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Rural tourism in Lebanon: what does the market reveal?

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Abstract: The concept of rural tourism encompasses many forms of tourism, such as nature-based tourism, community-based tourism, ecotourism, agro-tourism, and many more. Scholars consider tourism an important tool for revenue generation for communities living in rural areas. However, ineffective planning and management of the tourism industry may lead to undesired results in rural destinations, sometimes negatively affecting their rich natural and cultural heritage. In Lebanon, the last decade witnessed an increase of the rural tourism share within the tourism industry. Until today, there are no scientific studies of the supply and demand for this sector in Lebanon. This survey aims to analyze the demand for rural tourism among the domestic market hoping to provide information for actors in the field. The data showcase evidences about the needs, preferences and expectations of potential urban travelers, and factors affecting them. Data collection was completed in May 2014 with a sample of 436 persons, mostly Lebanese urban inhabitants, during the Travel Lebanon exhibition dedicated to promote rural tourism in Lebanon. The statistical analysis revealed important information about the perception and behavior of potential visitors. Personal characteristics, especially respondents' personal income and cultural background, have been identified as major factors that affect their decision-making process regarding tourism services and facilities. Results also revealed a lack of awareness by the surveyed respondents about critical sustainable tourism issues in rural areas, and a visitor perception that is somewhat different from what is actually being provided by tourism stakeholders in rural areas.

Keywords: Rural tourism, domestic tourism, demand analysis, motivations and preferences.

JEL Codes: Z3

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1. Introduction

Tourism is considered one of the largest industries in the world and a main source of income and employment. The global economy has been affected positively by the continuous growth of the tourism sector. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), in 2013 the travel and tourism total contribution to the global economy rose to 9.5% of the global GDP (WTTC, 2014). International tourism revenues are generated from different types of tourism including leisure tourism as a well-known tourism type, sport tourism, health tourism, and different forms of alternative and sustainable tourism namely: ecotourism and community-based tourism. Lebanon is a well-known tourism destination in the Mediterranean region. With a very small surface (10,452 km²), the country is endowed with a unique landscape and heritage, and a mild climate that distinguish it from all the neighboring countries. Lebanon has been cited by the international media as the number one place in the world for its unique beaches and resorts, and Beirut's vibrant nightlife (El Maalouf et al. 2015).

Despite its richness in natural and cultural resources and its distinctive geographical location in the Middle East stretching along the Eastern Mediterranean coast, Lebanon has been facing serious problems affecting the performance of its tourism industry and leading to a decline in its competitiveness with low ability to compete with the neighboring destinations such as Turkey, Jordan, and Egypt. Compared with these three countries Lebanon received the lowest number of international tourists in 2012, 1.3 million. While Turkey received the highest number of tourists, 31.8 million, followed by Egypt 11.2, and Jordan 4.2 million (Lanquar, 2013). The deterioration of the political and security situation in the Middle East since 2010, especially the Syrian crisis, has highly affected the flow of international visitors to the region in general and to Lebanon in particular. The international tourists' arrivals decreased by more than 50% between 2012 and 2013 to reach 0.6 million (BankMed, 2013).

Rural areas in Lebanon are facing many challenges due to the unbalanced development strategies of the post-war period (after 1990), resulting in a change in the living patterns seen in the decline of the agricultural sector and the deterioration of the cultural and natural landscape. This situation has increased rural exodus; the young generation is moving to the urban areas in search for better opportunities and life conditions. From the tourism market perspective, the Lebanese domestic and international tourism market is witnessing a change in the demand side. More people are looking for authentic experiences and unspoiled landscapes to visit; and rural areas are their first destination.

Hence, tourism in rural areas may result in negative impacts on the natural and cultural heritage if it is not well planned and managed. Therefore, the challenge is to find a synergy between rural tourism and sustainable landscape management, which will bring benefits for the rural population in terms of additional sources of income. Furthermore, the Syrian crisis has greatly affected Lebanon and its tourism sector, especially the international arrivals. During the past three years, Lebanon suffered from continuous internal political tensions, security incidents, and the high influx of Syrian refugees to Lebanon. Until October 2014, Lebanon was considered as the first country hosting more than 1 million Syrian refugees representing approximately 30% of the Lebanese population (UNHCR, 2014). The crisis situation has raised the concern for tourism managers and planners to develop tourism strategies that could face such situations.

Rural tourism strategies have been developed to enhance domestic tourism in Lebanon, unlock the great economic potential of this sector and find alternative ways of income generation to face the political and security instability. For instance, based on the fact that Lebanese residents are less sensitive by the day-to-day situation than regional and international tourists because they used to this situation, Beyond Beirut (which is a Lebanese based non-governmental organization with a mission to encourage the development of experiential tourism

beyond the city limits of Beirut, by creating a tourism industry platform for cooperation and market growth) has developed a Rural Tourism Strategy for Lebanon- project funded by USAID, (Daily Star, 2014). Moreover, studies have shown that domestic tourism has the ability of stabilizing the economy of a destination and is dependable in term of economic revenues especially in case of instability, where most of the dollars generated from visitors stay within the local economy (Henderson, 2003; Nanda and Hargreaves, 2013; Pforr 2006; UNWTO and ILO, 2013; USDA, 2013).

Within this context, this paper aims at exploring the Lebanese rural tourism market through the analysis of the domestic tourist needs, preferences and expectations. The results and findings of this study will serve tourism professionals and service providers to better plan and promote sustainable forms of rural tourism, and offer products and packages that suit the Lebanese market.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Rural tourism concept: definition and terminology

Starting with the general concept for what is called tourism, *“it is a social, cultural and economic phenomenon which entails the movement of people to countries or places outside their usual environment for personal or business/professional purposes”* (UNWTO, 2014). Different types or forms of tourism have various definitions, each depending on the tourism destination, its geography and characteristics. However, the UNWTO (2012) provides general definitions of well-known types of tourism. For instance, business visitor is defined as a visitor whose main purpose for a tourism trip corresponds to the business and professional category. While, cultural tourism is defined as that *“activity which enables people to experience the different ways of life of other people, thereby gaining at first hand an understanding of their customs, traditions, the physical environment, the intellectual ideas and those places of architectural, historic, archaeological or other cultural significance which remain from earlier times”* (UNWTO, 2012).

