FIT tourism in Israel: Behavior and Characterizes

Until the Covid-19 outbreak the number of international tourist was experiencing continues growth and reached 1.4 billion in 2018 while the expanses of international tourists reached 1.7 trillion dollars (UNTWO 2019). The covid-19 outbreak in 2020 has brought international tourism to a standstill, and although most expert predict tourism to become meaningful again, it is expected that the form of tourism, will change. A large portion of the international tourist are independent tourists and due to the Covid-19 outbreak a blossom in independent tourism is expected in order to avoid exposure to large groups. Considering risk management aspects, tourists will look for less visited sites, small accommodation , small restaurants and will try to minimize unnecessary contact with large crowds on public transportation and public places by using, for example more nature based vacations (Wen, Kozak, Yang, & Liu, 2020, Wen, Kozak, Yang and Liu 2020).

Independent tourism is defined as travelling independently or in small groups, usually the tour and the services are planned and purchased by the tourists itself. This is a growing alternative to organized tourism, and it allows a tourist to focus on their specific needs and interests within their financial capacities (Hernandez., Kirilenko., Stepchenkova. 2018, Polukhina, Tarasova , Arnaberdiyev 2020). Modern traveler prefers individual tours instead of the organized group tour packages, since those trips meet his/her desires and wishes (Polukhina, Tarasova , Arnaberdiyev 2020) . For example, in China independent tourists accounted for around 70 percent of all tourists in 2012 (Kristensen, 2013).

Most of the tourism literature consider tourism in general without distinguish between organized and independent tourist. However, the characteristics of independent tourists differ from those of organized tourists: Independent tourists usually have higher level of education, more diverse experience traveling abroad, know more about their destination and its culture, are looking for new challenges, unique travel and self-realization (Ramseook-Munhurrun ,Seebaluck ,Naidoo 2015, Zheng W., Huang X., Li Y. 2017, Tsaur S.H., Yen C.H., Chen C.L. 2010). Independent tourists have relatively higher expenses and therefore make a greater impact on the economy.

The independent tourist is “doing homework" before the trip, that means choosing destinations, arranging travel itinerary, purchasing tourism products and allocating time and money. Xiang, Y. (2013) found that Independent Chinese tourists behave differently in developed and developing countries. In developed destinations they plan their trip ahead for several reasons: visa requirements to list all accommodation sites when applying for the visa, more sophisticated reservations systems that allow making reservations ahead, it is also easier to get discount when making reservation a head of time and the uncertainty about the trip that is reduced when having a clear plan. When traveling to developing regions the decisions are made on the road as none of the above factors apply.

The development of online platforms that easily enables information searches, purchasing and experience sharing engine the independent tourism (Gretzel et al., 2019; Pourfakhimi et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2019). It allow the tourist to plan his trip without the need to use travel agent and diminish the need for person-to-person contact (Wen et al., 2020b). Studying the independent tourists from China, Xiang, Y. (2013) found that the time spent on searching information last from ten days to several months, even after the destinations was chosen and the main travel products were purchased. In addition, she found that the Internet is the most important source of information with 100% utilization. Newspapers, magazines and guidebooks especially Lonely Planet are used by 68.4%. Usually, travel books, Newspapers and magazines are used before the trip, while guidebooks are carried on the trip. The Chinese tourists consider personal travelogues to be more realistic, more up-to-date and more interesting. The use of travel agent as a source of information is by only 9.9% of tourists. In addition, she found that the official destination websites and those of private companies have stronger effect on tourists. Lately, the use of marketing on social media such as Sina Weibo (the Chinese version of twitter) increase. Tourists specifically search information about transportation, accommodation and sites. General knowledge of destinations and information of culture and entertainment activities are also required by tourists. The least important content is shopping information.

The online direct and indirect e-channels are actually involved in multichannel operation of tourism services, in addition to conventional channels. Direct channel refers to the service provider and the indirect refer to the OTA (Online tourism agencies). Both tourism services and OTA's seek for developing competitive advantage based on customer loyalty.

