The tourist choice between Urban and Rural Sites in Domestic and International Travel

Purpose

When planning a vacation the tourist chooses between the combination of urban and rural sited in his travel, however, most management and development tourism research deals primarily with from the suppliers’ perspective. The objective of this study is to better understand these issues from the perspective of demand, with a specific analysis of tourists’ mixed preferences for urban and rural destinations, concerning domestic and international vacations.

Methodology

The study proposes a mediation model (estimated by PROCESS Macro on SPSS 25) to examine the direct and indirect effects of tourist’s experience and personality characteristics on rural and urban preferences and to shed more light on differences obtained by sociodemographic variables. The research included a quantitative cross-sectional study based on a self-administered questionnaires collected forn a sample of 269 Israeli participants.

Findings

The results indicate that growing up in the city can influence tourists’ experiences and characteristics, consisting of the number of previous vacations, desire for novelty, keenness to interact with the local community and degree of planning ahead, which in turn affects their urban/rural preferences.

Originality

This research is the first attempt to analyse preferences for a mix of urban and rural sites from the tourist’s point of view. The aim is to examine the influence of a tourist’s experience and personality characteristics on these mixed choices, in the contexts of international and domestic travel.

Social implications

In a world shaken up by COVID-19, tourism managements must rearrange there offering of sites, facilities and attractions across destinations. In the near future, while international tourism is limited, urban sites may introduce new experiences for domestic tourists. In the long term, in order to redistribute international tourists, rural sites may offer personalized/ small group packages and international chain facilities.

Keywords: Childhood type of residence; Tourist typology; Urban tourism; Rural tourism; Preference

**Introduction**

Tourism is one of the world’s largest industries. The sector experienced a 10-year period of sustained growth between the 2009 financial crisis and the COVID-19 outbreak in 2019. In 2018, tourism accounted for 10.4 percent of global GDP (WTTC, 2019a), with over 1.4 billion international tourists (UNWTO, 2019). However, in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, in the first quarter of 2020, the number of international tourist arrivals dropped by 67 million; the loss of export earnings amounted to 80 billion USD and travel restrictions were imposed in 100% of global destinations. This is by far the worst result in the history of international tourism since 1950 (UNWTO, 2020). In 2021 there was a small recovery of international demand i, and a significant recovery in domestic demand as expected by UNWTO panel of experts . In 2019, domestic tourism was the leading form of tourism representing 71.3 percent of total global tourism spending (WTTC, 2020) under the COVID-19 situation the share of domestic tourism increased. .

The COVID-19 situation requires a re-planning of the tourism services focusing on health and risk aspects. In order to avoid crowded destinations, the tourism will be re-distribute around the country in rural and urban sites. The tourism literature focus on the supply at a specific rural or urban destination or the demand for a specific type of tourism.The aim of this study is to establish a tourist decision model which describe her preferences over a mix of urban and rural destinations. Instead of dealing with demand for rural tourism and urban tourism separately we expand the discussion for a continuum selection. In particular, the tourist chose the rurality level from only rural destination through a mix of rural and urban destination to only urban destination. In addition, the paper examines the influence of a tourist’s experience and personality characteristics on these mixed choices, in the contexts of international and domestic travel. More specifically, the research tests whether the association between rural and urban origin and rural and urban destination preferences is mediated by desire for novelty, keenness to interact with the local community, spontaneity and number of previous vacations. A proper understanding of this mechanism would have economic benefits for tourism by guiding the development and marketing of urban and rural destinations. This applies now more than ever, with the tourism industry currently experiencing major upheaval and in need of a shake-up.

Urban and rural tourism definition

The definition of urban tourism is controversial (Al-Saad and Ababneh, 2017) , however, UNWTO describes urban tourism as trips to cities or places with a high population density, which provide a Varity of cultural, architectural, technological, social and natural experiences and products for leisure and business. Since these trips are usually short (one to three days), urban tourism is closely linked to the short break market. Several researchers have tried to develop a framework for understanding urban tourism, which is highly important to cities’ economies but also requires significant urban infrastructure. According to WTTC research, based on 73 cities, cities are more reliant on international travel demand than wider economies. Urban tourism accounts for 44 percent of international tourism, with international visitor spending representing 45% of tourism spending, compared to 29% of the global tourism spending in 2018 (WTTC, 2019b).