On the other hand, sustainable tourism is generally described as tourism that takes into consideration the environmental, and socio-cultural aspects of a tourism destination, aiming at developing sustainable tourism packages (Leroux and Pupion, 2014). This form of tourism is defined by the WTTC (2014), as *“tourism that meets the needs of the present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunities for the future. It is envisaged as leading to management of all resources in such a way that economic, social, and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecology processes, biological diversity, and life support systems*. Rural tourism is a type of sustainable tourism. Many scholars studied the concept of rural tourism and admitted that it is not easy to come up with a general definition. *“Although it seems simple to define rural tourism as tourism that takes place in rural areas of the country, this definition does not include the complexity of the forms developed in different countries so far”* (Barbu, 2013).

According to Irshad (2010), rural tourism can be defined as the “country experience” which encompasses a wide range of attractions and activities that take place in agriculture or non-urban areas. The essential characteristics of rural tourism include wide-open spaces, low levels of tourism development, and opportunities for visitors to directly experience agricultural and/or natural environments. As defined above, rural tourism is not just about farm-based tourism, it also comprises special interest nature holidays and ecotourism, educational travel, arts and heritage tourism, and, in some areas, ethnic tourism. The types of the concept “rural tourism” are many. Although these types share a lot of common elements, they have what distinguishes them. Because of this differentiation, they are called niche markets in rural tourism. “Ecotourism, green tourism, rural tourism, are just some of the terms that define the tourism

activities taking place in specific and unique environment offered by rural areas” (Lucian, 2012).

In Lebanon, rural tourism is not well defined and managed, with very few scientific studies and publications, such as the Lebanon traveler (2011). The development of rural tourism around the world has been widely explored by tourism researchers for many years, an interest which has been motivated by the recognition of the importance of this activity for rural areas (Frochot, 2003). Tourists pursued different experiences due to distinct motivations; they travel and use tourism as a mean to satisfy their needs. In general consumers are considered as rational and emotional human beings concerned with achieving pleasurable experiences (Qi et al. 2013). In the context of rural tourism, consumers tend to satisfy recreational and cultural motivations through their engagement in active and cognitive experiences. This fact seems to be agreed on by many authors. Royo-Vela (2008) admits that every weekend and holiday, thousands of people leave their homes in the city to go, even if for a few hours, to small rural towns those have historic or architectural appeal.

Admitting the existence of such tourism is not what only authors talked about. Authors went deeper in tourism studies, and analyzed the motivations of visitors to rural areas. According to Anna Farmaki “motivation plays a significant role in influencing travel decisions and tourist behavior” (Farmaki, 2012). Previous studies exploring tourist motivation have also suggested that tourists tend to choose the destination or type of holiday that can satisfy their desires or needs (Kim and Eves, 2012).

Sharpley and Jepson (2010) on the other hand, reported in their study at the Lake District that tourism experiences at rural areas embrace some form of spiritual fulfillment. Their study opens a new discussion in tourism sector which is the consumer behaviors, and the different factors affecting visitors’ choice in preferring certain destinations over others.

2.2. Factors affecting visitors’ behavior and decision making?

Motivation can be triggered by many factors affecting tourists. Farmaki (2012) studied the tourists’ motivation in the rural area, the case of Troodos in Cyprus. She found that tourists travel to the rural areas for various reasons. “Some travel because of an intrinsic need to escape or to relax whereas others were attracted to the region by the cultural/religious or natural attributes. The complex nature of the tourism sector suggests that tourists travelling to rural areas might not be necessarily motivated by the rural setting but by the interest in an activity, such as cultural activities. In another case study, tourism researchers found that the preferred tourism types of Taiwanese tourists visiting Indonesia were heritage, culture, and nature-based tourism (Kuo et al. 2012). Other authors found in different studies a wide variety of factors influencing and motivating tourist in choosing their destination. In a study done about Nairobi-Kenya, the researchers found that Kenya’s domestic tourists were more influenced in choosing their destination by individual trait factors rather than environmental factors (Mutinda and Mayaka, 2012).

Environmental factors are defined as external forces such as sources of information, culture, family, lifestyle, and destination feature, and what influences purchasing decision. While, individual trait factors refer to the personal characteristics such as personal motivation, personality, past experience, etc. The local food and wine of the areas, can also play a major role in affecting the decision-making of visitors. “Food and wine have become one of the most important reasons for visiting a particular geographic area in recent years” (Guzmán et al. 2014).

According to Kim et al. (2013) study about the tourist motivation to consume local food, the main motivational factors were, exiting experience, escape of routine, health concern, cultural experience, togetherness, prestige, and sensory appeal.

Besides what was mentioned previously, relative income is one of the most important factors that affect tourism, especially domestic tourism. The results of the study conducted by Yang et

al. (2014) showed that absolute personal income is a dominant factor that influenced Chinese domestic tourism demand for both urban and rural residents. The study suggests that when designing marketing plans to target potential tourists, relative income should be another important factor to consider apart from absolute income because in certain areas, it also determines the level of domestic tourism demand. Besides, different marketing strategies should be proposed for residents in different areas as well as residents in urban and rural areas. Another study showed how important is income for tourists to choose their destination. Among international and high-income groups of tourists, tourists were willing to pay much higher fees than proposed by communities (Chaminuka et al. 2012).

Moreover, tourism is as anything in nowadays life, affected by the technology trends. Thus, modern travelers first visit online websites or blogs for information and reviews other consumer's feedback regarding the destination they seek. With this comes the role of the eWOM (electronic Word of Mouth). "Modern travelers often rely on reviews provided by other consumers online, or eWOM to choose their accommodations" (Nieto et al. 2014). Gender is another factor that affects the behavior and decision making of consumers. According to Gibson and Yiannakis (2002) gender and life stage-linked psychological needs (push factors) "drive" the selection and enactment of tourist roles. This study showed that by the time many women are in their late fifties, they may be less constrained by their familial roles and have the freedom to take vacations where they can explore and learn about the ways of people in other cultures.

