

# THE IMPACT OF UNDERSTANDING TOURISTS' PREFERENCES ON OPTIMIZING TOURISM OUTCOME IN LEBANESE RURAL DESTINATIONS

Mohamad Faraj<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Dean assistant, Agriculture Engineer, Research Assistant of Environment and Natural Resources Department, Faculty of Agricultural Sciences, Lebanese University, Deckweneh, Beirut- Lebanon

(Received March 2021 – Accepted October 2021)

## ABSTRACT

**Faraj, M. (2021). *The impact of understanding tourists' preferences on optimizing tourism outcome in Lebanese rural destinations. Lebanese Science Journal, 23(1): 78-98.***

*The Lebanese economy primarily relies on the service sector, and tourism is one of the most important economic service sectors in Lebanon, for it constitutes 20% of Lebanon's national income. One particularly interesting aspect of tourism is rural tourism, which could represent a significant economic opportunity for Lebanon, especially after the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic and amongst the Lebanese economic crisis. This article focuses on nine main factors that are believed to have an influence on the decision-making process of tourists visiting rural destination in Lebanon. These factors include tourist attraction, tourist transportation, accommodation, tourist entertainment, natural environment, hospitality environment, tourist information, marketing and safety and security. The aim of this study is to analyze the perception of Lebanese tourism stakeholders towards the mentioned nine factors that could affect the decisions of tourists, thereby aiding those stakeholders to create appropriate tourism strategies that match the needs of tourists more accurately. The main research question addressed is stated as follows: "What are the factors that have the most impact on the decision-making process of tourists visiting rural tourism destinations in Lebanon?" Tourism stakeholders targeted in this article include tourists visiting Lebanon, tour operators, the Lebanese government and local authorities such as municipalities, local residents of tourism destinations, the private sector, NGOs and others. As for the research methodology, a quantitative research approach based on a self-designed survey was applied. Primary data was collected from several rural Lebanese villages randomly selecting 354 respondents of varied profiles. These respondents were also interviewed face-to-face. Data obtained were analyzed using the SPSS 20.0; The Chi Square test (two-way contingency table) and a correlation analysis were used to analyze data and check the validity of the proposed hypotheses. Results of the study revealed that (i) transportation facilities, (ii) the natural environment, and (iii) the safety and security of a tourism destination were the most impactful factors that affected decisions of tourists. It is recommended that tourism stakeholders carefully study their target market in order to meet the corresponding tourism demands. Nevertheless, stakeholders such as the government should cooperate with other stakeholders and enroll them in tourism planning in order to optimize tourism capacity and achieve sustainable tourism development in the future. A future perspective of the subject could highlight foreign currency exchange rate and COVID-19 vaccination as additional*

*factors that could have a remarkable impact on the decision-making process of tourists considering Lebanese rural tourism destinations.*

**Keywords:** Lebanese rural destinations, Tourist's decision-making, Lebanese rural tourism, Tourism stakeholders, COVID-19 Pandemic.

## INTRODUCTION

Lebanon is a country that is blessed with various advantages in terms of its tourism competency and rural destination properties. And a very distinct, opportunistically touristic element of Lebanon is its rural destinations which include authentic Lebanese villages, incredible natural sites and much more. The potential of Lebanon's rural destinations has recently been amplified, making these destinations potential hosts of huge tourism opportunities, especially after the Coronavirus, or COVID-19, pandemic that started invading the world by the end of 2019, and the ongoing Lebanese economic crisis that stroke most, if not all, of what was left of the economy after COVID-19. The *importance of this study* is that it highlights rural tourism in Lebanon as an economic opportunity that lays within the tourism industry. This type of tourism not only has the potential to generate economic benefits, but also serves as the ultimate solution to the most trending complications associated with the out breaking COVID-19 pandemic and the Lebanese economic crisis, thus reflecting the *newness of the study*.

The aim of this study is to analyze the perception of Lebanese tourism stakeholders towards the following nine factors that could affect the decisions of tourists: *tourist attraction, tourist transportation, accommodation, tourist entertainment, natural environment, hospitality environment, tourist information, marketing and safety and security*. Understanding the impact of each of these factors on the decision-making process of tourists helps stakeholders formulate effective tourism strategies that match the needs of tourists more accurately. Thus, the study will be addressing the following research question: "*What are the factors that have the most impact on the decision-making process of tourists visiting rural tourism destinations in Lebanon?*" Hypotheses proposed in this study are built for the specific purpose of testing whether or not each of the mentioned nine factors has a significant impact on the decision-making process of tourists visiting rural tourism destinations in Lebanon. This study reveals the most and least impactful factors that can affect the decisions of tourists, and therefore, links to a high economic *added value* to the Lebanese and global tourism industry that is still suffering from COVID-19 consequences. It also provides a prospective resolution to Lebanon that needs every single window of economic hope to start rising from the ashes again.

### ***Current Lebanese Situation***

Lebanon is a Middle-Eastern Arab country that is longitudinally spread along the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea, and has a very strategic location in the Middle East. This country has been best known for its Mediterranean climate, unique nature that encompasses beautiful natural landscapes, its marvelously created mountains, the long, uninterrupted coastal areas and sea shores that stretch from its north to south, and, of course, its lakes, rivers and forests that are part of its diverse natural scenes. It has a rare property that citizens and tourists tend to highly enjoy, which is the short driving time separating the mountains from the sea. Locals and visitors can enjoy the contradictory duality of mountain

and ocean pleasure within the very same day. This unique geography has made Lebanon a very attractive point on the map for tourists from around the globe.

One very special tourism aspect of Lebanon are its rural destinations that are distinctive for tourists who seek rural tourism. Lebanese villages are authentic and diverse in terms of culture, natural environment and tourism potential.

