
The college student travel market: exploring the key factors influencing higher education Arab students' travel decisions

Abdulaziz Mohammed Alsawafi

College of Applied Sciences,
University of Technology and Applied Sciences,
Nizwa, P.O. Box 699, Postal Code 611, Nizwa, Sultanate of Oman
Email: abdulazizalsawafi.niz@cas.edu.om

Hamed Almuhrzi

Sultan Qaboos University,
P.O. Box 42, P.C. 123, Al-khod, Sultanate of Oman
Email: h.almuhrzi@squ.edu.om

Abstract: The purpose of this study was to determine the key factors influencing Arab college students' travel decisions in terms of their selection of tourist attractions, accommodation, mode of transport, restaurants and travel agency. The study also sought to identify whether there are significant differences in travel decisions of Arab college students that could be attributed to socio-demographic variables. A questionnaire survey was used to collect data from 200 Arab college students. The study revealed that reputation and quality were always the most influencing factors on Arab college students' travel decisions, especially when they are choosing accommodation, mode of transport, restaurants and travel agency. On the other hand, the study showed that Arab college students are less likely to be affected by media publicity when choosing tourist attractions, accommodation, mode of transport, restaurants and travel agency. Finally, the study discussed both the theoretical and managerial implications related to Arab students' travel market, and possible future research directions.

Keywords: student travel market; travel decisions; student travel behaviour; destination choice; Arab.

Reference to this paper should be made as follows: Alsawafi, A.M. and Almuhrzi, H. (2022) 'The college student travel market: exploring the key factors influencing higher education Arab students' travel decisions', *Int. J. Leisure and Tourism Marketing*, Vol. 7, No. 3, pp.235–250.

Biographical notes: Abdulaziz Mohammed Alsawafi received his Master's and PhD degrees in Tourism and Hospitality Management from the University of Waikato, New Zealand in 2010 and 2013, respectively. He is an Assistant Professor of Tourism and Hospitality Management at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences, Oman. His main research interests focus on travel motivations, destination choice, travel and leisure constraints, and travel and leisure negotiation strategies.

Hamed Almuhrzi is an Assistant Professor at the College of Arts and Social Sciences, Sultan Qaboos University, Sultanate of Oman. His research interests focus on visitors' behaviour and experience, heritage tourism, and Arab/Muslim tourism.

1 Background of the research

As destinations compete to increase their share of the foreign tourist market, destination marketers and managers should have detailed and necessary information about their targeted markets (Alsawafi, 2013). Therefore, understanding what influences people's travel decisions is of critical importance in developing appropriate marketing strategies (Nyaupane et al., 2006; Nyaupane et al., 2011; Alsawafi, 2013; Eusébio and Carneiro, 2015; Almuhrzi and Alsawafi, 2017). The college student travel market is currently one of the most targeted markets for destination marketers, who in general seek opportunities for learning about new cultures and relaxation avenues (Xiao et al., 2015). This travel market segment is also categorised as being among the first explorers of new destinations and time rich, which enables them to stay longer in a destination compared with other travel market segments (WTO, 2016). They also play an important role as influencers through their choices and preferences and prompt others to use certain products, services or brands. Similarly, their presence can attract new tourists to destinations (Skift + Student Universe Report, 2014). Therefore, they are playing a significant role in promoting tourism activities that support the development of a destination's tourism industry (Park et al., 2006). Furthermore, according to WTO (2016), youth and student travellers were expected to spend around \$400 billion in 2020 compared with \$286 billion in 2014, which represents around 40% growth in the total value of this market segment.

Youth and student travellers have become a large segment of the tourism industry (Shoham et al., 2004; Richards and Wilson, 2004a; Deng and Ritchie, 2018). This segment of the travel market has become important and they have become the 'bread and butter' of the tourism industry, even more so after graduation (Shoham et al., 2004; Chadee and Cutler, 1996; Bywater, 1993). There are two acknowledged perspectives studied by researchers when it comes to investigating the youth and student travel market:

- 1 analysing the student travel market in terms of choosing destination and making other travel decisions either for the whole degree or exchange study programmes (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002; Griffith and Albanese, 1996; Gmelch, 1997; Richards and Wilson, 2004b; Nyaupane et al., 2011; Alsawafi, 2013)
- 2 investigating the leisure travel activities of students during their free time within the education period such as spring break in the USA and summer break in Australia and Middle East countries (Hsu and Sung, 1997; Field, 1999).