Food and other factors and motivations mentioned above are a sample of a long list of factors influencing customers' behavior and their decision making in the field of rural tourism. This literature review shows the importance of conducting research to understand the consumer behavior in tourism, so marketers know how to promote destinations and attract customers; especially to the unveiled areas. An empirical study done by Oh (2013) about "Incorporating simplified decision rules into tourist decision making processes: A case of fishing trips" showed that the majority of respondents used a simplified decision-making strategy, by ignoring certain choice attributes during their choice tasks and giving attention to certain attributes affected the quality of modeling results. This shows that customers are concerned about essential information rather than simple attributes regarding the decision.

2.3. Effective rural tourism marketing strategies

Rural tourism in the whole world is witnessing a lot of development strategies and research in order to make rural areas opened to the whole world away from isolation. According to MacDonald and Jolliffe (2003), "*Tourism has become a development tool for many rural and more isolated areas to supplement traditional industries that are often in decline*". One of these strategies marketers studied in rural areas is the "Niche Market Strategy" considering rural area as a niche market. "To 'soft', 'green', and 'eco-' might now be added 'niche', thus simply increasing the lexicon of terms used to complicate understanding of the nature of much rural visiting in the 21st century" (Roberts and Hall, 2004). This niche market approach has been studied by many researchers. According to a study funded by the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, rural tourism encompasses all of the following niche markets, including: agro-tourism, natural resource tourism, historical tourism, ecotourism, cultural tourism, farm tourism, green tourism and alternative tourism (Buck, 2000). The use of networks was another strategy studied by researchers. Polo and Frias (2010) wrote in their case study "Collective strategies for rural tourism" taking Spain as their case about two networks: the development of enterprise partnerships in the operation of rural tourism businesses and the creation of a viable rural tourism product and an image of the rural tourist destination.

Many researchers tried to study the role of market segmentation in the success of rural tourism. According to Pesonen (2013) "One strategic marketing tool capable of generating competitive advantage is market segmentation". Moreover, information and communication

technologies have had a profound effect on tourism marketing. Pesonen stated, *“ICT have been transforming tourism globally since the eighties till now where new tools and services were developed for this purpose”*. Thus, it is obvious that segmentation by what motivates a tourist can bring success to the tourism sector, and clustering is the successful way for that. *“The clustering of rural tourists’ motivations proved to be a valuable means of segmenting markets”* (Park and Yoon, 2009). Although many strategies have been developed, but still researchers find it hard to study rural tourism development and its needs. Polo and Frías (2010), mentioned the reason for that: *“neither rural area nor rural tourism is clearly defined”* and *“tourism activity in rural areas is heterogeneous”*.

Still that would not stop researchers and marketers from studying this sector, because competitive advantage cannot be reached without understanding the market and developing strategies to benefit from as much as possible. For instance, in Scotland, operators feel that wildlife tourism demand has already reached the stage where macro level strategic management and planning is required, and that market forces now dictate that organizations should overcome their reluctance and work together to develop, promote and manage wildlife destinations (Curtin, 2013). Researchers did not stop at the point of strategies development, they went deeper inside their research to study the services and products rural tourism can offer. In a research done by Sznajder and Przezbórska (2004), rural and agro-tourism products and services have been grouped into nine clusters, including: accommodation, gastronomy, real agro-tourism, direct sale, ethnography, sport, therapy and health-related products, recreation, entertainment. Besides, they concluded that farmers and rural society usually offers a packet of services and products, that are usually expensive because of their unique nature.

Other issues also attracted researchers regarding rural tourism. According to Rama kumar and Shinde (2008) rural tourism faces many challenges starting from the shortage of trained manpower, exploitation of rural environment, inadequate physical amenities, and language problems reaching lack of business expertise. Concerning the purpose of tourists’ visits to rural areas, many studies have been made. Molera and Albaladejo (2007) identified five segments of tourists who sought different benefits in their holiday in rural establishments. Results showed that four of these segments placed importance on nature, environment and peacefulness, although only two were attracted by activities. The remaining segment, comprised of individuals whose only motivation was spending time with friends.

Beside the purpose of their trips, other studies tried to link the tourists to the type of accommodation. One of these studies showed significant differences among the individuals who choose each type of accommodation at a destination (Pina and Delfa, 2005). Different types of tourists with various and needs backgrounds tend to prefer different types of accommodation. Pricing is also one of the factors affecting consumers’ decisions in using different types of accommodations (Mattila, 2004).

3. Methodology

Based on the literature review and the actual situation of rural tourism in Lebanon the analytical framework and the methodology of this research were elaborated. To explore and investigate the different factors affecting the behavior and decision making of the potential visitors to rural areas, a quantitative approach was adopted. Research data was collected using a survey conducted in Beirut, the capital of Lebanon. The selection of Beirut as the study area was guided by the fact that the total population in Beirut constitutes 25% (500,000 people) of the total urban population in Lebanon (Central Administration of Statistics-CAS, 2014) which constitutes by turn 88% of the total Lebanese population. Additionally, Beirut is considered the center of the country’s most of social, economic, political and cultural activities.

Data was collected in five consecutive days during the Garden Show exhibition in May 2014. “The Garden Show” is a yearly event taking place eleven years ago for the purpose of celebrating a green/eco-environment to sustain an image of authenticity and cultural diversity. This exhibition offers a section to the rural tourism stakeholders “Travel Lebanon” to present and promote their products and packages as to attract potential customers to discover different regions and activities in Lebanon (The garden show and spring festival, 2014). The choice of the Garden Show and Travel Lebanon is guided by the representative sample of urban residents it attracts every year. It is estimated that in 2013 the number of visitors reached was 20,000 persons (garden show, 2013).

A total of 436 respondents were interviewed face-to-face. The choice of the respondents was made randomly in different locations of the show and at different periods of the day. The questionnaire was formulated based on a review of the different rural tourism consumer behavior theories and studies, and a preliminary analysis of the current rural tourism situation in Lebanon. The questionnaire included a total of 31 main questions concerning the respondent preferences, and motivations to visit rural areas in Lebanon (for the full version of the questionnaire visit <https://figshare.com/s/f57a611b0d80dfca5446>).