Unfortunately, after the sudden outbreak of the Corona Virus Disease, also known as COVID-19 pandemic, the tourism sector in Lebanon became paralyzed. Economic sectors became frozen and tourism activities all around the world stopped, given that businesses and airports of most countries shut down to prevent further spread of the disease. This led to drastic financial losses within the tourism sector and a paralyzed tourism in countries around the world, including Lebanon. According to Fitch 2020 *consumer spending view for Lebanon, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, a contraction forecast of 7.0% y-o-y, down from a pre-Covid-19 forecast of a growth of 0.9% y-o-y* (Fitch-Solutions, 2020). However, this pandemic presented an unexpected opportunity for rural tourism development. Lebanese tourism destinations located in rural areas of Lebanon can be considered as very suitable tourism destinations during the COVID-19 outbreak; these rural destinations are less crowded than urban tourism destinations and, hence, permit an easier and more successful application of social distancing, health safety and precaution measures needed to contain the spread of the virus. In addition, rural destinations are characterized by their wide spaces and natural environment, which reflects a healthy atmosphere against COVID-19. The present conducted study targets Lebanese tourism destinations located in rural areas of Lebanon, which makes the study of high importance, given that COVID-19 could seriously represent an important potential tourism opportunity for the Lebanese economy.

In addition to COVID-19 pandemic, the *Lebanese economic crisis* and Beirut port explosion in 2020 forced the tourism sector to further pay a very heavy price. Statistics showed that tourist arrivals in Lebanon dropped to less than 200,000 in the first half of 2020, compared to more than 923,000 in the first half of 2019 as the COVID-19 pandemic forced the Lebanese airport to close (Akleh, 2020).

This drastic fall in tourism activities raises the importance of *domestic rural tourism in Lebanese rural destinations* as a compensating and opportunistic form of tourism to support the Lebanese tourism sector. In an interview with Arab News, Jean Beirut, secretary-general of the Tourism and Trade Unions Federation (2021), ensured the importance of domestic tourism in maintaining the activity of the tourism sector after COVID-19 and the Lebanese economic crisis. Beirut said that after Lebanon had succeeded gradually in reducing the number of COVID-19 infections, tourism establishments are encouraged to resume their work. He also confirmed that Lebanon was facing challenging times because of the pandemic and a “stifling economic crisis”. This crisis had caused 50% of tourism establishments to shut down and suffer drastically, and Beirut added that the tourism sector constitutes 20% of Lebanon’s national income, stating that domestic tourism is keeping the sector ongoing (Houssari, 2021).

### ***Tourism Stakeholders***

By definition, a ‘stakeholder’ is “any group or individual who is affected by or can affect the achievement of an organization’s objectives” (Freeman, 1984). Building on this definition, which was set by Freeman (1984), ‘tourism stakeholders’ can be defined as “groups or individuals who are affected by or have an effect on the achievement of tourism objectives”.

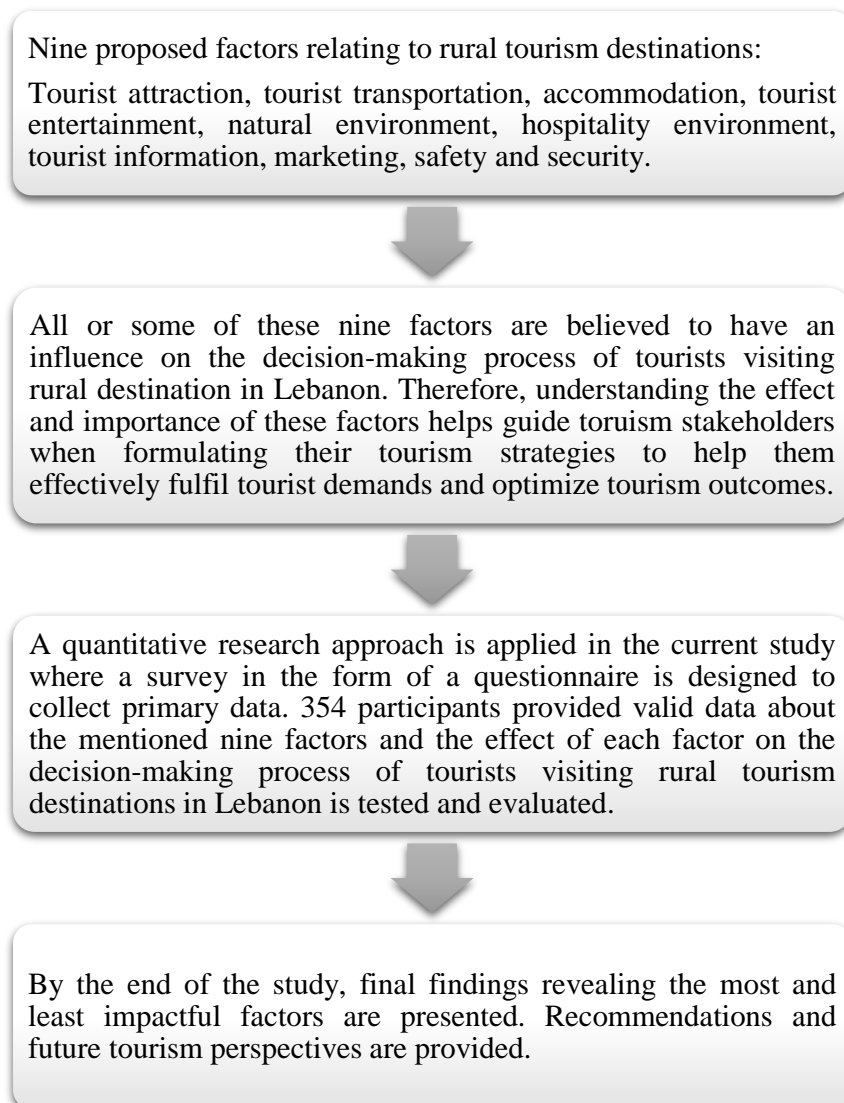
There are several stakeholders who engage in, or relate to, tourism activities. The UNWTO (2013) has identified nine main categories of tourism stakeholders: international development assistance agencies, national government, local government and destination bodies, private sector businesses, employees and labor unions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), education and training bodies, local community and, of course, tourists (UNWTO, 2013).