This study contributes to the first aspect by investigating the factors influencing Arab college students' travel decisions.

It is now well established from a variety of studies, that there are a number of travel decisions that tourists have to make prior to or during a trip, including the selection of a

tourist attraction, activities, accommodation, duration, mode of transport, restaurants, travel agency, etc. (Liu, 2008; Zhang, 2009; Alsawafi, 2013; Bicikova, 2014; Eusebio and Carneiro, 2015). According to Crompton (1977), the travel decision-making process can be segmented into two levels. The first level (the general level) is when the traveller answers the fundamental question of whether to take a holiday or not. Once he or she makes a decision to travel; the second level (the specific level) is to decide on where to go and other issues such as type of accommodation, duration, mode of transport, activities etc., which are called specific sub-decisions (Zhang, 2009). In this context, Ankomah et al. (1996) argued that when the process of decision making is related to specific sub-decisions (the second level), there are various factors that influence these decisions. Therefore, understanding the factors influencing students' travel decisions is of critical importance to provide destination marketers with some insights into the student travel market to help them to effectively promote their destinations to college students. In this context, destinations such as the USA, the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and Korea are trying to promote themselves as educational and entertainment tourism destinations through offering a diversity of products and services which may satisfy students' increasingly sophisticated needs and, at the same time, attract them to visit the destination offered (Park et al., 2006; Alsawafi, 2013).

The number of student travel markets has expanded remarkably in the last two decades. The United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) defined youth travellers as travellers aged between 15 and 29 years (WTO, 1991). However, several studies (Pearce and Son, 2004; Richards and Wilson, 2004b; Xiao et al., 2015) have documented that student travellers differ considerably from the general youth market in terms of travel motivation, travel patterns, expectations and preferences. Thus, they should be examined as a distinct market segment.

Arab World in general, and Gulf Countries in particular, have a large youth segment of their population (Mirkin, 2010) According to the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI, 2020), the number of Arab students, including Omani students, at higher education institutions in Oman was 125,466 in 2019. However, to date, the key factors influencing Arab college students' travel decisions have not yet been empirically investigated. In this context, Bywater (1993) argues that there is much less information about the college travel market segment than for other market segments, since examining the student travel market is quite difficult and complex. More specifically, Marcevova (2011) attributed the limited number of researches examining the decision-making and holiday behaviour of young people to the dominant portrayal of young people as 'low spenders'.

Regionally, Prayag and Hosany (2014) highlighted the scarcity of travel research in the outbound travel market in the Middle East and North Africa in general and on young tourists in particular. The importance of studying this pattern lies on many supported assumptions. First, higher education systems in this region have three months of summer break, where many students (sometimes along with their families) undertake long travel holidays. Second, large numbers of students tend to secure employment after their graduation, which makes them a prospective travel market a few years after their graduation.

The total number of students in Middle Eastern countries is growing rapidly. Furthermore, the Statistical Centre for the Cooperation Council for the Arab Countries of the Gulf (GCC-Stat, 2019) shows a growing total number of students in higher education

institutes. The total number of students in the higher education institutes in the academic year 2015/2016 was 2,197,429 students; 7.3 % growth on the previous academic year. This indicates the importance of the segment to the travel industry, both in the short and longer term. Understanding travel behaviour of this segment is therefore a vital task that cannot be ignored by tourism researchers within the region. In this context, Jafari and Scott (2014) argued that in order to develop knowledge of hospitality marketing and management, an understanding of the patterns and requirements of the growing numbers of Muslim tourists, including Arab travellers is of practical importance for the tourism and hospitality industry. Therefore, destination marketers should pay more attention to the Muslim tourist market and its financial potential (Battour et al., 2011).