Data obtained were analyzed using the SPSS, Chi Square tests (two-way contingency table) were conducted as well as correlation test. The Chi Square is a statistical test commonly used to compare observed data with data expected to be obtained according to a specific hypothesis (Black, 2010). The Chi square test is therefore used to test a relation between two independent variables that enable the researchers to validate or reject the expected outcomes. For ranking questions, a weight score was used, for each option a specific weight was attributed, the first preference got the highest score.

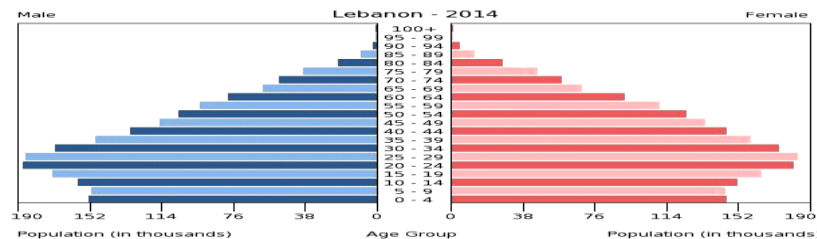
4. Discussion of Findings

4.1. The socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents

Table 1 represents the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. The age group 18-25 (youth) is overrepresented (40.2%), while the other percentages are distributed almost equally among the other age group categories. Females and males are somehow equally represented in the sample (approximately 44% for male and 55% for female). To see if the sample is representative in term of visitor’s age, a comparison was conducted with the Lebanese population pyramid for 2014 (Figure1). The figure shows that the two age groups 20-24 and 25-29 represent the highest percentages of the total Lebanese population comparing to other age categories. This shows that the sample is representative and represents the reality on the field. Therefore, the results are credible and the respondents’ opinions and perspectives are useful for tourism stakeholders especially for segmentation strategies. The sample also covered a broad spectrum of occupations and high educational level for 73.7% of the respondents (bachelor and master degrees). Furthermore, 50% earn less than 1000\$ and 1000-1500\$ (estimated to have limited purchase power).

Table.1. Results for the respondents' profile

Variable	Category	%	Variable	Category	%
Age	18-25	40.2	Children	0	73.6
	26-30	17.2		1	6
	31-39	18.6		2	12
	40-50	13.1		3	6.3
	51-60	6.7		4	1.9
	>60	4.2		5	0.2
Nationality	Lebanese	97.2	Educational level	Primary	10.6
	Syrian	0.7		Technical	6.8
	American	1.4		Bachelor	44.4
	Palestinian	0.2		Master	29.3
	French	0.5		PhD	8.9
Marital status	Single	64.8	Gender	Male	43.8
	Married	33.1		Female	56.2
	Divorced	2.1			
Occupation	Student	28.3	Income level	<1000\$	30
	Public sector	8.4		1000-1500\$	22.5
	Private sector	28.8		1500-2000\$	17.5
	Engineer	6.7		2000-2500\$	8.1
	Lawyer	2.1		2500-3000\$	5.6
	Physician	0.7		>3000\$	16.3
	Teacher	7.2			
	Retired	2.3			
	Unemployed	4.6			
	Other	10.9			

**Fig.1.** Lebanese population pyramid 2014 (source: index mundi, 2014)

4.2. What factors affect the decision making of visitors to visit rural areas?

Table-2 shows that 41.1% of the respondents prefer to visit rural areas during summer season which is considered peak season in Lebanon. Except for Lebanese citizens who live abroad, domestic visitors are used to visit rural area during summer. 45% of the respondents prefer to self-organize their trip; generally speaking, visitors have more confidence in the quality of services received when booking trips by their own. Furthermore, the majority of respondents (40.8%) prefer to book their trips by phone calls. This result may probably be interpreted as a lack of trust in online booking services or the lack of culture in using online booking. Lebanese people do not trust companies selling online due to the ineffective communication channels and the poor online customer service (Bechara, 2013).

Table 2: Preferences of domestic visitors who visited or are willing to visit rural areas (for some variables, respondents were allowed to select more than one option)

Variable	Category	%	Variable	Category	%
Booking	Phone call	40.8	Visit pattern	Partner	17.6
	Online	22.7		Family	35.5
	Face-to-face	22.6		Friends	44.8
	No reservation	13.9		colleagues	2.3
Organization	Self-organized	45	Transportation	Public	6.5
	Join organized tour	34		By personal car	56.2
	Both	21		Organized tour	37.3
Distance	0.5-1 hour	45.3	Duration of visit	Day trip	36.6
	1-1.5 hours	50.8		Weekend	47.7
	1.5-2 hours	61.4		3-7 days	8.1
	> 2 hours	53.8		> one week	7.6
Best group size	2-5	25.5	Seasonal preference	Spring	35.6
	5-10	35.9		Summer	41.1
	10-15	16.1		Winter	12.9
	15-20	8.7		Autumn	8.5
	20-25	3.9		No preference	21.4
	> 25	9.9			

Despite the cheap price of public transportation comparing to personal car and organized tour transportation in Lebanon, the choice of personal car by 56.2% of the respondents may be guided by the fact that this type of transportation is more reliable, by using it visitors are free of their decisions. The lack of culture in using public transportation and organized tour may be another reason behind the preference of personal car. Ranking the transportation means by order of priority for the respondents (Table-3), the public transportation was also ranked as the least usual for reasons stated above.

Table-2 shows that the majority of respondents (80.3%) prefer to visit rural areas either with their friends or their family. In order to test the relation between this preference and the visitors' age and marital status, a chi square test was conducted. Results in table 4 show that there is a relation between the two tested variables. Therefore, the alternative hypothesis is accepted, young and single visitors prefer to go with their friends while married and mature visitors prefer to go with their families. Looking at Table-3, the same analysis can be drawn; visiting rural areas with friends and families was ranked as first and second priorities by the majority of respondents. This proves the analysis of Molera and Albaladejo (2007) that the majority of visitors are motivated to visit rural areas only to spend time with friends.

