

THE FEELINGS OF THE VISITORS PARTICIPATING IN RELIGIOUS TOURISM: THE CASE OF VIRGIN MARY HOUSE IN IZMIR

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Abstract

Tourism is an important activity for the global economy around the world. This situation leads to an endless change and innovation. The answers to the changing needs and expectations of customers are contributes to this development. Many different researches are being developed to compete under these conditions.

According to this study, identifying the feeling of the visitors participating in religious tourism is being able to request and an important response to meet the expectations. In this context, these research investigated feeling of the people who visit the Virgin Mary House. To quantify this phenomenon, semi-structured interview was used in this study which covered qualitative data collection techniques. As a result of this research, feelings of visitors in the holy place have been identified and their opinions and expectations have been evaluated.

Keywords: *Religious Tourism, Feeling, Holy sites, House of Virgin Mary, Izmir*

Introduction

Berli and Martin (2004) said “motivation is the need that drives an individual to act in a certain way to achieve the desired satisfaction” (Berli and Martin, 2004:626). Motivations of travel might be push or pull. Push motivation answered to request and emotional side of tourists mind. Pull motivations refers to the properties of the destination to be visited (Valle et al., 2006; 28). At the same time, having a purpose makes the trip more meaningful (Demir and Saribaş, 2015). There are many motivations for emotional frame of mind to participate tourism activities. Some of those are; to feel relaxed, have rest, discovering new things, travelling to different destinations (Saribaş and Öter, 2013; 53) or to visit holly, sacred places. One of the requirements of this case is religious

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tourism. Religious tourism is surely motivated for religious reasons (Rinschede, 1992).

Religious travel is not a new experience. From past to present, millions of people travel to pilgrimage destinations around the World (Timothy and Olsen, 2006; 1).

Religious tourism is one of the types of cultural tourism. According to the János Csapó, Tourism products, activities of religious tourism are (Csapó, 2012):

- Visiting religious sites and locations with religious motivation
- Visiting religious sites and locations without religious motivation (desired by the architectural and cultural importance of the sight)
- Pilgrimage routes

As we understand from the description of János Csapó, religious travel can be done with religious motivation or without religious motivation. At the same time, participants of religious activities may be in different emotions as in fear, exciting, emotional, happy, angry, confused, or none.

People are not attending the religious activities only for religious sites, but also for physical, mental, and social well-being and sometimes to understand the cultural differences. People find spirituality by religion; but some people find spirituality with music, nature, art and search for scientific truth or just for a travel. Some people are participated religious tourism without related to spirituality and some of them who don't belong to any religion seek spiritual contact during their travel. To better understand this distinction, Table 1. is explaining the main faces of these concepts. Table 1 compares the direction of religion and spirituality (Saad and Medeiros, 2012).

Table 1. Comparison of Religion and Spirituality.

RELIGION	SPIRITUALITY
“Specific set of beliefs and practices Strongly determined by culture Community focused organization (from outside to inside) Observable, measurable, objective Formal, orthodox, organized Behavior orientated, outward practices Authoritarian in terms of behaviors”	“Feelings of peace and connectedness Universal human characteristic Individualistic inner experience (from inside to outside) Less visible and measurable, more subjective Less formal, less orthodox, less systematic Emotionally orientated, inward directed Not authoritarian, little accountability”

In this situation, it's not expecting to visit holy places with the same motivation or feel the same thing of these people.

Theoretical framework

Religious tourism is defined as “trips that people make to fulfill their religious needs and to see faith attraction sites outside of where they live permanently” (Bingöl, 2007: 1). According to the religious perspective, religious tourism facilities are evaluation in tourism phenomenon by holy sites’ trips made by tourists of belonging to any religion (Sargin, 2006: 3). But most of the researchers agree that religious tourism is trips to the sites which have historical and cultural meaning apart from piety to individual’s quest for shrines and locales (Collins-Kreiner, 2010: 444). So tourists who participate religious tourism are not only join that tourism type to fulfill religious duties and become pilgrim, they can also join other touristic motivations (Başer and Başçı, 2012:430).

The biggest religious tourism movement is pilgrimage. According to Griffin (2007:16), pilgrimage is defined as “journeying to a sacred place or shrine as a devotee”. According to Collins-Kreiner (2010:154) more than two million Muslims are joining Hajj annually to Mecca and almost one quarter of all tourists who visiting to Israel are for pilgrimage. In this context, Turkey is an important religious and pilgrimage site. Anatolia has hosted many civilizations and religions for centuries. In this region many civilizations lived and left numerous works and trace behind (Bingöl, 2004: 125).