Customer loyalty is the basis of the company’s assets and financial sustainability. Múgica and Berné (2020) found that production of higher level of loyalty may be caused by increasing the participation level or the increasing the satisfaction level. Indirect channels are positively associates with higher participation level. On the other hand, there are no differences in the satisfaction level from direct or indirect channel. Once the channel choice is made, consumer adoption of their service demand to their purchase expectations.

The level of satisfaction is one of the important challenges of tourism providers and it is crucial to the business success Al-Refaie, Ko, & Li (2012). Satisfaction creates loyalty and it can create a competitive advantage for the country. Jurdana & Frleta (2016) showed that the expenses of tourists that reported a high level of satisfaction in Opatia (Croatia) was higher than the level of expanses with a low level of satisfaction.

In Israel, the number of international tourists reached a record of 4.6 million in 2019 (Israeli Ministry of tourism 2020) and an income of 6.6 billion dollars. Tourism in Israel account for 2.6 percent of GDP (direct) and it is 16 percent of services export and 7 percent of total export. The percentage of independent tourists in the total number of international tourist in 2019 was about 67 percent <https://motwebmediastg01.blob.core.windows.net/nop-attachment/9090_%D7%A1%D7%A7%D7%99%D7%A8%D7%AA%20%D7%AA%D7%A2%D7%A9%D7%99%D7%99%D7%AA%20%D7%94%D7%AA%D7%99%D7%99%D7%A8%D7%95%D7%AA%20%D7%A1%D7%99%D7%9B%D7%95%D7%9D%202018.pdf> and is expected to increase due to the Covid-19 . In order to adjust the marketing strategy and policy management of tourism in Israel to the post Covid-19 era, it is crucial to understand the behavior and preferences of the independent tourists visiting Israel.

The purpose of the current research is to focus on the independent tourist visiting Israel to characterize him and understand the method, timing and satisfaction level from the various services which are purchased. The uniqueness of this research is focusing on searching and purchasing phases by combining questionnaires and interviews to get a whole picture of the tourists' preferences.

**Methods**

This research uses both Questionnaire and interviews. The first part of the research is based on closed questionnaires developed in order to learn about the behavior of the tourists which visit Israel. The questionnaires were anonymous and confidential and the data collected served for research purposes only. The research questionnaire was developed and distributed by a company called Martin and Hoffman that performs surveys for the Israeli Ministry of tourism. The survey was translated to English, Spanish, Russian and French.

The questionnaire included the following sections: 1) Socio-demographic details, including gender, age, education, as well as other questions (e.g., "Is this your first visit to Israel "). 2) Questions regarding the places and attractions visited in Israel. 3) Questions regarding the usage of social network before and during the trip (yes or no). 4) Questions regarding purchasing method, time of purchase and satisfaction level from the purchasing process.

The interview were performed in different tourist locations in Israel: both in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem and lasted an average of twenty minutes. The interviews were performed in English, Spanish and Russian. The tourists were asked about the reason for the visit, the information they collected regarding the trip to Israel, their satisfaction regarding the information and the services they purchased.

***Data Analysis***

The statistical packages SPSS 24 was used for statistical analysis of the data. The analysis of the questionnaire included descriptive statistics and independent T tests.

**Results**

***Descriptive Statistics***

The descriptive statistics include the demographics variables from the questioners.

Table 1. Description of sample by demographic data.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Variable |  | N | % |
| Gender | Male | 231 | 49.8 |
|  | Female | 233 | 50.2 |
| Marital status | Married | 260 | 56 |
|  | Single | 204 | 44 |
| Education | 12 years of school or diploma | 92 | 19.8 |
| Undergraduate degree | 199 | 42.9 |
|  | Graduate degree | 173 | 37.3 |
| Age | Below 24 | 52 | 11.2 |
| 25 to 34 | 115 | 24.8 |
|  | 35 to 44 | 87 | 18.8 |
|  | 45 to 54 | 120 | 25.9 |
|  | Above 55 | 90 | 19.4 |
| Country of Origin | USA | 88 | 19 |
|  | Russia | 64 | 13.8 |
|  | Germany | 46 | 9.9 |
|  | UK | 32 | 6.9 |
|  | Italy | 24 | 5.2 |
|  | Netherlands | 22 | 4.7 |
|  | Ukraine | 25 | 5.4 |
|  | France | 19 | 4.1 |
| Purpose | Vacation | 203 | 43.8 |
|  | VFR | 90 | 19.4 |
|  | Business | 138 | 29.7 |

