Tourist Insights About Travel Experience in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

This qualitative study explored the quality of the tourist experience in Saudi Arabia. A total of 255 tourists who had visited Saudi Arabia in the last six months and had stayed for at least two nights were surveyed using an open-ended questionnaire. The results showed that most of the participants had a positive travel experience and valued the local history and culture of Saudi Arabia. They found the country hospitable with friendly locals and excellent hospitality services. Furthermore, their views on Saudi Arabia changed following their visit, particularly regarding local people. Most participants reported feeling more optimistic about the people of Saudi Arabia after their visit, noting that they were welcoming and kind. Additionally, many participants said that they felt more connected to the culture and history of Saudi Arabia after experiencing it firsthand. They also noted plenty of attractions to explore in Saudi Arabia, from historical sites to modern shopping malls. Overall, the tourists had a positive experience when visiting Saudi Arabia and came away with a

greater appreciation for its culture and people. This study is unique as it focuses on the tourists' perspective of the quality of their experience in KSA.

Keywords: Tourism, Hospitality, Culture, Tourist Experience, Tourist Behavior, Experience Quality.

Introduction

Tourism in Saudi Arabia is a growing industry, and the government is committed to the development of the local tourism industry as part of its efforts to diversify the Saudi economy. This research aims to develop a better understanding of the factors that lead to a satisfactory travel experience for tourists who visit Saudi Arabia. This topic is critical as tourism is one of the primary industries being developed by the Saudi government in compliance with Vision 2030. By helping to understand the factors that affect the quality of tourist experience for those visiting Saudi Arabia, this research guides the features that the tourism industry in Saudi Arabia should prioritize. By prioritizing these factors and enhancing them, the experience quality for those visiting Saudi Arabia can be improved.

Literature Review

Tourism Industry in Saudi Arabia

Tourism has been a significant contributor to Saudi Arabia's economic growth, and the country aims to strengthen its competitiveness and ability to attract global tourists. The 2030 Vision Plan, launched by Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman in 2016, highlighted Saudi Arabia's plans to diversify the country's economy and reduce its dependence on oil trade by focusing on tourism and other industries. Vision 2030's primary objective is to promote Saudi Arabia as a tourist destination locally and internationally by enhancing the country's capacity to deliver the goods

and services necessary to make it a popular tourist destination (Visit Saudi Arabia, 2023).

The Saudi government strives to develop its tourism industry as it leads to increased air travel and higher demand for tourist services (Alsumairi & Tsui, 2017; Esmail, 2018; Nurunnabi, 2017).

The Saudi government established the Ministry of Tourism to ensure that the tourism sector in Saudi Arabia undergoes development (Alsumairi & Tsui, 2017). In 2019, it was declared by the Saudi Ministry of Tourism that some rules will be changed, including the condition that couples can only share accommodation if they are married. Foreign women are also not obligated to wear Abaya, and they can book hotel rooms without the permission of a male guardian (Masood, 2021).

The government of Saudi Arabia has launched a long-term strategy for developing its tourism sector focused on attracting an increasing number of foreign visitors (Daye, 2019). The Saudi government is focusing on expanding the holy cities as well as other facilities necessary for tourism growth, like airports and transportation networks, to cater to the various needs of travelers, including religious, business, and entertainment (Aina et al., 2019; Mahmood & Alkahtani, 2018).

According to the official statistics provided by the government of Saudi Arabia, in September 2021, 67 million tourists visited Saudi Arabia (Visit Saudi Arabia, 2023).

This reform process has been fundamental in promoting key tourism initiatives. Since the launch of electronic visas or 'e-visas' in September 2019, the country has attracted more international visitors. The e-visa permits foreign visitors to enter and exit Saudi Arabia quickly (Abuhjeeleh, 2019).

Saudi Arabia's ranking in the global tourism sector has evolved over the last few years, as noted by Balan et al. (2009), Mazanec and Ring (2011), Crotti and Misrahi

(2015), and Khan, SI 2020. The Saudi tourism industry has grown significantly after developing specific, clear policies and an institutional structure (Khan, SI 2020).