Both the development of ancient civilizations in Anatolia and having taken refuge in this land by heavy pressure to apostles in early Christianity and Jews in Middle Ages, have led many synagogues and churches take part with Islamic artifacts in Anatolia (Zaman, 2005: 2).

According to Ministry of Culture and Tourism’s data about “Religious Tourism Project in Turkey” 167 Islamic, 129 Christian and 20 Judaic artifacts has been identified in Turkey (Başer and Başçı, 2012: 432).

Turkey has great importance especially for Christianity. Christianity, although in fact was born in Jerusalem, has a special place in its spread and development of Anatolia (Keskinsöz, 1999: 13). Some of the apostles fleeing from oppression and persecution of the Romans came to Anatolia and tried to proselytize religious here (Zaman, 2005: 2). Because of that reason, there are significant churches, temples and ancient ruins sacred by Christians in Turkey. For instance, St. Pierre

Church, St. Nicholas Church, St. Paul House, Sumela Monastery, St. Tekla's Basilica, House of Virgin Mary, Seven Churches, Deyrulzafaran Monastery, Ani ruins are located in Anatolia. (Başer and Başçı, 2012: 432). Especially in Black Sea, Aegean and Mediterranean Region in Turkey, there is Christian heritage located (Bingöl, 2004: 125). There are also 9 centers which are pilgrim site accepted by Vatican. These centers are St.Pierre Church in Antakya/ Hatay, St. Paul House and Well in Tarsus/ Mersin, St. Nicolas Church in Antalya, Ayasofya Mosque in Bursa, Sardes Synagogue, Thyatira Church and Philadelphia Church in Manisa, Pisidia Ancient City in Isparta, Orthodox Church in Nevşehir, Laodicea Ancient City in Denizli and House of the Virgin Mary in Izmir/ Selçuk.

House of the Virgin Mary is one of the most important religious tourism centers in the country (Emekli, 2003:41). This place is located on the "Bulbul" Mountain which is 9 km away from Ephesus. It is believed that Virgin Mary came this place with Saint John and spent her last days in that house. In the 60s Pope Paul VI and in 80's Pope John-Paul II have visited House of Virgin Mary. Pope John-Paul II declared the Shrine of Virgin Mary as a pilgrimage place for Christians (<http://www.meryemana.info/>). After this declaration, the number of visitors has increased (Emekli, 2003:41). Also there is a ceremony organized here during first Sunday following 15th of August, and the people who join that ceremony become pilgrim. Therefore, House of Virgin Mary provides privilege to Turkey in religious tourism.

Visitors have different purpose and also different feelings before their trips and during their visits. Identifying the feeling of the visitors participating in religious tourism is being able to require and an important response to meet the expectations. From this perspective, these research investigated feeling of the people who visit the Virgin Mary House.

Methodology

Qualitative data collection technique has been used in this study. The interview from has been obtained from previous studies. Participants are composed of the visitors of Virgin Marry House in Izmir. Interviews were monitored through semi-structured format and the interview questions contained open questions and consist of two parts; there are demographic questions in the first section and three questions consisting

of feeling of the visitors, definition of the place according to the visitors and satisfaction of the visitors are in the second section.

36 visitors were interviewed in 2016. Research was held in Virgin Mary House in Izmir and took between 5 minutes and 15 minutes. It's asked permission from participants for the interview to be recorded and participants were informed of their right according to the human ethics requirements, especially the concealed nature of their participation and their right to refuse to answers any question or cut the interview whenever they want.

Data Analysis

According to the research, open-ended questions asked to the participants. It has been used the previous studies and experts opinion in the creation of the question. The questions redirected to the participants during the face to face interviews and it's supported by such questions; "Could you please explain more?", "Could you give some examples?".

A total of 36 visitors were identified from the database. Table 2 shows the personal profiles of respondents which are included age group, gender, educational level, country and the aim of the visits. Table 2 shows the demographic profiles of the respondents. According to the obtained results: There were 17 (47 %) male and 19 (53, 7%) female respondents. The numbers of female participants are more than the male participants.