One important concept that affects tourism development is the *perceptions of stakeholders*. The ‘perceptions’ or ‘attitudes’ of tourism stakeholders concerning the impacts of tourism development on their communities are crucial in guaranteeing the suitable design and execution of sustainable tourism development strategies in a tourism destination (Canizares et al., 2015). Positive stakeholders’ perceptions strongly support tourism development while negative perceptions often inhibit sustainable and successful growth of tourism in a destination (Ap, 1992; Butler, 1980). Local residents tend to attain a positive perception of tourism as an economic activity if they experience positive advantages from tourism activities in their area (Muresan et al., 2016; Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2011).

And since tourism is an exposed, multidimensional industry, it encompasses various stakeholder groups having different interests (Luštický & Musil, 2016). Despite the differences in their cooperation levels and the possibility of the existence of complicated interactions between them (Luštický & Musil, 2016), tourism stakeholders share mutual goals and they must, therefore, cooperate and develop fruitful relationships among them in order to fulfill the desired tourism objectives. Thus, it is very important to know that in order to achieve the best outcomes, tourism stakeholders must work in cohesion. The cooperation of stakeholders is, then, an inevitable condition for achieving successful tourism development. According to Bhote (2018), if all stakeholders\_ including *tourists, tour operators, tourist guides, hoteliers* and the *local host community*\_ cooperate together, they can provide solutions to problems that negatively affect tourism. The cooperation of stakeholders promotes prospective prosperity of the tourism industry (Bhote, 2018).

### ***Roadmap of the Study***

This paper addresses several viewpoints of stakeholders’ perceptions. These viewpoints are targeted in the questionnaire and include stakeholders’ perceptions of tourism attractions, transportation, accommodation and hospitality, events, natural environments, information and navigation services, destination marketing and safety measures. Figure 1 below presents a general roadmap of the current study.



**Figure 1. Roadmap of the study**

This theoretical roadmap is followed in the current study to answer the research question and test proposed hypotheses, revealing which among the nine factors are the most impactful in terms of shaping decisions of tourists visiting a rural tourism destination in Lebanon.

### ***Literature Review***

Numerous reviews of literature and previous studies handled the concept of tourism stakeholders, their perceptions, the factors that affect their tourism-related decisions and the impact of these factors on sustainable tourism development, including that of rural tourism destinations. A Lebanese study by Ghadban et al. (2017) handles rural tourism in Lebanon and highlights different related aspects of the Lebanese market. The aim of their study was to analyze domestic rural tourism market demand for the sake of providing information to tourism stakeholders to better promote rural tourism in Lebanon. Needs, preferences and expectations of potential urban travelers, along with factors that affect them, were analyzed. Results showed that personal characteristics of respondents, especially personal income and

cultural background, were main factors that affect their decision-making concerning tourism services and facilities. The study also revealed a mismatching between the perception of a tourist visiting rural tourism destinations in Lebanon and the actual tourism services provided by tourism stakeholders in rural areas (Ghadban et al., 2017).

Another recent Lebanese study by Arrage and Ghadban (2020) highlighted Lebanon's economic crisis and COVID-19 impact on domestic tourism market. The objectives of this study were to understand the impact of the Lebanese economic crisis and COVID-19 on local tourism, to analyze the market dynamics from a demand perspective and guide tourism professionals and decision-makers to cope with these challenges and adapt. 404 respondents to a designed online survey participated in the study, 348 of which were valid. Valid respondents were Lebanese or foreigners living in Lebanon. Findings showed that enjoying nature was the most powerful push factor for domestic tourism in Lebanon. It was also found that nature and biodiversity were the most powerful pull factors for tourists traveling inside Lebanon. These results add value to the current study, which studies factors that can optimize rural tourism development in Lebanon.

Previous studies highlighted the importance of identifying different tourism stakeholders and understanding the effect of each on tourism development. Based on Byrd et al. (2009) and previous literature, the stakeholder groups who have the most powerful influence on the development of tourism in a destination are: (i) *local community residents* (Sharma et al., 2008; Jaafar et al., 2013; Xie et al., 2014), (ii) *tourists* (Byrd et al., 2009; Lu et al., 2006), (iii) *local government* (Byrd et al., 2009) and (iv) *entrepreneurs* or *business owners* (Lu et al., 2006; Byrd et al., 2009; Prayag et al., 2010).

Other studies, such as those conducted by Del Chiappa (2012), Ritchie and Inkari (2006) highlight the importance of understanding stakeholder groups and how their *perceptions, attitudes* and *involvement* can impact tourism development. One study that handled the effect of stakeholders' perception on tourism development was that performed by Canizares et al. (2015) in Cape Verde, Africa. This study examined the attitudes and perceptions of three stakeholder groups: *tourists, local residents* and *business owners*. Results showed that all three stakeholder groups had a positive perception towards the growth of tourism in their destination. The study also confirmed that the positive perception of these stakeholders is vital for successful achievement of tourism development.

According to Ven (2015), stakeholders' participation in tourism development is crucial because these stakeholders compose an essential element of the 'hospitality atmosphere' of any tourism destination. Hence, *stakeholder involvement* is essential for sustainable tourism development in destinations (Ali et al., 2017). Lopes et al. (2019) conducted a relevant study on the rural communities of North-Eastern Portugal, which aimed at examining the perception of different stakeholders towards the contribution of tourism as a driving force for rural development and developing a model for stakeholder participation in decision making. The results of the study showed that tourism activities in rural areas promote a positive perception of stakeholders\_ local residents\_ towards the impact of tourism in the studied rural Portuguese destination. In addition, findings revealed that local residents who are more involved in tourism activities and decisions often generate positive perceptions towards tourism development in their area compared to less involved individuals. And so, *stakeholder involvement* and *participation in decision-making* supports tourism *positive stakeholders' perceptions* of tourism development in a destination (Lopes, Remoaldo, & Ribeiro, 2019).

It is necessary to be aware of the fact that in case of failing to implement tourism plans successfully, the tourism destination would suffer from negative tourism impacts (Easterling,

2004), which consequently lead to negative perceptions of stakeholders towards tourism and tourists (Murphy & Murphy, 2004). On the other hand, the more stakeholders are consulted and involved in tourism development planning and decision-making processes, the more they will generate a positive perception towards tourism development, accept it and support it (Presenza et al., 2013). Therefore, it's important to make sure that tourism activities hold rewarding benefits for a tourism destination in order to secure a positive stakeholder perception towards tourism development. This can be achieved through involving stakeholders such as local residents, entrepreneurs, local governments and tourists in tourism planning and decision-making for the best possible desired outcomes in the industry.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The mean for our primary data collection was a self-designed survey in the form of a questionnaire. The Survey questions were designed precisely to test our hypothesis, the survey follows the Likert method using a five –point scale (Sethuraman, 2017).