The terms ‘rural tourism’ and ‘countryside tourism’ are often used synonymously to define tourism activities that take place in the countryside or rural areas. The [OECD (1994)](https://www-sciencedirect-com.ezlibrary.technion.ac.il/science/article/pii/S0160738318301142#b0175) defines rural tourism as being in rural destinations. It is based on open space, contact with nature, rural heritage, and society. . Lane (1994) argued that rurality is the principal appeal and that as a concept can be connected to low population densities with open space and small-scale settlements, generally with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants. In such places, the land use is dominated by farming, forestry and natural areas. The concept of rurality has been widely recognized in attracting urban residents to rural areas ([Dong et al., 2013](https://www-sciencedirect-com.ezlibrary.technion.ac.il/science/article/pii/S0160738318301142#b0045), [Urry, 2002](https://www-sciencedirect-com.ezlibrary.technion.ac.il/science/article/pii/S0160738318301142#b0260)).

In tourism, however, it is in reality difficult to distinctly categorize destinations as either ‘urban’ or ‘rural’. Lane (1994) claimed that rurality should be treated as a continuum concept, with sparsely populated remote wilderness at one end and “world city” at the other. ([Robinson, 1990](https://www-sciencedirect-com.ezlibrary.technion.ac.il/science/article/pii/S0160738318301142#b0205) described the Varity of situation between these ends as mostly rural or mostly urban. Hall & Page (2014) emphasized the concept of an urban-rural continuum as a means of establishing differing degrees of rurality and the essential qualities of ‘ruralness‘.The Rurality of the destination is a relative concept with the origin of tourists as the reference ([Lane, 1994](https://www-sciencedirect-com.ezlibrary.technion.ac.il/science/article/pii/S0160738318301142#b0100)). A destination can be perceived as more rural for one person but more urban for another. Therefore, it is based on the tourist perception.

. The difficulty of classifying tourism and destination types is compounded by the difficulty of classifying vacation types. Most international tourists combine urban and rural sites in the same vacation and choose how to allocate their time abroad between the two. In contrast, on domestic vacations, the tourist typically focuses on either urban or rural sites, that is to say one category per each trip.

The destination choice of urban and rural tourist

In the literature, the phenomenon of travel destination choice has been explored from diverse angles using different approaches. The relevant research can be grouped according to four main focal points: (a) the decision process (b) motivating factors (c) influence of personality characteristics on destination choice (d) influence of information and communication on destination choice (Saito & Strehlau 2018).