Table 2.Personal Profiles of Respondents

Socio-Demographic Characteristics					
Gender	N	%	Country	N	%
Male	17	47	Australia	2	5
Female	19	53	Belgium	1	3
Age Group	N	%	Canada	1	3
24 or younger	2	5	China	1	3
25 – 31	6	17	Georgia	1	3
32 – 38	8	22,2	Holland	1	3
39 – 45	8	22,2	Iran	2	5
46 – 52	3	8,3	Italy	3	8
53 – 59	3	8,3	North Cyprus	1	3
60 or over	6	17	Malaysia	3	8
Educational Level	N	%	Philippines	1	3
Primary school	-	0	Portugal	1	3
Secondary School	9	25	Scotland	1	3
Bachelor Degree	19	53	Singapore	1	3

Master Degree	6	17		South Africa	2	5
Doctoral Degree	2	5		Spain	1	3
Aim of Visit	N	%		Saudi Arabia	1	3
Adventure	1	3		United Kingdom	3	8
Religion	6	17		United States of America	9	25
Travel	29	80				

In terms of age group, most popular answer was “32 – 38” and “39 – 45”, representing 44,4% (n=16) of the respondents. The next age groups were "24 or younger" 5% (n=2), "25-31" 17% (n=6), "32-38" 22,2% (n=8), "39-45" 22,2% (n=8), "46-52" 8,3 % (n=3), “53-59” 8,3% (n=3) and 60 or over 17% (n=6). In terms of age group, generally the middle age group is interested as it concluded from the numbers.

The education level of the respondents is classified into 5 groups such as "Primary School", "Secondary School", "Bachelor Degree" and "Master degree and Doctoral Degree". As a result of the applied analysis, it is determined that the main educational level was "Bachelor Degree" (53%). According to the research, participants, it's a kind of cultural travel, are generally high level of educated people (based on the "House of Virgin Mary").

Most respondents comes from "United States of America" 25% (n=9). The other respondents were coming from Australia (n=2), Belgium (n=1), Canada (n= 1), China (n= 1), Georgia (n=1), Holland (n= 1), Iran (n= 2), Italy (n= 3), North Cyprus (n=1), Malaysia (n= 3), Philippines (n=1), Portugal (n=1), Scotland (n=1), Singapore (1), South Africa (n=2), Spain (n=1), Saudi Arabia (n=1), United Kingdom (n=3).

Many of the respondents in this study also mentioned "Travel" as a reason of visiting "House of Virgin Mary". Besides, we identified that only one of them came for an Adventure and 6 of them came for a religion activity.

Table 3. Feelings of Visitors of Virgin Marry House.

<i>How do you feel at the House of Virgin Mary?</i>		
Code: Feelings of Respondents		
Themes	N	%
Peaceful	9	25
Spiritual	8	22,2
Faithful	2	5
Loyal	1	3
Excellent/Fabulous/Amazing	4	11,1
Devote	1	3
Calm	3	8
Solemnness	2	5
Blessed	7	19,4
No feeling	7	19,4
Interested	1	3
Nice	1	3
Return to Self	1	3
Unique	2	5
Honored	1	3
Engulfed	1	3
Happy	1	3
Thankful	1	3
Emotional	3	8
Excited	3	8
Impressive	1	3
Inspired	1	3
Closer to Mother Mary	1	3
Relaxed	1	3
Surprised	1	3
Extraordinary	1	3
Energetic	1	3

As shown in Table 3, 27 themes were created by the content analysis. These are “Peaceful, Spiritual, Faithful, Loyal, Excellent/Fabulous/Amazing, Devote, Calm, Solemnness, No feeling, Interested, Nice, Return to Self, Unique, Blessed, Honored, Engulfed, Happy, Thankful, Emotional, Excited, Impressive, Inspired, Closer to Mother Mary, Relaxed, Surprised, Extraordinary, Energetic.” The most

frequently encountered themes about feeling of visitors have been “to feel peaceful” which covers 25% of all answers. “To feel spiritual” is the second most common feeling of visitors (22,2%). “Not to have any feeling” (19,4%) and “to feel blessed” (19,4%) are the following most common answers.

One of the respondents, who felt peaceful in the Virgin Mary House, said that *“The Atmosphere deeply affected me. This place brought together history and religion and I felt peaceful while I was having my time in the holly place.”* The other respondent said that, *“I felt blessed when I see the house of Virgin Mary. I felt so happy and thankful to be in this holy place and the place engulfed my whole being.”* Despite most of the visitors had positive feeling such as peaceful, spiritual, blessed and happy etc., the rate of those people, who do not feel anything, was not too low. One of those visitors said that *“The place is great but only for the religious people, not for me. I did not fell something special. I just liked the nature of the place.”*

Table 4. Descriptions of Visitors of Virgin Marry House.