Table 3: Ranking the preferences of surveyed respondents from most preferred or usual to least preferred or usual

Variable \ Ranking	Transportation	Visit pattern	Duration of visit
1	Personal car	Friends	Weekend
2	Organized tour	Family	One day
3	Public transportation	Partner	3 to 7 days
4		Colleagues	More than one week

Table 4: Results for the Chi square tests on the relation between visit pattern, age and marital status

Test variables	α	DF	Critical value	Test value
Visit pattern with age	0.05	20	31.4104	32.686
Visit pattern with marital status	0.05	8	15.5073	35.943

*DF stands for the degree of freedom which is used along with the critical value to determine the acceptance or rejection of the alternative hypothesis. If the test value is greater than the critical value, the alternative hypothesis (which assumes that there is a relation between the variables being tested) is accepted.

The preference for group size by the majority of respondents (36%) is 5 to 10 persons. This implies that visitors in general prefer small group size. Concerning the willingness to travel to the destination, 61.4% of the respondents are willing to travel from 1.5 to 2 hours. Lebanon is considered a small country (an area of 10,452 km²), so this result shows that distance is not an obstacle or problem for the majority of those visitors surveyed.

For the duration of visit, the majority of respondents (84.3%) prefer short visits (one day trip and weekend). Since the majority of respondents are young visitors (see table 1) it is assumed that they may not have the time to spend more than a weekend, or they cannot afford it with an average monthly income of 1000 to 1500\$. However, the fact that respondents prefer short visits instead of lengthy ones is not only associated with their personal characteristics, but also related to the limited diversified packages provided by rural areas in Lebanon to encourage visitors extend their stay. Though, even if visitors will have additional income, they may prefer to spend it abroad visiting new tourism destinations.

The majority of visitors (48.8%) surveyed reported visiting rural areas only 0 to 6 times per year, which is in average equal to one time per two months. Also, this is considered as limited number of visits per year associated with reasons stated above or with the personal characteristics of visitors.

4.3. Respondents' willingness to pay and budget

Results concerning visitors' willingness to pay for the various services and facilities provided at rural destinations (figure 2), show that in general the majority of visitors are not willing to allocate high budget for the services at rural areas and they cannot afford the prices of tour operators' packages due to their limited income level. Figure 2 represents the percentages of respondents who are willing to budget a minimum, average and maximum price for the different services provided. For the transportation/trip if using their personal car and are organizing trip by their own, the majority of respondents (27.3%) are willing to budget on average 45,000 L.L. and about 18% are willing to pay max 65,000 L.L. Additionally, for food and beverage (2 meals at least/day/person), the majority of respondents (29.6%) are willing to pay the average amount of money which is equal to 43,000 L.L and only 16% are willing to pay the max amount of money allocated for food and beverage in the marketplace which is around 70,000 L.L.

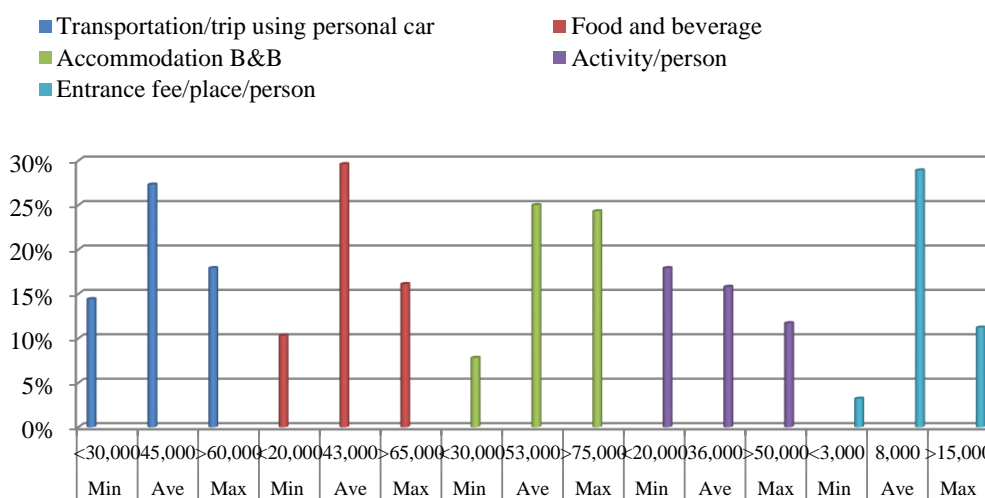


Fig.2. Budget allocated by travelers when organizing the trip on the visitor's own

For the accommodation B&B/ night/person, the majority of respondents (25%) are willing to pay an average price of 53,000 L.L and an equal percentage is willing to pay the max price which is approximate to 80,000 L.L. Moreover, among the 87% who are interested in the rural destination activities, 11.7% are willing to pay a price of more than 50,000 L.L. per activity/person; and 15.8% are willing to budget an average price of 36,000 L.L, while among the 99% who are interested in visiting specific sites, landmarks, museums, etc., about 29% are willing to budget an average price of 8,000 L.L.

The above results show the amounts visitors are willing to budget for the various services provided when self-organize their trips. However, regarding the amounts visitors are willing to pay for a readymade travel package (including transportation, food, accommodation, entrances, and some activities) are somehow different. For a one day tour, 12.8% are willing to budget a max price of more than 80,000 L.L. and 35.1% are willing to pay an average price of 45,000 L.L. For a weekend tour, 36% are willing to budget an average of 143,000 L.L. while only 6% are willing to budget more than 250,000 L.L. For local souvenirs and handicrafts, 37.8% (the highest percentage) is willing to budget a min price of 10,000 L.L. - 20,000 L.L. While for local produce, 31.2% are willing to budget the average total of 21,000 L.L. and 13.1% 40,000 L.L. as a max price.

Based on the above results, the observation that could be made is that respondents are willing to budget more for a weekend tour when self-organize their trips compared to what they are willing to budget for an organized trip package. The calculations show that they are ready to budget 228,000 L.L. for a weekend tour on a self-organized trip and only 143,000 L.L. with a tour operator. Interpretations could be made that the “psychological” cost of organized trips is perceived as high compared to the cost of self-organized trips.