Based on the literature review and the Lebanese actual rural tourism situation, the analytical framework and methodology of this study were elaborated. A quantitative approach was adopted to explore and investigate the respondents' opinions about what they care for in order to let the stakeholders be aware the demand and try to match the supply with the demand in order to increase benefits for both sides.

Research survey was conducted in Lebanese villages to collect our primary data. Villages were chosen randomly. Data was collected in two consecutive months (January-March, 2020). A total of 354 respondents were interviewed face-to-face.

Respondents were chosen randomly in different villages, locations and from different profiles such as taxi drivers, tour operators, locals, tourists, NGO's, etc.

Obtained data were analyzed using the SPSS (version 20.0). Chi-square tests (2-way contingency table) were conducted as well as correlation test. Chi-square test is used to compare observed data with expected data to be obtained according to a specific hypothesis (K., 2010).

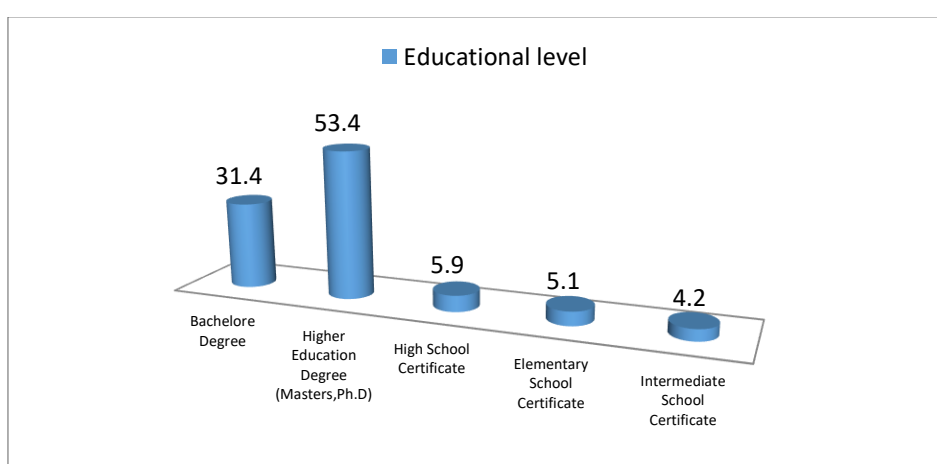
## RESULTS

This section of the paper presents the primary data obtained from respondents and the main findings of the study.

The Socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents are represented in table 1 and figure 2:

**Table 1. Respondents Profile**

Variable	Category	Percentage
Gender	Male	44.9
	Female	55.1
Age	18-25	16.9
	26-35	53.4
	36-45	19.5
	46-60	5.9
	60+	4.2



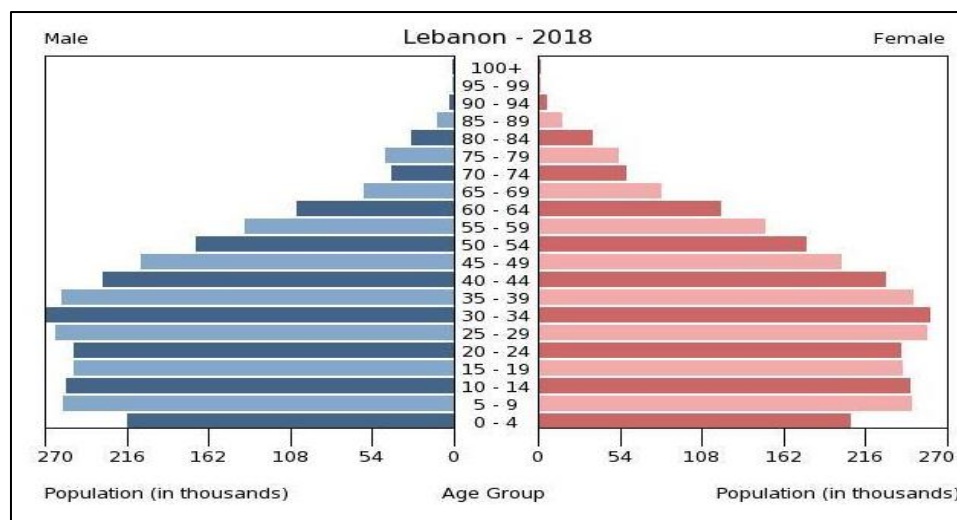
**Figure 2. Chart representing educational level of the respondents (Source: own data collected)**

The group age 26-35 is over respondents with 53.4 % while the other percentages are distributed among the rest age group categories. Both males and females are represented in the sample with 44.9 % and 55.1 % respectively.

To validate our work and check if the sample is representative in terms of Lebanese people age, we have to compare Lebanese population pyramid (Figure 2) with the respondent age.

Figure 3 below shows that the age groups (24-29) and (30-34) represents the highest percentage of the total Lebanese population in comparison to the other age groups. Thus, results are credible and useful for tourism take holders to build on. Moreover, the study covered a wide spectrum of high educated level 84.8 % (31.4 % bachelore degree, 53.4 % higher education degree).





**Figure 3. Lebanese population age group pyramid (Source: CIA World Facebook)**

### Statistical Results

Statistical results of questions of the survey following the five-point Likert scale are displayed below. These statistics reflect the extent of agreement of respondents to questions regarding nine important factors in rural tourism destinations that could affect their decision-making process.

