of visitors' behaviour expressed from previous studies. Twofold choices are illustrated by this model: plan to visit further destinations in similar countries and intention towards returning to similar destinations. Four important categories of factors influence either one selected option or another one selected total of the previous visits to the country, satisfaction level, economic and political issues and number of previous visits to similar destinations. The first three categories—factors are accompanied by the intention to return to the same destination as being illustrated by the model. The potential effects of additional elements, such as time, age of visitors, salary, distance, profession, behaviour, budget, incentive, threat and being of different destinations (fourth factor), are also illustrated.

METHODOLOGY

This study aims to profile tourists visiting Palestine by their demographic characteristics and tourism patterns, and realise their inspiration in visiting the state. Essential information was gathered through an overview regulated to vacationers at various inns in two Palestine urban communities, namely, Ramallah and Nablus. The review was conducted to address the exploration destinations and respond to the investigation questions. The questionnaire was utilised to obtain information on tourists' socio-demographic details. A total of 202 respondents were asked to answer 19 questions in mid- 2020. The questionnaire was planned to gauge the factors utilised in the examination model. Moreover, the respondents were asked whether they were happy to return to Palestinian hotels. The English version of the questionnaire was translated to Arabic.

A pilot survey was conducted to pre-test the questionnaire, and guarantee a dependable and exhaustive investigation. Accordingly, the questionnaire was edited in light of the pilot survey results. This study utilised descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) to analyse travellers' demographic and travelling characteristics.

Area of study

This study selected Ramallah and Nablus as the case study and locations for data collection. Both cities are located in the West Bank. These two areas were chosen primarily because the majority of foreign visitors have spent time in

several of their attraction sites. Evidently, both cities have numerous interesting places.

Ramallah is located approximately 16 km north of Jerusalem (Figure 1), and approximately 872–900 m (PECDAR, 2000). PCBS' population report of West Bank (2009) indicated that the population of Ramallah and Al-Bireh governorates in 2007 was 262,941. Ramallah has a pleasant climate throughout the year, thereby making it a favorite resort in the summer, specifically owing to its location near Jerusalem. Before the Israeli occupation in 1967, Ramallah attracted Arab visitors from Kuwait, Jordan, Lebanon, the Arab gulf and other areas.

PECDAR (2000) reported that Ramallah is the ideal town to potentially host tourists for night life activities and enjoyment, and is also considered a Palestinian business spot. Ramallah is also the location of several government and non-government organisations and institutions, such as the headquarters of PA, Ministers and PLO, which perform central political activities in Palestine (Ramallah Municipality, 2019). The municipality of Ramallah encourages tourism by offering various projects to different establishments, such as building query tourist centres, developing restaurants and cafes, car parks, naming and numbering streets and forming a national centre for exhibitions. Additionally, the municipality has acquired and continually develops remarkable attractions, including the remains of a Crusader tower at the city centre, the remains of a Byzantine church and ruined fortress in Bir Zeit. Ramallah has 17 accommodation hotels and 29 travel agencies.

Meanwhile, Nablus is located within the Mediterranean region, north of West Bank (Figure 1). Nablus governorate is located north of Jerusalem, between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim. As perhaps the largest city, Nablus has significant contributions to provide. Nablus city refers to the village of Balata, and the houses in the town occupy nearly 33% of the slope. Unearthing has revealed a broad assortment of archaeological remains, thereby demonstrating that it was firstly settled in the fifth century BC. The Let itself know incorporates a wealth of structural components, for example, the city dividers and a few passage buildings. The city is renowned for its desserts, conventional olive oil cleanser and occupied business sectors. Nablus is also home to various enterprises and businesses. Amongst the primary attractions in Nablus are Jacob's Well and the Old City of Nablus. Nablus' rich history lies in its Old City with its unmistakable stone veneers, excellent engineering, narrow roads and old metropolitan spaces. The current population of the old city is approximately 20,000. Two places of worship, twelve mosques and a Samaritan temple are also found in and around the thickly populated neighbourhoods. The regions in and around Nablus have numerous destinations to visit. The Palestinian town of Sebastya is located 12 km north of Nablus (Nablus Municipality, 2019).

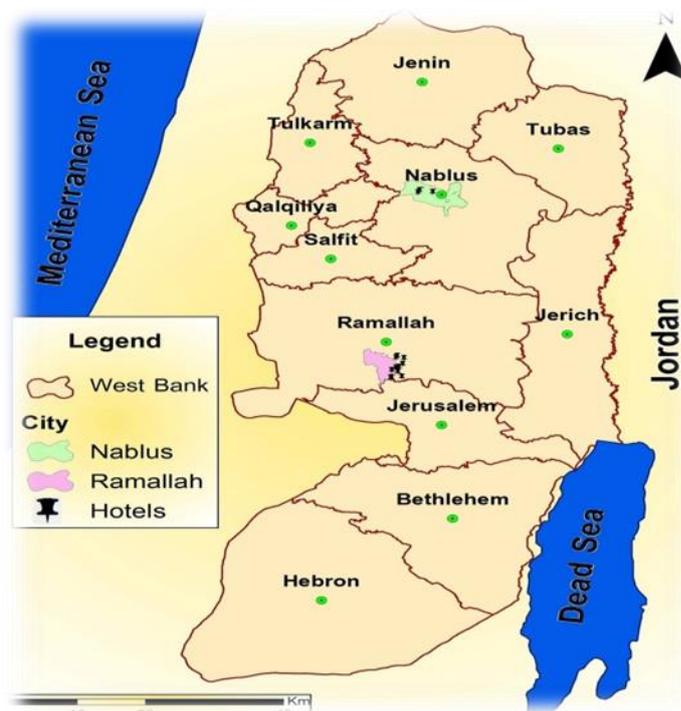


Figure 1 Ramallah and Nablus in the West Bank, Palestine (Source: Authors)

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Among the 202 valid respondents, 52% were females and 48% were males. Moreover, 3.51% of the respondents were aged below 25 years, 35.8% were below 34 years and 23.4% ranged between 35–45 years. The majority of the respondents (49%) were married, whilst 39.6% were single.