Research concerning personality characteristics has found that income and religious affiliation have a significant effect on destination selection (Cruz et al., 2018), and national culture is an internal variable affecting destination choice (Patel, 2013). Culture drives differences in travel motivations, which in turn affect the tourist’s destination selection generally, and the specific features of interest within the destination (Stylos et al., 2016). In addition, personality is used as one part of the person’s self-concept and plays a significant role in shaping a tourist’s motivation, perception and behaviour (Stokburger-Sauer, 2011). Sirgy & Su (2000) applied the self-congruity theory to the context of tourist destinations and claimed that the greater the match between the destination personality and the visitor’s self-concept, the more likely it is that the visitor will have a favorable attitude toward that destination. This attitude might result in a visit or recommendation by word of mouth. Early life experiences have a dominant influence on tourist personality and, according to the continuity theory, can form a bridge between an individual’s past, present and future (Atchley, 1999). In the context of rural tourism, frequent contact with nature in childhood has an influence on interaction with and attitudes toward the environment (Tapps & Fink, 2009; Thompson et al., 2008). Several researchers focused on the residential area and its effect on the type of the chosen destination and number of trips. Duman et al (2020) concluded that push and pull motives are different between rural and urban residence. In addition, Bernini and Cracolici (2015) found that people living in urban areas are more flexible to travel than those who live in rural areas. According to the world tourism organization (WTO 2010) different life experiences create different tourism demand and for example urban life create a demand for rural tourism and vice versa. Similar results were found by Li et al (2020), who found in addition that urban life increased the desire to travel abroad specifically for those with higher income. Holz-Rau et al (2014) concluded that those who live in small areas made less trips and for shorter distance than those who live in big cities. Likewise, Omelan et al (2016) and Czepkiewicz et al (2018) found that those who live in cities travel more than rural residence and Peeters et al (2004) found that urban Europeans travel more for pleasure than rural residence. However, Yun et al (2016) found that rural residence were less interested in urban destination than rural residence. McKercher (2021) found that residence of rural areas value traveling as much as the urban residence. However, they are more conservative and therefore they want to visit new places but do not want to experience different cultures. Cohen’s (Cohen, 1972) was the first researcher to focus on the concept of tourist typologies ([Chen, 2016](https://journals-sagepub-com.ezlibrary.technion.ac.il/doi/10.1177/1096348021996786) ) and most of the tourist segmentation is based on Cohen’s typology. The typology define four groups of tourists: organized mass tourists, independent mass tourists, explorers, and drifters. The organized mass tourist typically looks for familiar destinations, travels on package tours, desires familiar things when traveling (such as international hotel chains), and has no (or little) interaction with the local community. Independent mass tourists take the regular tourist routes, but prefer to make their own arrangements and travel individually. The third group is made up of explorers who travel to lesser-known destinations and who like to explore local culture without much interaction with the local population. The last group of tourists includes the drifters who travel to less developed, less known destinations; they stay with local residents, eat local food, and try to learn as much as they can about the culture. Mo et al. (1994) developed a scale and questionnaire, the International Tourist Role (ITR) scale, which includes three dimensions by distinguishing individuals based on their preferences on a novelty-familiarity continuum. . However, [Fan et al. (2017)](https://journals-sagepub-com.ezlibrary.technion.ac.il/doi/10.1177/1096348021996786) noted that the novelty–familiarity spectrum was too general to describe the diverse behavioural characteristics of tourists. I

Understanding tourism typology can give information that is important for the planning of *tourism policy* , including understanding the effects different types of tourists has on the destination. ([Coccossis & Constantoglu, 2006](https://journals-sagepub-com.ezlibrary.technion.ac.il/doi/10.1177/1096348021996786); [Swarbrooke & Horner, 2007](https://journals-sagepub-com.ezlibrary.technion.ac.il/doi/10.1177/1096348021996786))International Vs. domestic tourism choice

Some research on tourist destination choices distinguishes between decisions to travel domestically or abroad. Eugenio-Martin & Campos-Soria (2011) found that willingness to travel is not only related to income level but also to the characteristics of the person’s region of residence, such as climate, size and local tourist attractions. They found that those who live in larger communities travel more, probably because of the wider access to varied transportation. When age or income increase, people are more likely to opt for international travel, whereas domestic travel is preferred when the number of children increases.

Mechinda et al. (2009) showed that domestic and international tourists differ not only in their motivations for choosing certain destinations over others, but also in their perceptions of destinations. For example, domestic tourists were attracted to a destination because of the nature and climate, while international tourists chose the same destination because of the friendliness of the local people. In addition, domestic tourists travel more frequently, but their length of stay in their chosen destination is shorter and level of expense lower.

**Materials and methods**

### **Sample**

We conducted a quantitative cross-sectional study on a sample of 269 Israeli participants, of whom 225 travel internationally with an average of 1.56 vacations per year and 239 opt for domestic travel with an average of 4.4 vacations per year (the term vacation is intended to include day trips).

Before the self-administered questionnaires were distributed, the purpose of the study was briefly explained and the subjects were informed that their participation in the survey was voluntary and anonymous, and that the results would only be used for research purposes.

The study was conducted from April to June 2018 and subjects were recruited using convenience sampling. Some of the questionnaires were not fully answered. Out of the total sample, 74 percent grew up in a city and 26 percent grew up in another type of settlement. Table 1 shows the participants reported demographic characteristics.

[Table 1 here]

***Procedure***

The research questionnaire was partially based on the questionnaire developed by Mo et al. (1994). It was translated into Hebrew by one of the authors and back-translated by the other author. The Ethics Committee of the higher education institution with which the authors are affiliated approved this study.