For the entire sample of 464 valid respondents, the average length of stay was 15 with an average party size of 1.45. 315 people (67.9 percent) came as solo travelers, 115 (24.8 percent) had a party of 2 people and only 34 (7.3 percent) came in a party larger than 2 people. The sample included a similar percentage of men and women. About half (44 percent) were single, most (80.2 percent) had higher education and come for vacation (43.8 percent). Only for 54.5 percent of the tourists this is their first visit to Israel. The main origin countries of the tourists to Israel are: USA, Russia and Germany.

The sample of tourists that participated in the interviews included 105 tourists. 18 at the ages of 20-29, 35 ages 30-50, 14 ages 50 and up and 10 families with a total of 38 people. Mainly from USA, UK, Singapore, Spain, the Netherlands, Germany and Russia. Some of the tourist ages 50 and up came as part of a tour and stayed longer.

According to the questionnaire almost all the tourist that arrive to Israel visit Tel Aviv and over 60 percent visit Jerusalem, as shown in Table 2. The next popular destinations are Dead Sea and Haifa. For the above mentioned areas the percentage of visitors is different among first timers and return tourist, and it decrease in return visits. For other areas (Like Eilat, Netanya, Nazareth, Tiberius, Golan and Galilee) there is no difference in the percentage of visits for first time and return visits. In addition it can be concluded that a tourist in a return trip to Israel visit less cities/areas.

Table 2: cities/area visited by the tourist (including separation between first time and return visit)[[1]](#footnote-1)

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| City/area | Percentage of visitors out of total tourists  N=464 | Percentage of visitors out of first time visits  N=253 | Percentage of visitors out of return visits  N=211 |
| Jerusalem | 65.9 | 73.1 | 57.3 |
| Tel Aviv | 80.2 | 85.4 | 74 |
| Dead Sea | 39.9 | 50.2 | 27.5 |
| Haifa | 28.7 | 31.2 | 25.6 |

***Source of information and using social media***

The main source of information for the independent tourist to Israel is the internet (62.5 percent), for 23 percent the source is friends and relative and for the rest other sources like books, travel agent and advertisement. 47 percent came as a recommendation of family and friends, 29 percent came as a recommendation from their work place and the rest came from other reasons. About 53 percent of the tourists used social media to find information about Israel before the trip and 51 percent used social media during the trip. Table 3 describes the internet and social media used regarding the trip to Israel. It was possible to mark more than one source. There is a separation for uses before and during the trip. The percentage is calculated out of the total independent tourist's using internet and social media.

Table 3: use of internet and social media regarding the trip

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Social Media | Percentage of uses before the trip  N=244 | Percentage of uses during the trip  N=236 |
| Google | 79.9 | 61.4 |
| Facebook | 24.2 | 24.6 |
| Twitter | 1.5 | 1.3 |
| Instagram | 13.5 | 14 |
| TripAdvisor | 38.1 | 35.6 |

It is clear that most of the users uses google and then TripAdvisor and Facebook. There is no significant difference in the percentage of uses before and during the trip apart from a decrease in the use of google during the trip.

Table 4 describes the uses of the internet and social media for various purposes.

Table 4: The percentage[[2]](#footnote-2) of tourists using the internet social media by service

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Service | Percentage of usage before the trip  N=464 | Percentage of usage before the trip  N=464 |
| Flight | 32.1 | 2.6 |
| Accommodation | 29.5 | 3.7 |
| Attractions | 4.3 | 4.1 |
| Sites | 17.9 | 22 |
| Other travelers opinion | 11.6 | 11.4 |
| Sharing experiences | 8.8 | 30.4 |
| Guiding services | 4.5 | 4.3 |

The results shows that the internet and social media help in planning the trip especially regarding flight, accommodation and sited to visit. While during the trip it helps in choosing sites and sharing experiences.

