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Research Paper

Source market perceptions: How risky is Jordan to travel to?

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ABSTRACT

The tourism industry is one of the most important economic sectors in Jordan. However, Jordan's geographic location in a conflict-ridden region has resulted in tourists' misperceptions, especially given recent violent uprisings in neighboring countries and negative media portrayals of the region. The purpose of this study was to examine the US source market's perceptions of Jordan as a destination and to identify the factors that may influence their visiting intentions. Guided by the Risk Perception Attitude (RPA) framework, this study classified participants into clusters based on levels of perceived risk and efficacy beliefs. Four clusters were generated and compared based on individual characteristics, perceived safety, and visiting intentions. A series of mediation analyses were also conducted. Overall, the findings support the utility of the RPA framework in the context of tourism. Furthermore, the findings indicate that perceived safety mediates the relationship between respondents' risk-perception attitudes and their visiting intentions.

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1. Introduction

The tourism industry is one of the most important economic sectors in Jordan, having directly contributed 6.2% of its total GDP in 2014 (World Travel & Tourism Council [WTTTC], 2015). Jordan offers tourists a diversity of cultural and natural attractions, varying from the ancient rose-red city and designated UNESCO World Heritage Site of Petra, to the virtually untouched landscape of the Wadi Rum protected area and the salt and mineral lined shores of the Dead Sea. Although tourism income remains stable, Jordan has experienced a decrease in visitor arrivals over the past five years. According to the Ministry of Tourism & Antiquities of Jordan [MOTA] (2015), the number of international tourist arrivals to Jordan dropped 41% over the past five years, falling from 8.2 million in 2010 to 4.8 million in 2015.

The sharp decrease in tourist arrivals to Jordan has been largely attributed to its geographic location in a conflict-ridden area and intensive media attention (Avraham, 2013, 2015; Jordan Times, 2015a; UNWTO, 2014). As shown in Fig. 1, Jordan is bordered by Syria, Saudi Arabia, the Red Sea, Palestine, Israel, and Iraq (Jordan

Tourism Board, 2013). In addition, the destination is located in the Middle East and North Africa [MENA] region.

Within the MENA region, several destinations (e.g. Syria, Egypt, Israel, and Iraq) have experienced conflict over an extended period of time (Buda, 2015). Contemporary examples of regional conflict include the Arab Spring, the Syrian Civil War, and the Iraqi Insurgency. The situation in the region has intensified further due to the rise of the 'Islamic State of Iraq and Syria' (ISIS) terror group, which is also commonly referred to as the 'Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant' (ISIL) or Daesh (Buda, 2015; Jordan Times, 2015a). As the Western media has expressed growing concerns about these issues, tourists' perceptions of MENA destinations may be negatively affected (Avraham, 2015). Media coverage also tends to constantly remind the public of risky situations within the MENA region, which reinforce negative perceptions and may result in prospective tourists' hesitation to visit MENA destinations (Avraham, 2013, 2015).

A tourism crisis has been defined as 'any situation that has the potential to affect long-term confidence in an organization or a product, or which may interfere with its ability to continue operating normally' (Pacific Asia Tourism Association [PATA], 2003, p. 2). Political instability and terrorism in the MENA region has apparently created a tourism crisis for MENA destinations. Destinations that are under political instability and/or directly involved with terrorism activities have typically experienced declines in

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Fig. 1. Map of Jordan (Google, n.d.).

tourist arrivals and tourism receipts. Meanwhile, neighboring countries may experience spillover effects, which can negatively impact their tourism industries as well (Steiner, 2007; UNWTO, 2014). This is mainly due to tourists' perceptions, as they normally cluster images of destinations within the same region together (Avraham, 2013). One recent study found significant correlations between popular MENA destinations (e.g. UAE, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, and Qatar) in terms of perceived comfort and perceived safety, supporting the notion that most individuals perceive these destinations as being part of a larger category (Schroeder, Yilmaz, Liu, Pennington-Gray & Farajat, 2015). Given this clustering of destinations based on geography, any incident that takes place in one MENA destination naturally could affect tourists' perceptions associated with another MENA destination (Drakos & Kutan, 2003).

Jordan, as a MENA destination, has experienced spillover effects and has been negatively impacted by the aforementioned tourism crisis (Buda, 2015; Jordan Times, 2015a). Jordan's government has been working hard to ensure the safety of the country (Jordan Times, 2015b). In terms of tourism, Jordan Tourism Board (JTB) has undertaken several initiatives to counter terrorist activities and to mitigate the negative consequences of the tourism crisis. These initiatives include placing metal detectors at the main entrances of hotels, increasing police presence, establishing a tourism police department, and providing additional safety information (Jordan Times, 2015a). Furthermore, scholars have taken two different perspectives in terms of suggesting how Jordan should manage itself in times of crisis. On one hand, Buda (2015) has argued that

Jordan should 'sanitize' itself from the region and erase the dangers and conflicts in relation to tourists. On the other hand, Avraham (2015) and Henderson (2006) have suggested that the focus should be on perception management, whereby responses should be used to correct tourists' misperceptions and increase consumer confidence in the destination.

It should be noted that while Jordan has experienced spillover effects from regional conflict, the country itself is considered to be a relatively safe destination. The most recent terrorist attack in Jordan occurred over a decade ago. Specifically, in 2005, a series of coordinated bomb attacks took place in three hotel lobbies in Amman (Jordan Times, 2015b).

The US is one of the traditional feeder markets for Jordan, representing more than half of the American market (MOTA, 2015). Although the number of US tourists has decreased over the past five years, falling from approximately 182,000 visitors in 2010 to nearly 161,000 visitors in 2015, this rate of decline is smaller than the overall drop in international arrivals (11% vs. 41% respectively) (MOTA, 2015). This may be attributed to JTB's continued marketing efforts in promoting Jordan within the US market (eTN News, 2011) and the positive relationship between Jordan and the US, as these two governments have maintained a history of cooperation and friendship since 1949 (US Department of State, 2014).

Thus, using the US source market as a case, the purpose of this study was twofold. First, it seeks to examine the US source market's perceptions of Jordan as a destination and their visiting intentions. Second, the study seeks to identify the main factors that may influence their travel intentions. In doing so, this study also

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