Saudi Arabia is a big country with differing geographical attributes, locations, and travel destinations. Two of the largest cities in Saudi Arabia are Riyadh and Jeddah. Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia, has a population of more than two million people and has a variety of locations, including museums, cultural sites such as Masmak Citadel, and religious destinations like the Al Rajhi Grand Mosque. The city also has many big shopping malls, like the Al Faisaliyah Centre and Al Nakheel Mall. Tourists tend to visit Riyadh for cultural, health, business, and religious events as well as for business conferences (Al-Khateeb & Al-Hazmi, 2017). The King Khalid International Airport accesses Riyadh, and the city was chosen as the cultural capital of the Arab world by UNESCO in 2000.

As a major supplier of oil in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia has the advantage of using wealth generated through oil trade as well as political and commercial ties with other nations to develop and establish its tourism industry (Alalmai & Arun, 2020; Masood, 2021).

Tourist

Tourists include travelers who had visited Saudi Arabia within the previous six months and had stayed for at least two consecutive nights. (Ghanem, J., 2017; Tourism Definitions, 2023)

Novelty

Novelty refers to a travel experience that is unique and differs from other journeys experienced in life (Blomstervik et al., 2020; Borhan, Ibrahim & Miskeen, 2019). Huang and Crotts (2019) mention that while traveling, visitors look for various levels of novelty based on their likes and dislikes as well as the purpose of the trip.

Moreover, Skavronskaya, Moyle, and Scott (2020) discovered that while choosing travel destinations, visitors look for inspiration. Skavronskaya et al. (2020) mention that novelty depends on the quality of travel experiences and the degree of enjoyment experienced by the tourists. Further, Mitas and Bastiaansen (2018) suggested that the quality of the tourist experience depends on whether the tourist experienced and enjoyed new stimuli. Huang and Crotts (2019) claimed that the motivation to travel is derived from novelty. Skavronskaya et al. (2020) contended that novelty-seekers are a group of travelers who enjoy visiting new environments. Additional studies propose that surprise is an essential component of the novelty model (Khairudin & Rahman, 2020).

Experience Quality

According to Hwang & Lee (2019), experience quality means the emotional reaction of travelers to the social and psychological advantages of travel experiences. Lee et al. (2011) suggest that experience quality is the overall evaluation of the incident at a tourist location over a specific period.

According to Chang (2018), the quality of customer experience includes the emotional evaluation of the customer's whole experience of a well-planned service environment.

Emotional Responses to Experience Quality

Tourism research studies highlight the importance of understanding the emotional reactions of tourists to their experiences while traveling (Khairudin & Rahman, 2020; Suhartanto et al., 2020; Wu, H-C & Li, 2017). According to research, one of the critical determinants of pleasure derived from traveling is the extent of excitement, enjoyment, and memorability felt by tourists (Buonincontri et al., 2017).

Altunel and Koçak, Ö (2017) discovered that extraordinary leisure activities induce strong emotions. The quality of the tourism experience depends on the emotional reactions to such activities. (Suvantola, 2018). Moreover, tourists' memories are affected significantly by their emotional reactions (Blomstervik et al., 2020). Cetin and Bilgihan (2016) suggested that the total satisfaction derived by a tourist from a service depends on feelings like pleasure. Emotions have a significant impact on the quality of tourists' experience and their choices while evaluating post-travel behavior (Mitas & Bastiaansen, 2018) (Pestana, Parreira & Moutinho, 2020).

Due to increasing competition in the tourism industry, Saudi Arabia needs to develop an understanding of the perceptions of tourists so they can produce branding and marketing strategies that will enable them to compete with other countries. This research will analyze the experiences and perspectives of tourists who have visited Saudi Arabia recently.

Research Question

What are the tourists' perceptions of their tourism experience while visiting Saudi Arabia?