A review of relevant literature indicates a dearth of information about the factors influencing young Arab travellers in general; and in particular Arab college students' travel decisions in terms of their selection of tourist attractions, accommodation, mode of transport, restaurants and travel agency. Therefore, this study fills a gap in tourism literature by exploring these factors. The study also seeks to identify whether there are significant differences in travel decisions of Arab college students that could be attributed to gender and the number of vacation trips taken. Overall, it is hoped that this study will assist researchers and destination marketers by enhancing their comprehension of Arab students' travel behaviours and potentially will aid further research to understand travel behaviours of a growing segment in the Middle East.

2 Methodology

This study aimed to explore factors affecting Arab college students' travel decisions; i.e., what are the factors that influence students' selection of the main travel services and amenities? In order to answer this question, the study used a quantitative research approach, by employing survey as a data collection tool.

Survey has been commonly used in collecting data in the context of student market researches (Chadee and Cutler, 1996; Field, 1999; Richards and Wilson, 2004b; Hsu and Sung, 1997; Griffith and Albanese, 1996). Malhotra (2006) suggests that using the survey method has many advantages. These advantages include minimising the result differences that may occur in interviews, and facilitating the analysing process as it enables coding data. However, fixed response questions could be seen as a disadvantage. For example, limiting respondents to a set of options to choose from where they could have other responses.

The scale was developed based on existing literature (e.g., Chadee and Cutler, 1996; Field, 1999; Kim et al., 2006a; Liu, 2008; Zhang, 2009; Marcevovala, 2011; Alsawafi, 2013; Dassanayake, 2017; Tebourbi and Neifar, 2018; Marques et al., 2018). Further, tourism academics were consulted when finalising the scale to ensure its applicability and comprehension in relation to the main constructs. The survey sets to answer the study's main question by exploring factors affecting respondents' travel decisions when they select the following prior to or during their travel: accommodation, mode of transport, restaurants, tourist attractions and travel agency. Items included in the survey focused on factors such as: advertisements, the quality of offered services, information from social media, information from institutional tourism bodies (travel agent and official websites), pairs and family recommendations, prices, locations, and reputation. A five-point Likert-style scale that ranged from 1 (not at all important) to 5 (extremely important) was

used. The survey also included questions on basic demographic factors such as gender and number of previous trips undertaken. The scale then was examined with a convenience sample of Arab male college students ($n = 9$) and female students ($n = 11$) to obtain feedback on the scale and its content. The pretest led to slight modification of item wording to improve clarity of the questionnaire.

Table 1 presents the basic demographic factors of respondents. There were 240 surveys returned and 200 of them were deemed useable. The eliminated surveys were due to major incompleteness or response biases. The sampling process followed non-probability sampling methods. Once the survey was pretested and papers printed, it was distributed to undergrad students in the two major higher institutes in Oman: Sultan Qaboos University and the University of Technology and Applied Sciences. The distribution processes varied between campus intercept and lecture intercept. In campus intercept, the researcher intercepted students conveniently at various places in the common area of the campus (such as faculty building) while in the lecture intercept, the researcher coordinated with other faculties to take the last 15 minutes where the research aim was explained and students invited voluntarily to participate. Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the University of Technology and Applied Sciences, Oman.

The quantitative data were analysed using the statistical software package, SPSS (version 24). Descriptive analysis was performed on all survey items to find means and standard deviations for the factors influencing Arab college students' travel decisions, and to rank them in terms of their importance. Furthermore, an independent samples t-test and a one-way ANOVA were used to explore the influence of socio-demographic variables (gender and the number of vacation trips taken) on travel decisions of Arab college students.

3 Results

3.1 Sociodemographic profile of respondents

Out of the 340 questionnaires distributed, 240 were returned but only 200 questionnaires proved valid for analysis. Based on the results, there were 54 males (27%) and 146 females (73%). This is a representative sample, because 58% of students in higher education institutions are females (NCSI, 2020). In terms of travel frequency, respondents were also asked how many times they had travelled abroad during the previous years. Students who travelled from 1–2 times comprised 74.5% of respondents, compared to 51 respondents having been on three or more trips (25.5%). Table one shows the demographic profile of respondents.