To more understand and analyze the factors that may affect the willingness to pay for the different services provided, chi square tests were conducted. Results in table 5 show that the willingness to pay for food and beverage is dependent of the type of food and restaurant provided. For instance, the majority of visitors (38%) who prefer to eat in a self-catering restaurant are willing to budget 21,000L.L.-35,000 L.L. for 2 meals per person per day. The majority of visitors (31%) who prefer conventional Lebanese restaurants and fusion restaurants are willing to budget 36,000 L.L.-50,000 L.L. per person and per day. For the majority (42.2%) who prefer simple snacks and bakeries they are willing to budget 21,000 L.L.-35,000 L.L. per person per day. Therefore, the highest amount of money is budgeted to eat at Lebanese and fusion restaurants.

Table 5: Relation between willingness to pay for food & beverage and accommodation and other independent variables

Test variables	α	DF	Critical value	Test value
Food & beverage and restaurant preference	0.05	16	26.296	34.154
Accommodation with marital status	0.05	8	15.5073	32.111

The second chi square test has shown a relation of dependence between willingness to pay for accommodation and the visitors' marital status. For example, the majority of married respondents (37%) are willing to budget more than 75,000 L.L. for accommodation, while, the majority of single respondents (27%) are willing to pay between 46,000 L.L. and 60,000 L.L (figure 3).

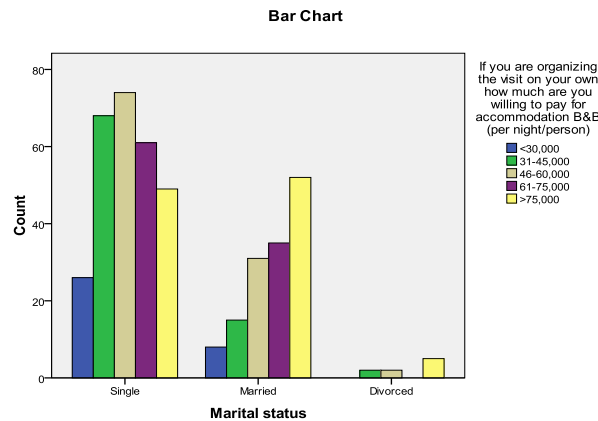


Fig.3. Relation between willingness to pay for accommodation and visitors' marital status

4.4. Consumer behavior and motivations

Respondents were asked about the most usual tools they used when looking for tourism information and prices. Figure 4 shows that the majority of respondents (almost 74%) prefer to use the internet and social media.

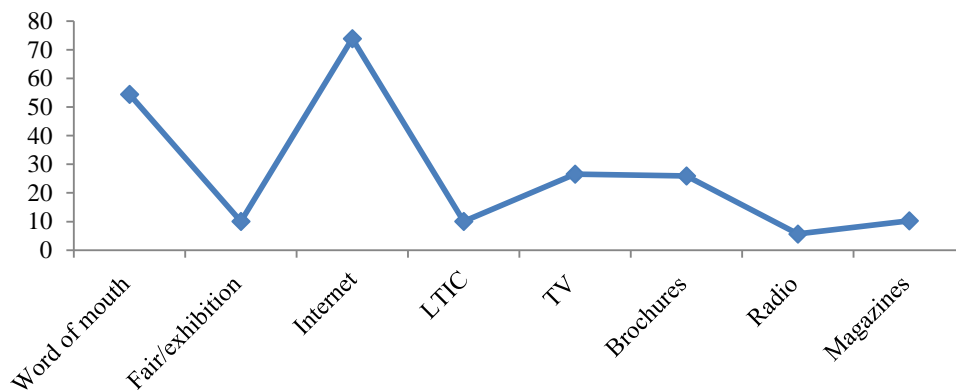


Fig.4. Tools used to look for tourism information and prices (LTIC- Local Tourism Information Center)

The word of mouth selected by 54.4% of the respondents which is considered as an influential tool for getting information and taking purchase decisions. Fair and exhibitions selected by only 10% of the correspondents are considered more as means to promote products and attract potential customers rather than a way to search for tourism information and prices.

For the preference of accommodation type, figure 5 shows that 57% of the respondents prefer to stay in a chalet, 52% prefer camping site and 47% prefer small hotels, while small percentages are associated to the other accommodations types. The chalet was in the top of mind for the majority of respondents. It is assumed that chalet, camping and small hotels are the oldest and most common types of accommodation and have the cheapest prices as compared to other accommodations' types, while for the B&B and guesthouses, people in Lebanon don't know what to expect in these new forms of lodging, they tend to choose what is more familiar for them especially that the concepts of guesthouses and eco-lodges are not well introduced for visitors in Lebanon yet.

Concerning the type of restaurant most preferred by the respondents, 52.10% selected “conventional Lebanese restaurant”. Using the same total weighted score used previously; the types of restaurants were ranked as most and least preferred by the majority of respondent as follow: conventional Lebanese restaurant come in the top of mind of the majority of domestic visitors surveyed, followed by self-catering and picnicking, simple snacks and bakeries, and the least preferred type of restaurant for the majority of respondents is fusion restaurant.

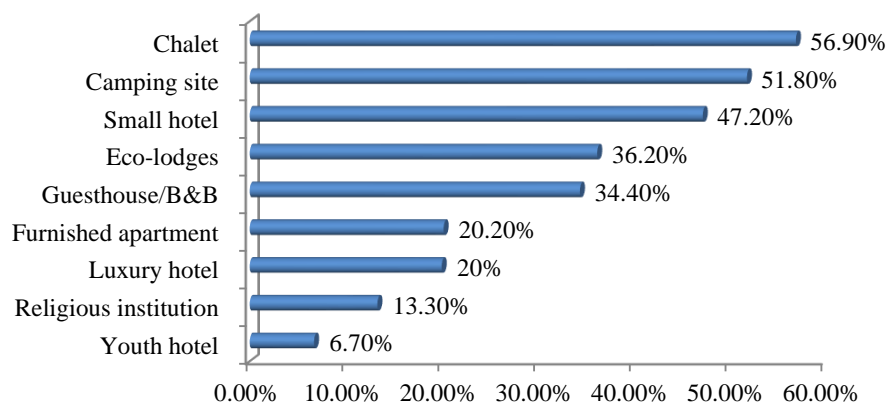


Fig.5. Respondnets' preference for different accommodation' types

Another concern related to rural tourism management is environmental protection. Protecting the environment and its resources at rural areas is one of the core principles and values of sustainable tourism, many tourism policies and regulations at rural areas in Lebanon especially in areas of high protection such as nature reserves encourage or even prohibit visiting the area alone without a local guide as a practice to benefit local people in these areas, improve the economic situation of the region and enhance the experience of visitors. For instance, at Shouf Biosphere Reserve-SBR which is the largest nature reserve in Lebanon (5% of the Lebanese territory) visitors cannot have access to some areas without a local guide (Shouf Biosphere Reserve, 2014).