Methodology

This research has utilized a qualitative approach using an open-ended questionnaire. For this research, the questionnaire was translated from English to Arabic language and was administered in both languages using Google Forms. Using a questionnaire in both Arabic and English language helps the participants understand the questions quickly and respond in their preferred language (AlHadi et al., 2017).

The data for this study was collected from participants who met the selection criteria of the researchers. The criteria include tourists who had visited Saudi Arabia in the last six months and had stayed in the Kingdom for at least two nights in a row. These

participants were provided with a brief outline of the study to help them understand the purpose of this research.

The data was collected using an online self-administered questionnaire. To select tourists who had visited Saudi Arabia within the previous six months and had stayed for at least two nights, a filter question was used. The participants who fell in the above category then went on to answer the survey questions.

Results

The respondents who filled out the survey had to answer the filter question first. Then, those respondents who qualified as tourists went on to answer the survey questions. The survey was filled by 255 respondents. Out of these, 247 surveys were filled.

Demographics: As shown in Figure 1, the most significant number of travelers, 43.3%, came to Saudi Arabia from the Middle East, mainly the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Kuwait, and Jordan. The second most significant number of tourists, 33.1%, came from English-speaking countries like Australia, Canada, and the United States. About 15.5% of visitors came from Asia, specifically countries like China, Malaysia, and Singapore. Only 7.7% of tourists came from Russia and Mexico. In 2019, The Saudi Commission for Tourism and Antiquities reported a higher percentage of Middle Eastern tourists in contrast to other international tourists. The Saudi Commission for Tourism and Agriculture also reported that most Asian tourists were from China and Malaysia. In contrast, most Western travelers belonged to the United Kingdom and the United States (Khowala, 2022).

About 53% of respondents to the survey were single, 7.3% were married, whereas 9.3% were divorced. As observed from Figure 1, according to the preliminary analysis of marital status, most travelers in both the married and divorced groups were from Middle Eastern countries.
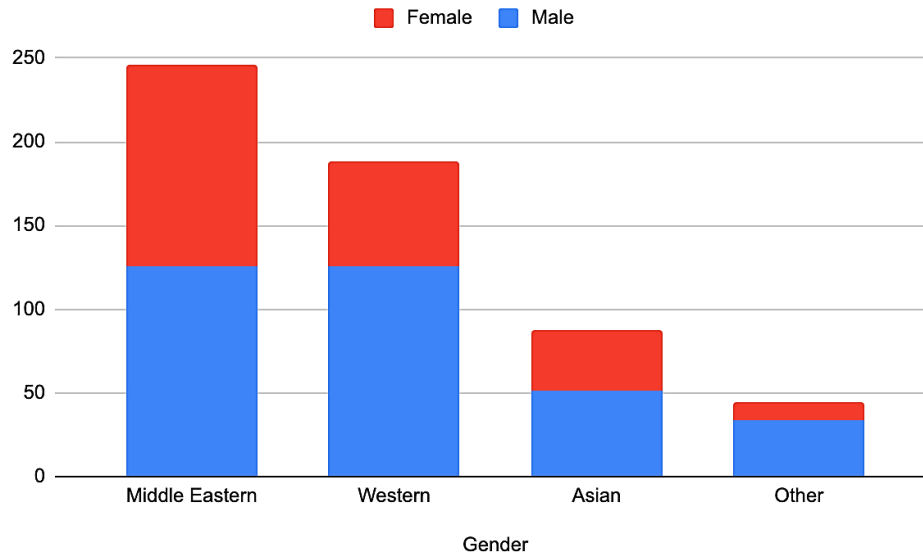
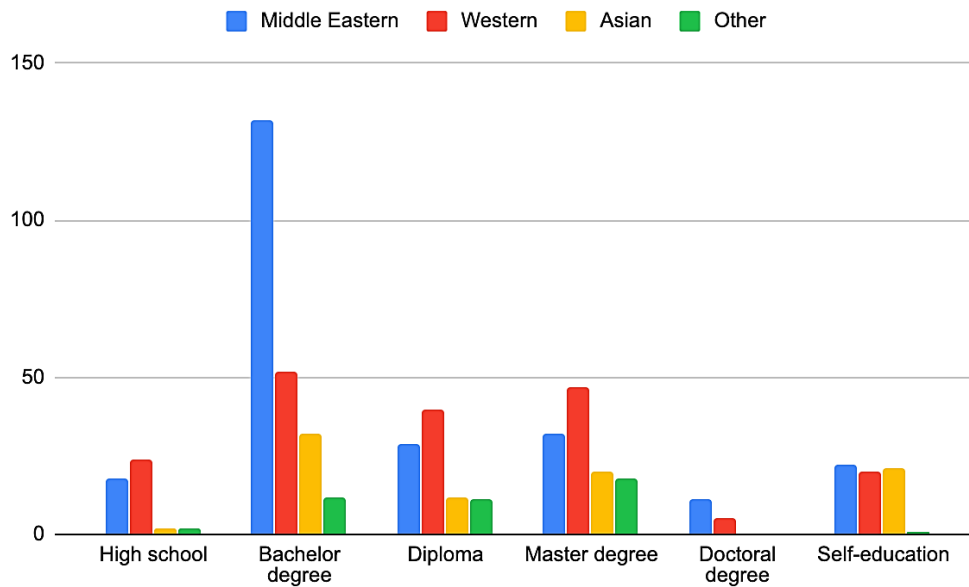Figure 1: Respondent's Genders and Nationalities