**Table 2. Study statistical results**

Factors	Statement	% Agreed	% Disagreed	% Neutral
<b>Tourist attraction</b>	Personal Value assigned to attraction site	64.4	8.5	27.1
	Type of tourist attraction	78.8	7.6	13.6
	Tourist guide services	59.4	16.9	23.7
<b>Tourist transportation</b>	Diverse Public transportation	62.7	17.8	19.5
	convenient & quick transportation to tourist attractions	71.2	16.1	12.7
	Good transportation facilities	72.9	8.5	18.6
<b>Accommodation</b>	Accommodation service quality	69.5	6.8	23.7
	Availability of accommodation options	66.1	9.3	24.6
	Location of accommodation facilities	67.8	11.9	20.3
<b>Tourist entertainment</b>	Attractive folk customs & festivals	57.6	14.4	28
	Multiple grades of	72	12.7	15.3

	entertainment places			
	Entertainment service quality	68.6	10.2	21.2
<b>Natural environment</b>	High water & air quality	63.5	8.5	28
	Good status of urban environmental hygiene	61.9	14.4	23.7
	Beautiful environment that attracts tourist	78	9.3	12.7
<b>Hospitality environment</b>	Providing visitors with chances to learn about local life	48.3	18.6	33.1
	Strong cultural & historical atmosphere	64.4	16.1	19.5
	Relatively high hospitality of locals	62.7	11	26.3
<b>Tourist information</b>	High-quality internet services	63.6	18.6	17.8
	Easy access to location and navigation information	65.3	25.4	9.3
	Multiple Languages support	72	6.8	21.2
<b>Marketing</b>	Vivid tourism image	54.3	36.4	9.3
	Strong promotions	51.6	33.1	15.3
	Advertising	65.3	17.8	16.9
<b>Security &amp; safety</b>	Good status of physical security	68.6	14.4	16.9
	Good security of tourist service facilities	76.3	11	12.7
	High overall safety of a local place	74.6	8.5	16.9

By referring to table 2 above, it is remarkable that there was a very high degree of agreement of respondents to the importance of the nine above factors for tourists visiting rural Lebanese tourism destinations. The following statistics are observed:

The majority of tourism stakeholders highly agree to the importance of three *tourist attraction* factors; the personal value assigned to an attraction site recorded 64.4% agreement, the type of tourist attraction recorded 78.8% agreement and tourist guide services recorded almost 60% agreement.

*Tourist transportation* factor also shows high agreement to its importance. 62.7%, 71.2% and 72.9% respectively agreed that that diverse public transportation, fast and convenient transportation of tourists to attraction sites and good transportation facilities were important for tourists visiting a rural Lebanese destination.

*Accommodation* elements showed high levels of agreement as well. 69.5%, 66.1.5 and 67.8% of respondents agreed that accommodation service quality, the availability of

accommodation options and location of accommodation facilities were important factors shaping tourists' decisions respectively.

*Tourist entertainment* sub-elements such as attractive folk customs and festivals, multiple grades of entertainment places and entertainment service quality show 57.6%, 72% and 68.6% of agreement of respondents to their importance to tourists respectively.

The *natural environment* was also important to tourists with 63.5% agreeing to the importance of high water and air quality, 61.9% agreeing to the essentiality of a good status of urban and environmental hygiene and 78% agreeing to the importance of a beautiful environment to attracting tourists.

As for the *hospitality environment* sub-factors, 48.3% of respondents agree that tourists care about providing them with chances to learn more about local life, 64.4% agree to the importance of a strong cultural and historical atmosphere in a rural Lebanese tourism destination and 62.7% assign high value to the hospitality of local hosts.

*Tourist information* is also an important factor to tourists. 63.3%, 65.3% and 72% of respondents agree that high quality internet services, easy access to location and navigation information and multiple language support respectively were important tourist decision-making shapers.

The *marketing* of a tourism destination also seems to be important to visiting tourists. 54.3% of respondents assign value to a vivid tourism image of a rural destination, 51.6% agree to the importance of strong promotions and 65.3% agree to the importance of proper advertising of rural tourism destinations of Lebanon.

Finally, the *security and safety* factor of a rural tourism destination records high importance to tourists, with 68.8% of respondents agreeing to the importance of a good physical security status of a destination, 76.3% agreeing to the importance of a good security of tourist service facilities and 74.6% assigning high tourism value to a superior overall security of a tourism destination.

### ***Research Hypotheses***

Twelve research hypotheses are developed in order to answer the main research question “*What are the factors that have the most impact on the decision-making process of tourists visiting rural tourism destinations in Lebanon?*”

The proposed research hypotheses are based on the nine studied factors and their sub-elements and their relationship with some demographic factors of tourism stakeholders such as *age, gender and educational level*.

Based on previous literature, the core elements of sustainable tourism development in a tourism destination include tourist attraction, tourist transportation, tourist accommodation and tourist entertainment, while natural environment, hospitality environment, tourist information, marketing, safety and security are considered as the auxiliary tourist supply factors.

Age, gender, and educational level are important factors that will be studied along with the nine proposed factors of the study in order to analyze the impact of these tourism-related factors in association to the age, gender and educational demographic dimensions of tourists taking decisions when visiting rural destinations in Lebanon.

As shown in the *Lebanese Population Age Group Pyramid* (Figure 3), most of the Lebanese people belong to younger age groups mostly spread between 25 and 40 years old, which makes their preferences extremely important to tourism suppliers.

Gender may have an impact on the choice of tourists. This leads us to include gender in several hypotheses as a demographic factor affecting the preferences and decisions of tourists.

As for the educational level demographic factor, it is known that Lebanon is a country with a high proportion of educated people. Thus, educational level is also considered as a variable affecting the decisions of tourists in several hypotheses.

These final proposed research hypotheses are listed below:

- **H1.** There is a significant relation between the *personal value assigned to the tourism attraction site* and *Educational Level*
- **H2.** There is a significant relation between the variables *convenient and quick transportation to tourist attraction sites* and *Age*
- **H3.** There is a significant relation between *accommodation service quality* and *Age*.
- **H4.** There is a significant relation between *attractive folk customs & festival activities* and *Age*.
- **H5.** There is a significant relation between *high water and air quality in urban areas* and *Age*.
- **H6.** There is a significant relation between *providing visitors with chances to learn about local life* and *Educational Level*.
- **H7.** There is a significant relation between *multiple languages support* and *Age*.
- **H8.** There is a significant relation between the variables *providing visitors with chances to learn about local life* and *Educational Level*.
- **H9.** There is a significant relation between *quick and effective resolution of tourists' complaints* and *Gender*.
- **H10.** There is a significant relation between *high overall safety of a local place* and *Educational Level*.
- **H11.** There is a significant relation between *tourist entertainment service quality* and *Gender*.
- **H12.** There is a significant relation between the *location of accommodation facilities* and *Gender*.