The results of the survey with regard to that issue shows that the majority of respondents (38.6%) prefer to discover the area by their own without a guide. The lack of interest in a guide may be explained by the idea that local guides in the majority of rural areas in Lebanon are not qualified in term of skills and capabilities; in addition, they are not well organized.

Figure 6 shows the major factors that may attract the respondents to visit rural areas. For the majority of respondents (71.3%), visiting rural areas is guided by the attractiveness of the nature and biodiversity of the rural area visited. Landscape and scenery is also another factor for 51.4% of the respondents, climate is also selected by 42.7% of the respondents. Other percentages are being distributed almost equally on other attracting aspects.

To know the relation between the visitors' age and attraction factors, chi square test was conducted (α : 0.05; DF: 5; critical value: 11.070), the test value (13.759) shows a relation of dependence between the two tested variables. Young visitors visit rural areas to enjoy its nature and biodiversity while older visitors are attracted mainly by history, culture and traditions.

When asked about their motivations to visit rural areas (figure 6), the majority of respondents (65.8%) selected relaxation. Stress of daily life, the lifestyle along with the pollution and traffic in urban areas are all factors that motivate people to escape the city seeking relaxation and calm. Discovering, entertainment, enjoying nature and adventure are all motivations identified almost equally by respondents. However, for the majority of respondents (81.2%), meeting local people is not a motivation for them. This result is compatible with the previous one: young visitors are not interested in the culture of the area visited; they are not motivated to meet new people and

get to know the rural traditions and habits. Hence, visitors are not aware that meeting local people is one of the ways that contribute to peace building, and decrease stereotyping. Another reason that demotivate people to meet local people is that Lebanon is a small country; there is no huge cultural discrepancy between regions that motivate people discover different cultures and traditions. However, even the differences that exist between the regions and villages do not encourage visitors to discover them.

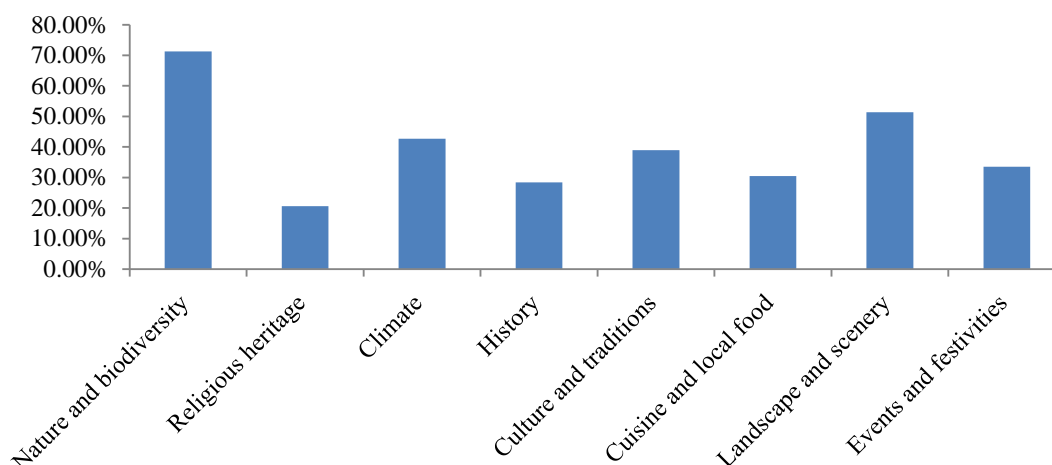


Fig.6. Factors that attract people to visit rural areas

When visiting rural areas, the majority of visitors (33%) focus on a cluster of villages, meaning that they are interested in visiting many villages at the same time. This preference may be related to the fact that visitor's stays in rural areas are relatively short and they tend to discover as many attractions as they can on one same visit.

When in rural areas, the majority of respondents are interested to go hiking, cycling, caving, camping, and farming (figure 7). Hiking, camping, cooking/food tasting and sightseeing got the highest interest among respondents. In addition to the unique experience it provides, camping is a cheap form of accommodation and is a highly chosen activity option. The visitor interest in cooking and food tasting is contradictory to their lack of interest in cuisine and local food (refer to figure 6). This contradiction can be associated with the fact that visitors don't separate between food as an activity and food as a service. Other interpretation is that food heritage is not well introduced and enhanced in Lebanon and does not create a need for visitors by itself to attract them visit the rural destination.

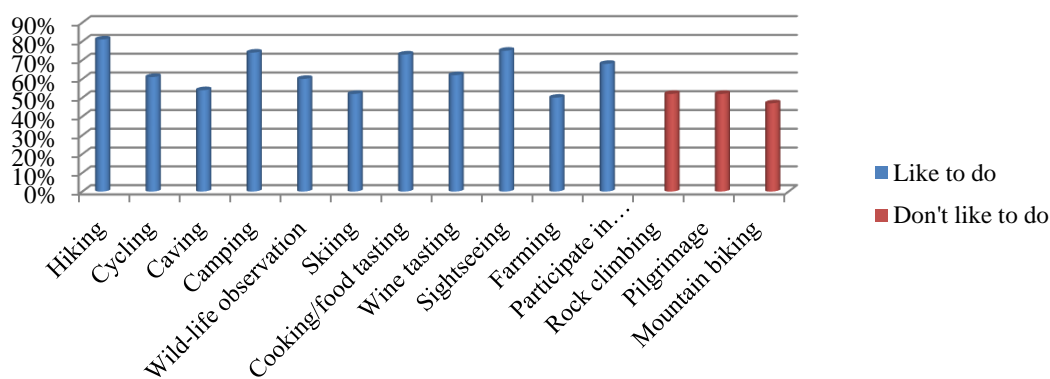


Fig.7. Preferences for tourism activities in rural areas.