Figure 2: Respondent's level of education

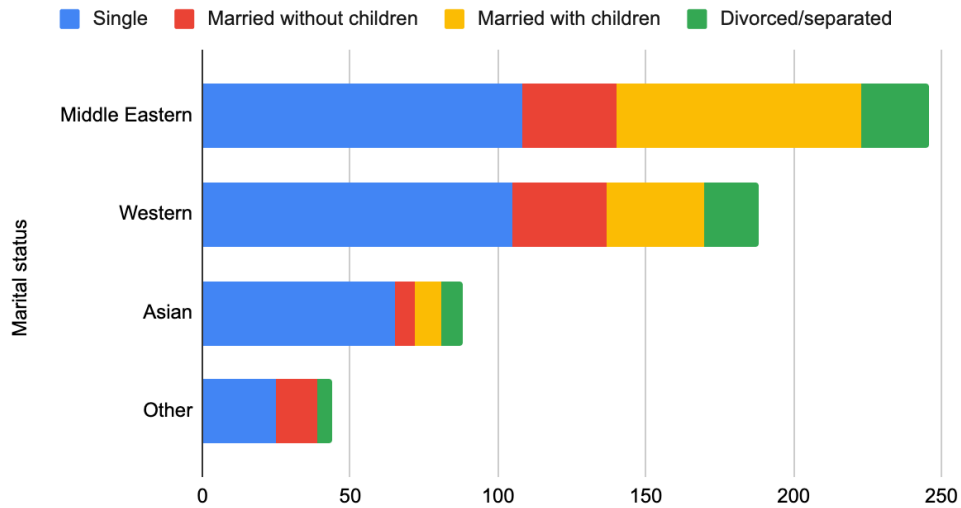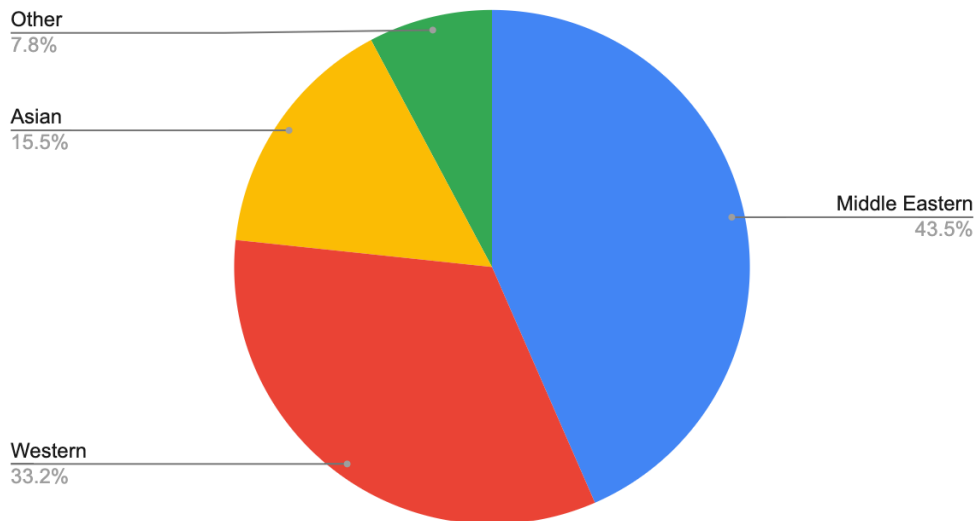Figure 3: Respondent's marital status