3.2 Reliability and adequacy of the construct

To ensure the reliability of the internal consistency of the questionnaire, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient test was used. Cronbach's alpha coefficient is widely used to assess the internal consistency of Likert-type scales. In this context, Nunnally (1967) argued that a research instrument with an alpha value of 0.70 or higher is considered reliable and acceptable. The Cronbach's alpha reliability of the 40-items examining the factors influencing Arab college students' travel decisions in terms of their selection of a tourist

attraction, accommodation, mode of transport, restaurants and travel agency was 0.954; these are greater than the acceptable alpha value.

Table 1 The demographic profile of respondents

<i>Socio-demographic variables</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Gender		
Male	54	27%
Female	146	73%
Total	200	100%
No. of trips		
1–2	149	74.5%
3≤	51	25.5%
Total	200	100%

3.3 *The factors influencing Arab college students' travel decisions*

Xu et al. (2009) pointed out that the tourism industry requires a deep understanding of the travel behaviours of tourists, which may include choosing different attractions, activities, accommodation and modes of transportation. Therefore, the means, standard deviations, and rank of the factors influencing Arab college students' travel decisions in terms of their selection of the tourist attraction are shown in Table 2. Descriptive statistics indicated that the factors which had the most influence on Arab students' travel decisions in terms of their selection of the tourist attraction were the availability of amenities being the most influencing factor (M: 4.08, SD: 1.25); followed by distance and costs associated with getting to the destination (such as transportation cost and entry fees) (M: 3.85, SD: 1.21) and friends' recommendations and suggestions (word of mouth marketing) (M: 3.82, SD: 1.13) respectively.

Table 2 Descriptive statistics for the key factors influencing Arab college students' travel decisions in terms of their selection of the tourist attraction

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Factors</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
1	Availability of basic amenities such as paved road, toilet, and network.	200	4.08	1.25
2	Distance and cost to the destination and entry fees.	200	3.85	1.21
3	Friends' recommendations and suggestions.	195	3.82	1.13
4	Previous experience.	195	3.79	1.25
5	Anticipated benefits from visiting the site/destination.	197	3.78	1.13
6	Information and images available in social networking sites (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.).	199	3.75	1.17
7	TV commercials and advertisements published in newspapers and magazines.	199	3.55	1.32
8	Travel agencies, brochures, leaflets and tourist brochures.	200	3.43	1.22

Table 3 shows that reputation of the quality of services available in the accommodation was found to be the most influencing factor on Arab college students when they select their accommodation during their travel (M: 4.33, SD: 1.10); followed by its location and

proximity to other ancillaries and entertainment facilities (M: 4.22, SD: 1.16) and price (M: 3.89, SD: 1.16). Interestingly, the Arab college student travel market seems to be less affected by travel agent information as this item scored the least (M: 3.30, SD: 1.20).

Table 3 Descriptive statistics for the key factors influencing Arab college students' travel decisions in terms of their selection of accommodation

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Factors</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
1	Reputation of the quality of services available in the accommodation (free parking, free internet, swimming pool, gym, etc.).	200	4.33	1.10
2	Its location and proximity to other ancillaries and entertainment facilities.	199	4.22	1.16
3	Price comparison with similar accommodation.	195	3.89	1.09
4	Previous experience.	195	3.72	1.40
5	Friends' recommendations and suggestions.	194	3.70	1.16
6	Information and images available in social networking sites (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.).	199	3.65	1.02
7	TV commercials and advertisements published in newspapers and magazines.	199	3.42	1.13
8	Travel agencies, brochures, leaflets and tourist brochures.	200	3.30	1.20

When it comes to the modes of transportation (see Table 4) during travel, again reputation seems to be the most influencing factor (M: 4.27, SD: 1.16); followed by the availability of modes of comfort and entertainment with almost the same mean and standard deviation (M: 1.23, SD: 1.15). Previous experience seems to be also an influencing factor as it was the third factor affecting Arab college students' transportation selection (M: 3.94, SD: 1.14). Again, commercial entity seems to be the least influencing factor on Arab college students when it comes to transportation selection (M: 2.94, SD: 1.24).