***Questionnaire***

The questionnaire incorporated three dimensions. First, the *‘Destination Oriented Dimension’ (DOD)* considered the tourist’s preference with regard to novelty and familiarity in a destination. This dimension is measured on a five Likert scale ranged from 1-familiarity to 5-novelty. Second, the *‘Social Contact Dimension’ (SCD)* examined the degree to which tourists want to observe the local culture and community from the outside or whether they prefer interaction, also measured on a Likert scale from 1– observe locals to 5 – interact with local culture.Finally, the *‘Travel Service Dimension’ (TSD)* looked at the degree to which tourists seek organized tourism services and plan ahead. However, since this dimension concerns two different aspects (using travel agent services and/or planning ahead) this would have undermined the internal consistency (or reliability) of the test item based on Cronbach’s Alfa. Therefore, two new dimensions were introduced to this study: the Organized Plans dimension (OP), the Third Party dimension (TP). The Organized Plans dimension (OP) was used to measure the level of planning before a vacation (1 – makes plans ahead; 5 – does not make plans), while the Third Party dimension (TP) defined the level of seeking assistance from a travel agent or other third party (1 – uses a third party; 5 – does not use a third party). For each one of the four dimensions, a combined score was calculated based on the average of responses to the questions related to this dimension.

The questionnaire included the following sections:

1) *Sociodemographic details and vacation details*, including gender, age, education, childhood type of residence (denoted as CCR and coded by 1 – city or 0 – other), number of previous domestic vacations (denoted by #VACd) and number of previous international vacations.

 2) *Tourist characteristics* *on international vacations*: Subjects were asked questions based on Mo et al. (1994) to measure international tourists’ characteristics, denoted by DODi, SCDi, OPi, TPi on a Likert scale of 1 to 5 (1 – very much agree; 5 – do not agree).

3) *Tourist characteristics* *on domestic vacations*: Subjects were asked questions based on Mo et al. (1994) to measure domestic tourists’ characteristics, denoted by DODd, SCDd, OPd, TPd and ranked on a 5-point Likert scale (1 – very much agree; 5 – do not agree).

4) *Tourist preference in international and domestic vacations*: This referred to the mix of urban and rural sites during a vacation, ranked on a 5-point Likert scale (1-urban only; 2 - more urban than rural; 3 - urban and rural equally; 4 - more rural than urban; 5 - rural only). The preferences were denoted by URi and URd for international and domestic vacations respectively.

***Data* *analysis***

The statistical package SPSS 25 was used for statistical analysis of the data. International vs. domestic differences were examined by paired t-tests for independent samples. This research tested the total and direct effects to determine whether the effect of the childhood city/non-city residence (CCR) on the tourist preferences for a mix of rural and urban destinations is completely/partially/inconsistently mediated by tourists’ experiences and characteristics. Partial mediation occurs when the indirect effect and the corresponding direct effect are of the same sign. Complete mediation occurs when the indirect effect is nonzero and the direct effect is zero. Inconsistent mediation (sometimes called suppression) occurs when the indirect effect and the direct effect are nonzero but have opposite signs (Maassen & Bakker, 2001; MacKinnon et al., 2000). The Pearson correlation method examined direct effects and PROCESS macro examined mediation effects for the hierarchical multiple regression. The significance of the mediation effects was examined by calculating 5,000 bootstrapped samples to estimate the 95% bias-corrected and accelerated confidence intervals (CIs) of indirect effects of the predictor on the outcome through the mediator (Hayes, 2013).

***Results***

The tourist characteristics and experiences for international and domestic vacations and the reliability and correlation between them are shown in tables 2a and 2b respectively[[1]](#footnote-2).

[Table 2a]

Table 2a indicates that SCDi and DODi are positively associated with the chosen mix of urban and rural international sites, while OPi and CCR (city vs. non-city) have no significant correlations. In addition, SCDi, DODi, and OPi are positively associated.

[Table 2b]

Table 2b indicates that DODd and the number of domestic vacations are positively associated with the chosen mix of urban and rural sites on domestic vacations, while SCDd has no significant correlation. Moreover, growing up in a city is associated with a preference for urban sites and affects the number of domestic vacations. SCDd is positively associated with DODi.