All research hypotheses aim to give a clear vision to stakeholders regarding the Lebanese market demand. This demand is represented by tourists' preferences and reflected by the most impactful factors on tourists' decisions. This, in turn, aids tourism stakeholders to create the appropriate tourism supply to match market demand.

### Testing Hypotheses

In order to test the validity of each studied hypothesis, a Chi-square test was performed using SPSS 20.0. Results are shown in Table 3 below.

**Table 3. Relation Between Variables**

Test Variables	Test value	DF	$\alpha$	Critical value
<b>H1:</b> Personal value assigned to the tourism attraction site * Educational Level	<b>137.238</b>	16	0.05	26.30
<b>H2:</b> Convenient and quick transportation to tourist attraction sites * Age	<b>85.135</b>	16	0.05	26.30
<b>H3:</b> Accommodation service quality * Educational Level	<b>137.020</b>	16	0.05	26.30
<b>H4:</b> Attractive folk customs & festival activities * Age	<b>117.002</b>	16	0.05	26.30
<b>H5:</b> High water and air quality in urban areas * Age	<b>29.850</b>	16	0.05	26.30
<b>H6:</b> Providing visitors with chances to learn about local life * Educational Level	<b>101.266</b>	16	0.05	26.30
<b>H7:</b> Multiple Languages support * Age	<b>84.561</b>	16	0.05	26.30
<b>H8:</b> Internet and communication * Age	<b>103.681</b>	16	0.05	26.30
<b>H9:</b> Quick and effective resolution of tourists' complaints * Gender	<b>7.044</b>	4	0.05	9.49
<b>H10:</b> High overall safety of a local place * Educational Level	<b>101.957</b>	16	0.05	26.30
<b>H11:</b> Tourist entertainment service quality * Gender	<b>14.225</b>	4	0.05	9.49
<b>H12:</b> Location of accommodation facilities * Gender	<b>8.441</b>	4	0.05	9.49

By referring to the above table, it is remarkable that for every set of variables tested in hypotheses H1, H2, H3, H4, H5, H6, H7, H8, H10, and H11 the test value obtained was greater than the *critical value obtained in Chi-square* over a 5% confidence interval ( $\alpha$ -value=0.05). These results reflect a significant relationship between the two studies variables in each of the mentioned hypotheses.

*Therefore, H1, H2, H3, H4, H5, H6, H7, H8, H10, and H11 are valid.*

On the other hand, the *test values obtained for hypotheses H9 and H12 were less than their corresponding critical values obtained in Chi-square; test value=7.044 for H9, less than its critical value 9.49, and test value=8.441 for H12, less than its critical value 9.49.* This reflects insignificant relationships between the two studied variables within each hypothesis.

*Therefore, H9 and H12 are rejected.*

## CONCLUSION

The *importance of this study* is that it highlights rural tourism in Lebanon as an economic opportunity that lays within the tourism industry. This type of tourism not only has the potential to generate economic benefits, but also serves as the ultimate solution to the most trending complications associated with the out breaking COVID-19 pandemic and the current ongoing Lebanese economic crisis.

In an attempt to answer the main research question “*What are the factors that have the most impact on the decision-making process of tourists visiting rural tourism destinations in Lebanon?*”, this study reveals the most and least impactful factors that can affect the decisions of tourists, and therefore, links to a high economic *added value* to the Lebanese and global tourism industry that is still suffering from COVID-19 consequences. It also provides prospective resolutions to Lebanon that is suffering from a drastic economic crisis since 2019 and needs every single economic opportunity to start rising from the ashes again.

The present study analyzes the preferences of tourists visiting Lebanon and understand their demands in order to guide tourism stakeholders to help them effectively meet those demands when providing their services, and, subsequently, optimize tourism practices and outcomes. Findings of the study reveal important points sought by tourists, which could be used as anchor points for stakeholders who wish to maximize the output of their strategies. All nine studied factors showed significant influence on tourist decisions. It is noted that tourist transportation and safety/security seem to be extra important factors that stakeholders must consider.

The results of this study reveal that respondents assign high value to several factors which shape their decisions as tourists. It is apparent that respondents showed high levels of agreement towards the importance of factors such as transportation facilities, the natural environment and safety/security measures in a tourism destination. The role of the tourism stakeholders here is to carefully study the target market in order to meet market needs through matching supply with demand. In addition, it is recommended for the government to cooperate with other stakeholders and enroll them in tourism planning in order to optimize tourism capacity and achieve sustainable tourism development.

Tourism stakeholders should be aware of and fully understanding of the factors that affect a tourist’s decision-making process. Governments can play a vital role in the tourism industry on different levels such as tourism policies and planning. Nonetheless, municipalities or local authorities should care about tourist attraction sites in a given destination because this particular factor increases the competitiveness level of a destination. Moreover, both government and local authorities should work on providing high-quality infrastructure like roads and internet coverage for the sake of empowering the destination’s attractiveness and accessibility. Diverse *transportation* means should also be available since they represent the bridge that physically connects a tourist to a given destination on arrival and departure.

The *accommodation* industry is also a vital sector that directly supports the development of a tourism destination, especially that this industry composes an index for

measuring the level of tourism supply. Different types of accommodation facilities available at a tourism destination and the corresponding quality of services provided to tourists are linked to the overall travel experiences of tourists and their duration of stay. For that reason, hotels, hostels and ecologies should put their best efforts to continuously gain new clients and retain existing ones.