<i>How do you describe the House of Virgin Mary?</i>		
Code: Description of Virgin Mary House		
Themes	N	%
Historical	7	19,4
Authentic	2	5
Nice / Cute / Beautiful	8	22,2
Special	4	11,1
Interesting / Quaint	3	8
Amazing/Wonderful	2	5
Grate	3	8
Unique	1	3
Peaceful	4	11,1
Lovely	1	3
Simple	1	3
Small	2	5
Holly / Sacred /Biblical/Sanctity	13	36,1
Impressive	1	3
Calm	1	3
Just Religious	1	3

Solemn	1	3
Quite / Serene	2	5
Not Interesting	1	3
Worship	1	3
Crowded	1	3
Friendly	1	3

Table 4 shows 22 themes which are “Historical Place, Authentic Place, Nice / Cute / Beautiful Place, Special Place, Interesting / Quaint Place, Amazing/wonderful Place, Grate Place, Unique Place, Peaceful Place, Lovely Place, Simple Place, Small Place, Holly / Sacred /Biblical/sanctity Place, Impressive, Calm Palace, Just Religious, Solemn Place, Quite / Serene Place, Not Interesting Place, Worship, Crowded Place, Friendly” as a description of Virgin Mary House.

The most frequently encountered themes about description of Virgin Mary House by the visitors have been “Virgin Mary House is a Holly/ Sacred / Biblical/ Sanctity Place” which is 36,1 % of all answers. “Virgin Mary House is a Nice/ Cute/ Beautiful Place” (22,2%) is the second most common answers and the third most common answer is “Virgin Mary House is a Historical Place” (19,4).

There were positive and negative views for description of Virgin Mary House. One of these opinions was; “*This place is really lovely and historical place. It’s also sacred to both Christians and Muslims but it’s really smaller than I expected.*” The other respondent said that “*The place is really small but it’s too crowded. You need to wait long queue to get in the house but it takes only few minutes to see around. I think it’s not interesting place.*”

Table 5. Satisfaction of Visitors of Virgin Marry House.

<i>Did visiting this holy place meet your expectations?</i>		
Code: Satisfaction of Respondents		
Themes	N	%
Very Dissatisfied	2	5,5
Dissatisfied	2	5,5
Unsure	3	8
Satisfied	6	17
Very Satisfied	23	64

In terms of satisfaction of people, who visited The House of Virgin Mary, the most popular answer was “Very Satisfied”, representing 64% of the respondents. Very few respondents are “Dissatisfied” or “Totally Dissatisfied” of their visit to Virgin Mary House. Table 5 shows that most of the visitors are satisfied their expectations about Virgin Mary House.

One respondent, who is very satisfied, said that *“It’s a very nice and quiet place to relax. The place has beautiful landscape, wonderful small chapel in the forest with incredible view. So I’m really satisfied with my trip.”* But the one who was not satisfied at all said that *“I believe that those whom are religious will be satisfied; but for people who are not, it’s a not big deal for them. It’s just stone cottage on a hillside, which is reconstructed for me.”*

Conclusion

Religious tourism is one of the alternative tourism types which have great importance for destinations. This tourism type is different from other alternative tourism types due to main motivations. In tourism movements which are faith centered, some sensory notions such as peace, spirituality, faith, inner peace emerges. According to research findings, despite the main motivation for visiting to House of Virgin Mary is “travel”, they feel peaceful, spiritual, faithful, loyal, devote, solemnness, blessed, honored, engulfed, inspired after their journey. All the visitors visiting for religious purpose have religious based feelings. But also the visitors having just travel motivation, have quite feelings after their journey.

It is also important finding that, the most negative answer was “no feeling”. None of the visitors in 36 respondents mentioned negative feeling more than “no feeling” answer. This finding is supported by Table 5. The vast majority of respondents were content their travel. Faith motivates people to be better and disclose nice feelings. As a research finding, House of Virgin Mary serve a useful purpose by reviving positive feelings.

Therewithal, it is found that House of Virgin Mary is evaluated mostly as historical and holy place by the visitors. Most of the visitors

identified destination with positive expressions. Very small number of visitors made negative statements such as “small”, “crowded”, “just for religious” and “not interesting”.

Positive feelings and positive identifications are important for a destination especially for the religious centers. Faith supports positive feelings. The main reason for attending religious tourism is to feel better.

According to research findings, the House of Virgin Mary is perceived positively by visitors. It is also very important historical and holy religion tourism center and most of the visitors who come to that place are satisfied with their experiences.

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