Table 3 compares the characteristics and preferences of the tourist on international and domestic vacations.

[Table 3 here]

The results indicate that on international vacations tourists look for more novelty and contact with the local people than on domestic vacations. The mix of urban and rural sites differs between international and domestic vacations. The preference for rural sites is stronger among those who choose domestic vacations.

To examine the association between tourists’ experiences (number of previous vacations) and personality aspects (CCR, DOD, SCD, OP, TP) with the control of the sociodemographic variable (education, income, religion, and gender), several hierarchical multiple regression models were tested.

The best fit for international tourism is illustrated by Figure 1a and summarized in Table 4a, including DODi, SCDi and OPi as mediator variables and gender as a covariate.

[Figure 1 a here]

[Table 4a here]

The results in table 4a indicate that women and men significantly differ with regard to SCDi and OPi. Men prefer to have more contact with the local community than women. In addition, the behavior of male tourists is more spontaneous. The preferences for a mix of urban and rural destinations significantly depend on DODi, SCDi, and OPi (paths b1, b2, b3 respectively). Tourists who tend to create connections with the local people or desire novelty on their international vacations choose more rural sites, whereas those who like to travel without a great deal of forward planning prefer more urban sites.

In addition, growing up in the city has an indirect effect on the preferences for a mix of urban and rural destinations through the DODi (path a1b1). Tourists who grew up in the city prefer more urban sites. There is no direct effect of growing up in the city (path c’). The effect of growing up in the city on the preferences for a mix of urban and rural destinations is comple tely mediated. The overall model was significant p=0.000, R2=0.1553, F(5,213)=7.8334.

The best-fit model for domestic tourism is illustrated by Figure 1b and Table 4b including DODd, SCDd and number of previous domestic vacations as mediator variables.

[Figure 1 b here]

[Table 4b here]

The results in table 4b indicate that the preferences for a mix of urban and rural destinations in domestic vacations significantly depend on DODd and the number of previous domestic vacations (paths b1, b3 respectively). Travelers who take more domestic vacations or desire novelty in domestic vacations choose more rural sites. Growing up in the city has an indirect effect on the preferences for a mix of urban and rural destinations through the number of previous domestic vacations (path a3b3). Tourists who grew up in the city tend to travel less domestically and therefore prefer more urban sites. There is no direct effect of growing up in the city on preferences for a mix of urban and rural destinations (path c’). Therefore, the effect of growing up in the city on the preference is completely mediated. The overall model was significant p=0.000, R2=0.0119, F (4,224)=0.09.

**Discussion**

Tourism, until recently, was counted among the world’s leading industries, making a large contribution to global GDP. The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic brought the industry to a halt, but countries are now beginning to recover. The actors of tourism management and development face many new challenges associated with health risks, especially the requirement for social distancing. Tourism management literature usually concerns the flow of tourism in a country from the supply point of view, whereas this research highlights the destination selection process from the tourist’s point of view. Specifically, it examines the contribution of a tourist’s experiences and personality characteristics (childhood city/non-city residence and Mo’s dimensions to measure Cohen’s typology) to the preference for a mix of urban and rural sites on international and domestic vacations. The study proposes a new model to examine the direct and indirect effects of these variables and shed more light on differences obtained by the background sociodemographic variables (like gender, religion, income, education, number of previous vacations, and marital status). Moreover, the effect of childhood city/non-city residence on Mo’s dimensions (to measure Cohen’s typology) is tested as well. Unlike most research regarding urban and rural tourism this research does not look at the destination as a dichotomic destination but on a scale between only urban to only rural with an option to combine between them.