Demographic Characteristics	No. of Respondents	Percent (%)
Gender		
Male	97	48
Female	105	52
Age		
>24	19	9.5
25–34	72	35.8
35–44	47	23.4
45–54	26	12.9
55–64	22	10.9
65≤	15	7.5

Marital Status		
Single	80	39.6
Married	99	49
Divorced/Widow	13	6.4
Others	4	2

Table 3 shows the nationalities of the respondents, 36% of whom were from European countries, whilst 27% were from Arab countries. 28.9% of the respondents have visited owing to meetings, incentives, conferences and events (MICE), whilst 24.9% visited for leisure and relaxation. Meanwhile, 30% of the respondents stayed for 2–3 nights, whilst 21% stayed for 3–5 nights. A total of 36.6% of the tourists learned about Palestine from friends and families, whilst 18.3% obtained their information via social media.

Table 3 Nationalities of the respondents (N = 200)		
Demographic Characteristics	No. of Respondents	Percent (%)
European	72	36
Arabian	54	27
American	20	10
Asian	8	4
Palestinian/Locals (48)	14	7
Others	32	16

Table 4 shows the purpose of visit of the respondents. A total of 28.9% of them visited for MICE purposes, whilst 24.9% visited for leisure and relaxation.

Table 4 Purpose of visit of the respondents (N = 201)		
Purpose of visit	No. of Respondents	Percent (%)
Visit friends and relatives	34	16.9
MICE	58	28.9
Shopping	21	10.4
Leisure and relaxation	50	24.9
Others	38	18.9

Moreover, 30% of the respondents stayed for 2–3 nights, whilst 21% stayed for 3–5 nights (Table 5). A total of 36.6% of the tourists learned about Palestine from friends and families, whilst 18.3% obtained their information via social media (Table 6).

Length of Stay	No. of Respondents	Percent (%)
Day visit	22	11
1 night	36	18
2–3 nights	60	30
3–5 nights	42	21
One week	40	20

Types of information	No. of Respondents	Percent (%)
Friends and families	78	39.6
TV, radio, magazines	8	4.1
Social media	36	18.3
Travel agencies	35	17.8
Others	40	20

Table 7 shows the intention to revisit Ramallah and Nablus. Approximately 91.6% of the respondents expressed their intentions to revisit both cities, whilst 7.4% did not exhibit intention or interest to return.

Table 7 Intention to revisit Ramallah and Nablus (N = 200)

With intention to revisit	No. of Respondents	Percent (%)
Yes	185	91.6
No	15	7.4

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to improve the existing body of knowledge on issues related to identifying and profiling tourists and tourism in Palestine. The majority of the tourists were Europeans, and the main purposes of their stay were for MICE, leisure and relaxation. This research intended to recognise the attributes and conduct of guests towards Palestine. The results confirmed that tourists visiting Palestine were often from European countries, given that European citizens can easily reach Palestine via Israel. Moreover, numerous religious attraction sites for Christians are located in Palestine, such as Jerusalem and Bethlehem, which are near Ramallah and Nablus. Palestinians residing in Israel can easily cross the border of the Palestinian areas. A few of Arab tourists were also reported. However, misreporting of nationality may have occurred because with the exception of Jordan and Egypt, residents of Arab countries are prohibited from visiting Israel or Palestine.

CONCLUSION

The travel industry in Palestine is critical owing to the political environment. Thus, achieving other benefits from tourism requires the authorities to emphasise on peace as a main factor. This study may help Palestinian travel industry strategists, the people in general and the private sector to assess the circumstance of the travel industry throughout Palestine, specifically Bethlehem. Evidently, tourism is needed to maintain local livelihoods. Thus, the difficulties affecting the travel industry must be eliminated. Moreover, the travel industry is viewed as a major guide in supporting Palestinians as one society even with occupation and in holding significant connects to their country. Furthermore, tourism managers, policy makers and travel agencies should considerably focus on foreign tourists and their motivation to visit Ramallah and Nablus. Thus, gaining an improved understanding of their motivations and needs is beneficial for policy makers, marketers and managers to improve their products and services for the aforementioned tourists. This research confirmed that tourists flocking to Palestine are a significant factor for enhancing social and global harmony and employment opportunities. Accordingly, the Palestinian government must pursue promotional endeavours for the next few years, with focus on new target markets worldwide, including Asia, Africa and South America. They must also exert promotional effort in both cities, which exhibit a range of historical and cultural places and places of festivals and exhibitions. Additionally MOTA should focus on engaging with different government ministries to encourage local and international investments in hotels, restaurants and entertainment facilities collaborate with institutions and colleges to enhance training courses for different personnel in all branches of the tourism industry and partner with neighbouring countries to establish a regional framework to deal with the expected increase in the number of foreign and intraregional tourists.

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