Another factor that highly impacts the decisions of tourists is *tourist entertainment*. This factor plays a significant role in inspiring tourists' travel experiences and attracting tourists' interests and attention. The development of the tourist entertainment industry plays a vibrant role in promoting the destination. Municipalities and the private sector (e.g., tour operators, NGOs, etc.) can highlight attractive folk customs and hold festivals while making sure to use them as effective *marketing* tools that are capable of generating foreign-oriented publicity at tourist destinations and, of course, attract more tourists.

Furthermore, all stakeholders should have a responsible and sustainable approach towards the *natural environment*, which is a crucial part of the valuable resources of any tourism destination. The natural environment is important in attracting tourists to visit specific destinations. It is also part of the destination's tourism supply and is usually expected to have a positive impact on the decisions of tourists. The *hospitality environment* is an additional factor that supports healthy tourism destination development and provides a mean for interaction between locals and visitors.

It is important to acknowledge that tourism is an *information-intensive industry*; visitor's information has an influence on destination choices of a tourist before traveling, as well as on the tourist's evaluation of the whole travel experience after it's done. The ministry of tourism should play a supportive and helpful role in this field.

Finally, the *safety and security* factor lay at the heart of a tourist's considerations and crafts an indispensable condition for sustainable tourism development in a given destination. A high level of physical security, safe service facilities for tourists and accurate functioning mechanisms for tourists' complaints are vital factors that, when present, can boost a destination's safety and security.

All these factors must be addressed by tourism stakeholders when creating strategies in order to meet tourism demands most efficiently.

A *future perspective* of this study could highlight foreign currency exchange rate and COVID-19 vaccination as additional factors that could have a remarkable impact on the decision-making process of tourists considering Lebanese rural tourism destinations.

The *USD-LBP exchange rate* could be an important economic factor that impacts the decision-making process of tourists intending to visit rural tourism destinations in Lebanon. These tourists typically use foreign currencies such as the US dollar or Euro, which will give them even higher purchasing power in Lebanon if they convert their currencies to the Lebanese Lira that has collapsed. This, in turn, translates into a higher value of their money and a much cheaper overall tourism experience.

*COVID-19 vaccination* could also be a potential health factor that could highly impact the decision of tourists visiting Lebanese rural tourism destinations. Vaccinated locals and vaccinated tourists can simply interact safely and freely, which provides a much more enjoyable tourism experience away from the health safety restrictions. Ensuring the vaccination of tourism stakeholders and tourists is highly recommended in the future, as it is believed to have a powerful positive impact on rural tourism in Lebanon.

## REFERENCES

- Akleh, T. (2020, November 17). *Tourist arrivals in Lebanon slump to less than 200,000 in H1*. Retrieved from Arabian Business: <https://www.arabianbusiness.com/politics-economics/454741-tourist-arrivals-in-lebanon-slump-to-less-than-200000-in-h1>
- Ali, F., Hussain, K., Nair, V., and Nair, P. K. 2017. Stakeholders' perceptions & attitudes towards tourism development in a mature destination. *Tourism*, 65(2): 173-186. doi:10.13140/RG.2.2.17576.06400
- Ap, J. 1992. Residents' Perceptions on Tourism Impacts. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 19(4): 665-690.
- Arrage, J. A., and Ghadban, S. (2020, July). Lebanon's Economic Crisis and Covid-19 Impact on Domestic Tourism Market. doi:10.13140/RG.2.2.15738.93127
- Bhote, G. R. 2018. Perceptions of Tourism Stakeholders towards Tourism Industry in Nepal. *Journal of Business and Social Sciences Research*, 1(1): 129-143. doi:10.3126/jbssr.v1i1.20953
- Butler, R. 1980. The concept of the tourist area life-cycle of evolution: Implications for management. *Canadian Geographer*, 24(1): 5-12.
- Byrd, E. T., Bosley, H. E., and Dronberger. 2009. Comparisons of Stakeholder Perceptions of Tourism Impacts in Rural Eastern North Carolina. *Tourism Management*, 30(5): 693-703. doi:10.1016/j.tourman.2008.10.021
- Canizares, S. M., Canalejo, A. M., and Tabales, J. M. 2015. Stakeholders' perceptions of tourism development in Cape Verde, Africa. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 19(10): 966-980. doi:10.1080/13683500.2015.1008428
- Del Chiappa, G. 2012. Community integration: a case study of Costa Smeralda, Italy. In E. Fayos-Sola, J. Silva, & J.Jafari, *Knowledge management in tourism: Policy and governance applications bridging tourism theory and practice* (pp. 243-263). Bingley: Emerald.
- Easterling, D. 2004. The residents' perspective in tourism research: A review and synthesis. *Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing*, 17(4): 45-62.
- Fitch-Solutions. (2020, June 25). Lebanon And Covid-19: Impact On Consumer Sector. *Fitch Solutions*. Retrieved from <https://www.fitchsolutions.com/consumer-retail/lebanon-and-covid-19-impact-consumer-sector-25-06-2020>
- Freeman, R. E. 1984. *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach*. Boston, MA: Pitman.