Table 4 Descriptive statistics for the key factors influencing Arab college students' travel decisions in terms of their selection of the modes of transportation

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Factors</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
1	Reputation and quality of the transportation mode (safety, cleanliness, luxury, and trip time).	198	4.27	1.16
2	Modes of comfort and entertainment available on the transport mode (such as AC, TV/movie, toilet, etc.).	200	4.23	1.15
3	Previous experience.	198	3.94	1.14
4	Price comparison with other modes of transportation.	196	3.87	1.25
5	Friends' recommendations and suggestions.	197	3.74	1.20
6	Travel agencies, brochures, leaflets and tourist brochures.	196	3.26	1.14
7	Information and images available in social networking sites (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram etc.).	197	3.22	1.10
8	TV commercials and advertisements published in newspapers and magazines.	200	2.94	1.24

The paper also investigated factors affecting Arab college students' selection of restaurants during travelling (see Table 5). Similar to previous responses, reputation seems the most influencing factor among Arab college students when it comes to selecting restaurants (M: 4.35, SD: 1.06). Previous experience was the second factor indicated as an influencing factor in restaurant selection while travelling (M: 4.03, SD: 1.21); followed by the proximity of a restaurant to one's accommodation and other amenities that one can be visiting during travel (M: 3.91, SD: 1.21).

Table 5 Descriptive statistics for the key factors influencing Arab college students' travel decisions in terms of their selection of restaurant

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Factors</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
1	Reputation, menu and quality of the food as well as privacy.	199	4.35	1.06
2	Previous experience.	197	4.03	1.21
3	Proximity of the restaurant to accommodation and other important amenities.	196	3.91	1.21
4	Friends' recommendations and suggestions.	197	3.90	1.13
5	Price comparison with other restaurants.	199	3.88	1.16
6	Information and images available in social networking sites (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.).	197	3.36	1.16
7	TV commercials and advertisements published in newspapers and magazines.	199	3.25	1.31
8	Travel agencies, brochures, leaflets and tourist brochures.	199	3.05	1.12

The paper also asked Arab college students what are the factors affecting their choice of travel agency? Following the same pattern, respondents ranked the reputation and use of ICT and E-commerce tools (e-travel agencies) as the main influencing factors, (M: 4.07, SD: 1.18). Price and the anticipated quality of its services along with personal connection with an employee or the owner were also strong influencers among Arab college students when they select their travel agent, (M: 4.01, SD: 1.15), (M: 3.82, SD: 1.26), respectively (see Table 6).

Table 6 Descriptive statistics for the key factors influencing Arab college students' travel decisions in terms of their selection of travel agency

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Factors</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
1	Reputation and using of ICT and E-commerce tools (e-travel agencies).	200	4.07	1.18
2	Price and anticipated quality of its services.	199	4.01	1.15
3	Personal connection with employee/owner.	199	3.82	1.26
4	Previous experience.	196	3.74	1.24
5	Friends' recommendations and suggestions.	198	3.73	1.16
6	Information and images available in social networking sites (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, etc.).	196	3.45	1.13
7	Travel agencies, brochures, leaflets and tourist brochures.	198	3.44	1.15
8	TV commercials and advertisements published in newspapers and magazines.	198	3.18	1.28

Morgan et al. (2011) argued that the reputation or brand of any destination or tourism establishment plays an enormously significant role in determining just how successful they are in attracting or maintaining their customers. From the data in Tables 3, 4, 5 and 6, it is apparent that reputation and quality were always the most influencing factors on Arab college students' travel decisions, especially when they are choosing accommodation, mode of transport, restaurants and travel agency. Thus, this result highlights the importance of building and maintaining a strong positive reputation that enables the tourism provider to attract more customers (quality and reputation management). In this context, Herbig and Milewicz (1993) emphasised the importance of reputation to the ultimate success of a product and company and warned against ignoring its fragility.

On the other hand, the most striking result to emerge from the data, as shown in Tables 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6, is that Arab college students are less likely to be affected by media publicity when choosing tourist attractions, accommodation, mode of transport, restaurants and travel agency. To be more specific, factors such as:

- 1 the information and images available in social networking sites (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.)
- 2 TV commercials and advertisements published in newspapers and magazines
- 3 travel agencies' brochures, leaflets and tourist brochures were found to be less influencing factors on Arab college students' travel decisions.