Figure 4: The nationality of respondents

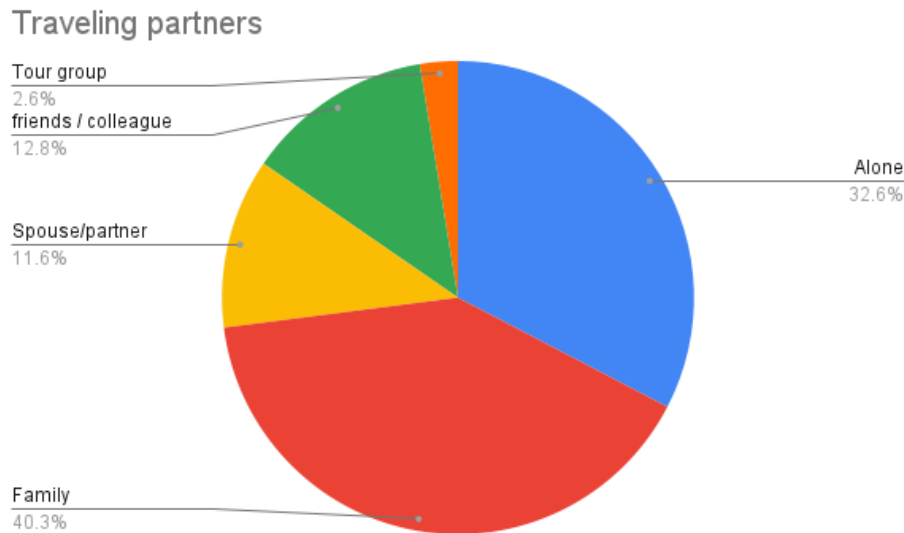Figure 5: Word cloud showing travel experience description

Figure 6: Traveling Partners

While describing their travel experience in Saudi Arabia, almost 89.5% of participants used positive statements. As illustrated in the word cloud Figure 5, travelers described the experience with terms like "enjoyable", "amazing", "memorable", "unforgettable" and "fantastic".

As shown in Figure 6, Almost 40.3% of respondents traveled to Saudi Arabia with family, whereas 32.6% came alone. 12.8% came to Saudi Arabia with either friends or colleagues and 11.6% traveled with their spouse/partner, only 2.6% came with a tour group.

Almost 35% of respondents stressed that they enjoyed learning about the local history and culture of Saudi Arabia as well as the locals' language and way of living. This was clear from statements like "an eye-opening experience," "an amazing cultural experience," or "gives me an insight into the world's most historically rich country".

Travelers highlighted that the hospitality, friendliness, and pleasant attitude of the local people made their experience more joyful. For instance, "The best of my experience is meeting the native people here," and: "Really good experience plus local people very welcoming".

About 32% of tourists who were mainly from the Middle East, considered their experience as joyful due to familiarity with the language as well as cultural connections with their own country. For instance, a visitor from Kuwait stated: "It is my second country; I love being here," and a traveler from the United Arab Emirates observed: "Saudi Arabia is a wonderful country; I've been there five times myself and still think about when I'll be able to go again."