- Ghadban, S., Shames, M., Arrage, J. A., and Fayyad, A. A. 2017. Rural Tourism in Lebanon: What Does the Market Reveal? *Management & Avenir*, 1(96): 165-185. doi:10.3917/mav.096.0165
- Houssari, N. (2021, May 3). *Lebanon's tourism sector seeks relief to recover from lockdown*. Retrieved from arabnews.com: <https://arab.news/zkhk7>
- Jaafar, M., Kayat, K., Tangit, T. M., and Yacob, M. F. 2013. Nature-based Rural Tourism and its Economic Benefits: A Case Study of Kinabalu National Park. *Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes*, 5(4):342-352. doi:10.1108/WHATT-03-2013-0016
- Ken, B. 2010. *Applied business statistics-making better business decisions*, (Sixth ed.).International Edition.
- Lopes, H. D., Remoaldo, P., and Ribeiro, V. (2019). Residents' perceptions of tourism activity in a rural North-Eastern Portuguese community: a cluster analysis. *Bulletin of Geography. Socio-economic Series*, 46(46):119-135. doi:10.2478/bog-2019-0038
- Lu, X. L., Wu, C. Y., and Xiao, G. R. (2006). Fuzzy Synthetic Evaluation on Resident's Perceptions of Tourism Impacts. *Chinese Geographical Science*, 16(1): 87-94. doi:10.1007/s11769-006-0028-z
- Luštický, M., and Musil, M. 2016. Towards a Theory of Stakeholders' Perception of Tourism Impacts. *Czech Journal of Tourism*, 5(2): 93-110. doi:10.1515/cjot-2016-0006
- Muresan, I., Oroian, C., Harun, R., Arion, F., Porutiu, A., Chiciudean, G., . . . Lile, R. (2016). Local Residents' Attitude toward Sustainable Rural Tourism Development. *Sustainability*, 8(1): 100-114.
- Murphy, P. E., and Murphy, A. E. 2004. Strategic management for tourism communities: bridging the gaps. Clevedon: Channel View Publications.176pp.
- Nunkoo, R., and Ramkissoon, H. 2011. Developing a Community Support Model for Tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 38(3): 964-988.
- Prayag, G., Dookhony-Ramphul, K., and Maryeven, M. 2010. Hotel Development and Tourism Impacts in Mauritius: Hoteliers' Perspectives on Sustainable Tourism. *Development Southern Africa*, 27(5): 697-712. doi:10.1080/0376835X.2010.522832
- Presenza, A., Del Chiappa, G., and Sheehan, L. 2013. Residents' engagement and local tourism governance in maturing beach destinations: Evidence from an Italian case study. *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management*, 2(1): 23-30.
- Ritchie, B., and Inkari, M. 2006. Host Community attitudes toward tourism and cultural tourism development: the case of the Lewes district Southern England. *International Journal of Tourism Research*, 8(1): 27-44.
- Sethuraman, S. M., Sendil .M (2017). Enhancing Questionnaire Design, Development and Testing through Standardized Approach. : *IOSR Journal of Business and Management*, 19(5): 01-08. <https://www.iosrjournals.org/iosr-jbm/papers/Vol19-issue5/Version-1/A1905010108.pdf>
- Sharma, B., Dyer, P., Carter, J., and Gursoy, D. 2008. Exploring Residents' Perceptions of the Social Impacts of Tourism on the Sunshine Coast, Australia. *International Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Administration*, 9(3): 288-311. doi:10.1080/15256480802096092

- UNWTO. (2013). *Sustainable Tourism for Development Guidebook* (1st ed.). Madrid, Spain: European Commission.
- Ven, S. 2015. Residents' participation, perceived impacts, and support for community-based ecotourism in Cambodia: A latent profile analysis. *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research*, 21(8), 836-861. doi:10.1080/10941665.2015.1075565
- Xie, H., Bao, J., and Kerstetter, D. L. 2014. Examining the Effects of Tourism Impacts on Satisfaction with Tourism between Native and Non-native Residents. *International Journal of Tourism Research*, 16(3): 241-249. doi:10.1002/jtr.1922

## APPENDIX

### (Questionnaire)

Dear Gents,

Thank you for participation in this study.

The purpose of this study is to understand your **preferences** to several factors /elements in tourism industry.

Your participation in this survey allows you to voice your opinions to help community planners improve the quality of tourism in your community. Your help will be greatly appreciated.

It will take approximately 15 minutes of your time to complete this survey. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Please answer all questions, as omitted responses may render your survey unusable for this study. Please know that your responses will be treated confidentially and anonymously. Please read all instructions and questions carefully.

Again, thank you for your time and participation!

Sincerely,

Mohamad Faraj, Ph.D.

Hospitality and Tourism Management

Belarusian State Economic University

### Questionnaire

In the following questionnaire, respondents were asked to rate their perception of the importance of different tourism elements and essentials, over a scale from 1 (Extremely unimportant/ Lowest Rating) to 5 (Extremely important/ Highest rating).

**1. Tourist Attraction:**

On a scale from 1 to 5, rate the relative importance of each of these factors in attracting tourists:

1. Personal value assigned to the tourism attraction site
2. Type of tourist attraction (historical, cultural, ecotourism, etc...)
3. Tourism guide services

**2. Tourist transportation:**

On a scale from 1 to 5, how essential do you think are these transportation facilitations for tourists?

1. Diverse public transportation
2. Convenient and quick transportation to tourist attraction sites
3. Good transportation facilities

**3. Tourist accommodation:**

As a tourist, how important are the following factors to you when selecting an accommodation (e.g., Hotel) to stay? Please rate each factor on a scale from 1 to 5:

1. Accommodation service quality
2. Availability of multiple options (levels) of accommodation service facilities
3. Location of accommodation facilities

**4. Tourist entertainment:**

On a scale from 1 to 5, assign a rating to each of the following components of tourism events and entertainment activities:

1. Attractive folk customs
2. Multiple grades of leisure and entertainment places
3. Tourist entertainment service quality

**5. Natural environment:**

On a scale from 1 to 5, rate the relative importance of each of the following environmental characteristics for tourists:

1. High water quality in urban areas
2. Good status of urban public environmental hygiene

3. Beautiful environment that attracts tourists

#### **6. *Hospitality environment:***

On a scale from 1 to 5, rate the importance of each of the following hospitality factors to tourists:

1. Providing visitors with chances to learn about local life
2. Strong cultural & historical atmosphere
3. Relatively high hospitality of locals

#### **7. *Tourist information and navigation:***

On a scale from 1 to 5, how important do you think are these information services for tourists?

1. High-quality internet services
2. Easy access to location and navigation information
3. Multiple Languages support

#### **8. *Marketing:***

On a scale from 1 to 5, how effective do you think is each of the following marketing efforts in engaging tourists in specific programs, places or activities?

1. Vivid tourism image
2. Strong promotions
3. Advertising

#### **9. *Safety & security:***

On a scale from 1 to 5, rate the significance of each of these safety measures in shaping a tourist's decision towards selecting a vacation destination:

1. Good status of physical security
2. Good security of tourist service facilities
3. High overall safety of a local place

### **Some information about you (respondent):**

**Gender**

Female

Male

**Age Group:**

18-25

26-35

36-45

46-60

60+

**Educational level:**

Elementary school

Intermediate school

High school

Bachelor's degree

Higher education (Masters / Ph.D.)