The current model is an extension of the continuity and self-congruity theories, and it builds on the work of Tapps & Fink (2009), Thompson et al. (2008), Sirgy & Su (2000), and Stokburger-Sauer (2011) who argued that childhood experience affects tourism behavior. More specifically, tourists who grew up in the city tend to prefer urban sites over rural sites. Although the results for international and domestic vacations are along the same lines, the underlying reasons are different. On international vacations, travelers who grew up in the city desire more familiarity when they visit a destination, which in turn explains their preference for urban sites. On the other hand, for domestic vacations the preference for urban sites appears to result from the number of previous domestic vacations. Tourists who grew up in the city tend to travel less. The connection which was found between the tourist’s region of residence and number of previous vacations contradicts the findings of Eugenio-Martin & Campos-Soria (2011), Bernini and Cracolici (2015). Li et al (2020), and Holz-Rau et al (2014). Support for the results of this paper may be found in Stylos et al. (2016) and Patel (2013) whose research suggested that cultural differences (in this research stemming from childhood type of residence) lead to differences in the mixed selection of rural and urban vacations.

Concerning international vacations, all of Mo’s dimensions have a significant effect on the mix of urban and rural preferences, while only the DOD has a significant effect for domestic vacations. Travelers who desire novelty prefer rural sites over urban sites on both international and domestic vacations. On international trips, tourists who like to get involved in the local culture prefer more rural sites. On the other hand, tourists who carefully plan their vacation in advance prefer urban destinations.

The tourist’s gender has a significant effect on the mixed preferences for urban and rural destinations on international vacations: men (compared to women) prefer to have more contact with the local community and are more spontaneous, which in turn leads to a higher preference for rural sites.

The number of domestic or international vacations has no effect on international preferences, while the number of domestic vacations has a significant effect on the mix of urban and rural destination preferences concerning domestic vacations. Tourists who take more domestic vacations prefer rural sites.

Tourist characteristics are different for international and domestic vacations. On international vacations, the tourist desires more novelty and more social interaction than on domestic trips. In addition, in the context of domestic vacations, the tourist preference for rural sites is stronger than on international vacations. Mechinda, et al. (2009) documented differences between international and domestic tourists which may be explained by the results of the present study.

Tourist characteristics may not change due to COVID-19, but tourist behavior is very likely to change in response to health risks and local restrictions. Therefore, although the data were collected before the COVID-19 outbreak the results are relevant for the post COVID-19 world. Tourism managers and developers may be guided by the differences between international and domestic tourist preferences. This issue is extremely relevant now, as tourism shows signs of recovery, particularly in terms of domestic travel. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, some potential tourists are opting to stay at home, and those who decide to travel prefer less crowded destinations (rural sites). In order to encourage domestic tourism among those who prefer urban sites, rural sites may consider offering familiar facilities and attractions like those usually offered in urban places (e.g., music performances and shows, food-trucks of international chains). In addition, market segments and products focused on nature and culture could be developed for those who prefer novelty: small group sports facilities, history tours, bird-watching tourism and traditional roads. In urban sites, enriching new experiences could be introduced for the domestic tourist who seeks novelty and who normally prefers rural destinations (e.g., guided tours with storytelling, cooking and craft workshops, local hospitality). Offering an annual pass which combines rural and urban attractions would be suitable for those who travel more; such a scheme would encourage this group to travel more frequently to cities as well.

In the long run, international tourism is likely to recover. Tourists who typically prefer urban sites will desire familiarity, avoid connection with the local people and pre-plan the vacation even more thoroughly than before, for the sake of health risk management. Therefore, it is important for urban sites to offer internationally recognized chains for hotels, restaurants and shops; tools for advance planning and purchase (travel, accommodation and attractions) that do not require contact; and real-time support and advice for travelers. Rural sites that market themselves as extensions of urban-based vacations for international tourists, or that aspire to be an ‘escape destination’ for city dwellers, may welcome international chains of hotels and restaurants as well. In addition, such rural sites could offer a fully-organized package designed personalize or for small groups, with standard facilities and attractions (women-only tours should be considered as well). Meanwhile, rural sites which stand alone as international vacation destinations may focus on the novelty factor and social connection.

The present research focused on the tourist preference for a mix of urban and rural destinations and considers the effect of personality aspects. Further research may consider the tourists preference affects in some other aspects of tourism, including destination choice, motivation factors and specific tourism niches such as wellness tourism, ecotourism, culinary/food tourism, or religious tourism.

The limitations of this research include the fact that it was conducted on a relatively small sample and in a specific location; future research should include larger samples from different countries in order to validate the results.

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1. The tables include only those variables which were included in the final models. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)