The majority of respondents are not interested in doing rock climbing, pilgrimage and mountain biking. When visitors were asked about the reasons behind this lack of interest, they described them as dangerous and risky activities. Respondents showed a lack of confidence in the safety and security measures undertaken at rural areas that cannot protect visitors from any accident when occurred.

It is normally assumed that age and income can affect the choice of an activity. Chi square test in table 6 shows a test value of 22.964 which is greater than the critical value for the relation between interest in tourism activities at rural areas and visitors' age. Assumptions may be made that young visitors (18-25 years old) are more interested in hiking, mountain biking, rock climbing, caving and other activities which are considered as more adventurous and risky, while visitors aged between 31 and 39 years old for example are more interested in wild-life observation, sightseeing, food tasting, wine tasting, cooking, etc. (activities that are considered as safer, traditional and authentic). However, no relation has been identified ($10.320 < 11.070$) between the preference for a tourism activity and the visitors' level of income or age.

Table 6: Relation between activities and respondents' age and personal income

Test variables	α	DF	Critical value	Test value
Activities with age	0.05	5	11.070	22.964
Activities with income	0.05	5	11.070	10.320

5. Conclusion

The rural tourism market survey was developed to study and understand tourism demand of potential domestic visitors to rural areas. Conducting the survey at Garden show- travel Lebanon in Beirut, has allowed the researchers to reach 436 domestic Lebanese visitors, mostly urban inhabitants. The survey analysis revealed several important conclusions with regard to the preferences and behavior of potential visitors to rural areas in Lebanon.

The preference toward self-organizing the trip, exploring the area without a local guide, and using personal cars instead of joining organized tour transportation are all factors reflecting a lack of confidence by the surveyed respondents in what is being provided by tourism stakeholders and show that the surveyed visitors' culture has a great impact on their decisions and behaviors. Therefore, it is recommended for tourism stakeholders to enhance and improve the quality of their services and to maintain a good relation with customers, as well as raise the qualifications of local guide at rural areas. Pricing strategies are also to be developed precisely targeting different types of visitors. Achieving these results need effective marketing strategies including segmentation, development of niche markets and customized tourism packages.

The analysis of the respondents' personal characteristics revealed that married respondents are not interested to visit rural areas with their children, they fear doing so because of the weak safety measures undertaken to protect visitors especially children from any incident when occurred. Furthermore, no specific and safe areas are developed for children. Hence, it is suggested to develop tourism packages targeting families and to provide specific areas for children where they can enjoy activities that match their ages and needs, protected and maintained to prevent and decrease the possibility of accidents.

On the other hand, the low tourism season particularly during winter in Lebanon has affected negatively tourism revenues and created joblessness for people in rural areas who rely mainly on the tourism industry. The fact that the majority of respondents prefer to visit rural areas during summer is associated with the respondents' habits and traditions as well as their culture, tourism stakeholders need to raise the awareness of visitors toward the availability of winter activities, the attractiveness of winter attractions and the uniqueness of Lebanese villages which

can be an attractive location for different tourism activities preferred by different types of visitors.

Additionally, rural areas need to maintain a good image about the area and the services they are providing and to enhance customer relation by developing effective and interactive websites and allow visitors to have access to critical information before visiting the area, it is recommended that any effort to provide information needs to use and benefit from the internet and social media which took the highest percentages by the surveyed respondents. This is also the responsibility of tourism research centers to conduct more rural tourism researches and share the results with tourism stakeholders and visitors.

This research investigated the motivations of visitors to rural areas. Anna Farmaki (2012) has stated that motivation can be triggered by many factors affecting tourists. This study found that the major motivations of visitors to rural area are relaxation and escaping to nature, it was surprisingly to know that visitors who are in majority young visitors are not interested in the historical and cultural attributes of the rural area visited. Therefore, rural villages need to convey an image of authenticity and to enhance the cultural values of the rural tourism destination. The outcomes of this study also provided important implications toward the authenticity of rural tourism products; local tourism providers are required to work more on the design of their products and their pricing strategies, one major challenge for them is to prove added value of what they are selling, since in order to avoid commodification it is impossible to increase the quantity of authentic products including souvenirs and handicrafts.

Moreover, several implications are particularly useful for national tourism planning efforts. Tourism stakeholders who are in direct communication with visitors need to increase their awareness toward the importance of respecting sustainable tourism principles and core values. Visiting rural areas and staying in luxury hotel or eating in fusion restaurant does not mean that visitors have participated in rural tourism and conducted a sustainable behavior. The concepts of guest houses, eco-lodges and other forms of environmentally friendly accommodation need to be communicated more effectively with potential customers. It is true that the researchers have studied tourism demand to know visitor's needs and preferences and encourage them visit more rural areas but it is very important to maintain a balance between satisfying visitors and protecting the environment and its resources.

Finally, the limitations of this study should be discussed with regard to future research. The Travel Lebanon and Garden Show visitors may not be fully representative of the urban population, therefore, additional studies are to be conducted to complement this study and make more comprehensive and reliable conclusions. Additionally, the conclusion of this research is based on the study of the potential domestic visitors and not tourists; it would be interesting to know what may attract tourists to visit rural areas in Lebanon and to compare their motivations with those of domestic visitors in order to create a compatibility seeking to protect the authenticity of rural areas. It would also be interesting to conduct this study from a supply side aiming to create a match between what is being provided and what is really demanded. The political instability is another topic of interest with regard to rural tourism especially with all what is happening today. Food heritage/trails and other new forms of rural tourism including agro-tourism and farming are also potential niche markets which should be studied with regard to future research.

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