From the interviews we conclude that tourist gathered information mostly by internet, blogs and Lonely plane. Couple or individuals ages 20-50 mentioned friends advise as well. Most tourists reported ease of finding information and the quality of information. Couple or individuals ages 50 and up and families mentioned that it was easy to gather information since it is not their first time in Israel. Some of tourist ages 20-50 mentioned that the Airbnb owners gave them information regarding special places to visit before the trip. "We had contact with the hosts before the trip and they gave us details and information that helped us know Israel, including less touristic sites" (Couple from Bulgaria). The Trip advisor site (TA), the site of the Israel nature and parks authority and the TELAVEAT site were mentioned as good sites. However, some of the tourists complained about difficulties in finding information on public transportation and on hour of operation during the weekend. Families complained that there is a lack of one site that gather all the information and lack pf information regarding religious sites behavior aspects, and attraction for kids. Families mention the information on the Facebook page "visit Israel".

***Purchasing tourism services: Channel, timing and satisfaction level.***

Before or during the trip the tourist may purchase various tourism services including: accommodation, car rental and tour guides. Each service could be purchased by one of three channels: a general website (like booking, trip Advisor) travel agent (online or offline) or directly from the service supplier (online or offline). The following table describes the distribution among the channels for those tourist who reported buying the service.

Table 5: The tourist's distribution among the purchasing channels

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | General Web site | Travel Agent | Directly from the service provider |
| Accommodation (301) | 86.7 | 6 | 7.3 |
| Car Rental (48) | 77.1 | 8.3 | 14.6 |
| Tours (142) | 39.4 | 36.6 | 23.9 |

About 18.3 percent of the tourists reported that they did not purchase accommodation (8 percent of them are tourists that purchased the accommodation as part of a package to Israel). The rest of them that purchase accommodation did it using general web sites like Booking or Hotels. Most of the purchases of accommodation occur one week to two month before the trip: 29.6 percent between a week to a month before the trip and 34.9 percent one month to two month before the trip. The level of satisfaction form purchasing accommodation services is very good (mean 3.83 1-poor, 5- excellent) and similar in all purchasing channels.

About 44.2 percent of the independent tourist (that answer the question regarding car hire in Israel) do not rent a car in Israel. Most of those that rent a car do so using general web sites like Rentalcars. 37.5 percent did so one month to two month prior to the trip and 29 percent a week before the trip or during the trip. The average satisfaction level is 3.63 (1-poor, 5- excellent). The tourists that rent car in Israel are very satisfied when they use the car company directly and significantly less satisfied when they use general web site. The reason might be the characteristics complexity of the requested services.

About 26.2 percent of the independent tourists do not book guided tour in Israel (from those that answer the question). Most of the tourists (66 percent) that book guided tours and guides do so during their trip. As the tours approaches (or during the tour) less tourist uses general web sites and more tourists uses travel agent or the tour company directly. The average satisfaction level is 4.28 (1-poor, 5- excellent). Tourists are satisfied from the process of purchasing tours and guides, specifically using a travel agent.

The interview results regarding purchasing channel and level of satisfaction coincide with the questionnaire results: During the trip Couple or individuals ages 20-50 mostly purchased accommodation and car rentals from Booking , Expedia, google travel and TA. They purchased only accommodation before the trip and some of them did so regarding the first nights and the rest they purchased in Israel. Most of them were satisfied with the purchase, but some claimed that the pictures did not match reality. Some tourists mentioned lake of guided tours in different languages like Italian.

Couple or individuals ages 50 and up only purchased accommodation before the trip. Some of them purchased a fly and drive package which is organized by a travel agent "We bought a fly and drive package which includes fight tickets, car rental for the whole period and hotels based on a round tour planned by the travel agent, we are very satisfied" . Families purchase mainly accommodation and cars. Some of them preferred travel agent so they will have someone to talk to in case something goes wrong.