Nearly 12% enjoyed their experience because the experiences were organized properly. For instance, a traveler who attended a music concert stated: "The music concert I attended was well organized. I loved being there". Only 9% of the

participants mentioned the religious attractions and traditions of Saudi Arabia; they stated that visiting the country induced extreme feelings related to Islam. One visitor commented: "Visiting these holy places makes me feel comfortable, calm, and safe." Another said: "The spiritual presence is high here."

Another group, including about 13% of visitors, mostly from Western countries, stated that their goals were achieved, or the visit had surpassed their expectations, with statements like: "Better than what I expected" or "surprisingly impressed!!", "it was unexpectedly beautiful." "This trip surpassed all expectations. People were friendly! The scenery was stunning. The traditional food was tasty". Another tourist detailed his experience:

"Saudi Arabia was different from what I had expected and in a very positive way. I felt completely safe here as a solo female traveler. I'm surprised how locals are friendly and extremely respectful. My travel experience here is completely different, so maybe one day, I will be back in Saudi Arabia."

Travelers suggested their feelings about Saudi Arabia changed after their trip, especially about the Saudi people. Remarkably, one visitor conveyed his surprise at the local education level and the ability of locals to communicate in English so well:

"I am very surprised how good the English speakers are. I mean, go to Paris or Barcelona, and most random people on the street won't be able to communicate in English with you like that".

About 10.5% of participants mentioned that the trip was not bad. They used terms like: "goodish," "so-so," "passable," or "reasonably good." Many problems were highlighted as a reason for discontent, including bad traffic as well as public transport limitations. For example:

"Public transportation is limited, which made it somewhat expensive to go around, but this allows us to talk more with the locals as most taxi drivers were local, very friendly, and extremely happy to help."

This reaction shows that the public transport system in Saudi Arabia should be improved to make sure that visitors have easy access to travel destinations.

Another reason for displeasure was the weather: "I like everything except the weather." Other travelers mentioned the hotel facilities; for example: "Unfortunately, the hotels here are extremely expensive, and the quality is lower than I expected." The Ministry of Tourism should consider critical comments and find solutions to enhance the overall experience quality in Saudi Arabia.

Conclusion

This research helps in understanding the features of the Saudi tourism industry, which can lead to the development of tourist-focused traveling experiences.

The data collected during this research demonstrates that the main attraction in KSA is the natural beauty and scenic places, which families love. Most satisfied tourists came from nearby countries like the United Arab Emirates and Egypt to visit Saudi Arabia.

Most participants expressed positive sentiments about their travel experience in Saudi Arabia because of familiarity with the culture.

The data also shows that a small percentage of Western and Asian tourists also visited KSA, and they were attracted by the unique culture. Some of these tourists stressed that they have a higher appreciation for Saudi Arabia's history and culture, and their opinion about Saudi Arabia had altered after their visit, especially their beliefs about the local people. However, they also mentioned several discomforts, including traffic congestion and limitations of the local public transport system.

Recommendations

Based on this research, the following recommendations should be followed to improve the overall tourist experience in Saudi Arabia:

- The Saudi Ministry of Tourism should promote the individuality of Saudi history and culture to attract more international tourists, especially visitors from non-Arab countries.
- Authentic experiences should be offered at the historical areas situated all over Saudi Arabia.
- Local traditions, history, and culture must be highlighted in the advertisements targeted at foreign tourists.
- To increase the attractiveness of tourist destinations, additional housing facilities as well as entertainment venues should be made available for visitors.
- To attract Middle Eastern visitors, the quality of tourist attractions should be enhanced so that the various facilities are developed to meet the varying needs of tourists, such as for families traveling with young children, access to clean toilets, and kids' play areas should be readily available.
- To grow the tourism sector in Saudi Arabia, it is crucial to improve the overall quality of tourists' experience.

Limitations

- The sample of this research was limited to foreign visitors.
- Due to the time and financial restrictions for this research, convenience sampling was used.
- The data was collected only from areas where English and Arabic were the main languages used for communication. As a result, visitors who spoke languages other than Arabic and English were excluded.

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