Discussion and conclusion:

Similarly to Xiang (2013) the independent tourists that visit Israel has high level of education and is "doing homework" before the trip. As in developed countries, the independent tourist reserve hotel and car rental in advance. Although the planning cover only the early days of the trip and only parts of the services. The rest are brought during the trip.

A great share of the independent tourists to Israel are repeated tourists. A reason for that can be the uncertainty about a trip to Israel, as noted by a tourist "The media represent Israel as a dangerous and scary area and a place which is inaccessible for individual tourist. It looks like the only option the tourists can visit Israel is by organized tour. For this reason many people avoid such a tour especially younger tourists".

Almost all tourist visit at least Tel Aviv or Jerusalem, and most of the first time visit include the Dead Sea as well. Visits to the north and south of Israel is more frequent by tourists on their first visit, but is still very low.

The internet is the main source of information for the independent tourist, this is in line with Xiang (2013). Most of the information is gathered from Google, trip advisor and facebook. This information concern flight, accommodation, sites, and traveler's reviews. The effect of the Israel official destination web-site is limited in contrast to the results of Xiang (2013). Most of the purchasing of tours and guides occur during the trip, as well as some purchasing of hotels and car rental. Therefore there is a need for an accessible internet access (Wi-Fi). According to some of the tourist this is a problem in some areas (Jerusalem, for example).

The preferred purchasing method for all services is through indirect channels usually a general website, while tours are frequently purchased through travel agent as well. Therefore, the participating level of indirect channel is higher than this of direct channels, as in Múgica, & Berné, (2020).

Accommodation is mainly purchased between one week to two month before the trip, car rental is purchased either two month to one month before the trip or adjunct to the trip. Most of the guided tours are purchased during the trip.

The level of satisfaction is very good but differ between the services. Rental car has the lowest satisfaction level and guided tours has the highest satisfaction level. The satisfaction level of purchasing from a general website is lower than other channels regarding car rental or guided tours. Whereas most of the tourists choose the general website channel. This result is in contrast to Múgica, J., & Berné, C. (2020) who claimed that there are no differences in the satisfaction level of direct and indirect channels. One explanation might be that this paper disgusted between services and between indirect channels (general website and travel agent) while Múgica, J., & Berné, C. (2020) did not.

The results of the interviews of the different groups shows that most of the tourists are very satisfy with their trip and said they will return again and will recommend others to visit Israel. This is in line with Al-Refaie, Ko, & Li (2012) who claimed that satisfaction creates loyalty and indeed for 45.5 percent of the tourists this is not their first visit to Israel, 44.6 percent came as a recommendation of friends and family, and 19.8 percent came as a recommendation of their work place.

Implication

Israel should promote the accessibility of the country and the possibility to visit independently. This can be done by encouraging tourist to share their full description of their tour in Israel in blogs and social media.

In order to improve the tourist experience and the connection and purchasing ability during the trip it is important to enhance the Wi-Fi accessibility and Israeli official information web-site. The web site should concentrate information from various sites and include information regarding families' opportunities to travel in Israel, public transportation in Israel and information regarding religious sites and behavior. The tourist information may be focused mainly on flights and travel experience and less on attraction and guided services.

The Israeli Ministry of tourism should offer short guided tours (may be private tours) to the north and south of Israel in order to allow better distribution of tourists over the country. This will contribute development of peripherally area.

It is recommended to develop purchasing platform for services in Israel that will be easier for use, secured and trusted to enhance the tourist satisfaction.

Since most tourists are very satisfied from their contact with the host and local people, it is important to give in advance the local representative details.

This research is unique in combining questionnaire and interviews to get better understanding of the tourists. However, it has some limitations: The number of interviews should be increased, and the questionnaires should be collected around the year and not just on one month. This research did not distinguish between offline and online purchase from travel agent and service provider.

Future research may focus on the effect of the satisfaction from the purchasing process on the overall vacation satisfaction level, and on e-wom recommendations. In addition each origin country should be analyzed separately, due to cultural differences.

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1. Only areas with significant difference appear in the table [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The percentage is calculated out of the total number of tourists and more than one use is permitted [↑](#footnote-ref-2)