In this context, Shu et al. (2017) argue that although social media is low cost, easy access, and rapid dissemination of information, it also enables a wide spread of fake news (i.e., low quality news with intentionally false information). Therefore, tourism providers need to enhance their organisations' reputation and brand, and better manage their presence in different types of media (Iversini et al., 2010; Micera and Crispino, 2017). Traditionally, it has been argued that promoting tourism products and services through distributing tourism information at campuses or exhibitions (also known as campus marketing) is an effective marketing method to attract college student travellers (Michael et al., 2004; Kim et al., 2007).

3.4 The influence of sociodemographic variables on students' travel decisions

In order to design effective tourism destination marketing strategies, Ryan et al. (1998) recommended tourism marketers to recognise that there are gender differences in information processing. Therefore, the differences in students' travel decisions were first examined using the independent sample t-test with reference to gender. Table 7 indicates that there was only one significant difference between male and female students in their travel decisions: Arab female students were more influenced by 'information and images available in social networking sites' when choosing a tourist attraction than Arab male students were ($t = -2.761$, $p < 0.01$). In this context, Leontidou (1994) argued that the importance of gender differences in tourist behaviour stems from the growth in numbers of those travelling in single-sex groups. This finding will help tourism and hospitality marketers in developing market strategies, with the need to factor in the influence of college students' demographic characteristics in order to more effectively manage and promote tourism products concerning different genders (multi-segment targeting)

(Varasteh et al., 2015). In terms of the influence of the number of vacation trips taken, the ANOVA results revealed that there were no significant differences among students regarding their travel decisions that can be attributed to the number of vacation trips taken. A possible explanation for this might be that the influence of the number of vacation trips taken (previous experiences) on Arab college students' travel decisions has been partially neutralised by the spread of internet access and other digital technologies among college students. In this context, Richards and Wilson (2004b) suggested that student travellers may be more knowledgeable consumers than might be expected. Overall, the analysis of the influence of sociodemographic variables on students' travel decisions has the advantage of preparing tourism and hospitality marketers, and therefore to design and forecast the offer of tourism products and services that meet the current and future demand (Mahika, 2011).

Table 7 t-Test results as related to students' travel decisions based on gender

<i>Factor</i>	<i>Mean scores</i>		<i>t-value</i>	<i>Sig</i>
	<i>Males (N = 54)</i>	<i>Females (N = 145)</i>		
Information and images available in social networking sites.	3.52	4.02	-2.761	.005

Note: $P < 0.01$.

4 Discussion and conclusions

Jafari and Scott (2014) argued that the distinctive needs, wants, motivations and expectations of Muslim tourists in terms of food, daily prayers, and travel patterns necessitates certain adjustments in the tourism offering of most non-Muslim destinations. In this context, Ibrahim et al. (2009), who studied the preferences of Arab tourists visiting Malaysia, went beyond that when they argued that tourism service providers in Malaysia should take into account Arab tourists' preferences if they want to see Malaysia as a world famous tourist destination. Therefore, this paper has attempted to achieve two main objectives. To be more specific, the study sought to better understand the key factors influencing Arab college students' travel decisions in terms of their selection of tourist attractions, accommodation, mode of transport, restaurants and travel agency. The study also sought to identify whether there are significant differences in travel decisions of Arab college students that could be attributed to gender and the number of vacation trips taken.

The following conclusions can be drawn from the study results. The main findings identified that 'availability of basic amenities such as paved roads, toilets, and network'; 'distance and cost to the destination and entry fees'; and, 'friends' recommendations and suggestions' were the most important factors that influence Arab college students to choose or visit a specific touristic destination. The study also revealed that factors such as 'reputation' and 'quality' were the most influencing factors of Arab college students' choice of accommodation, mode of transport, restaurants and travel agency. Thus, the current study suggests considering the most influential factors influencing Arab college students' travel decisions as motivations to choose the tourism products and services. Therefore, tourism and hospitality marketers should take them into account as guidance when targeting this market segment. In terms of the influence of sociodemographic

variables on students' travel decisions, the study found that Arab female students were more influenced by 'information and images available in social networking sites' when choosing a tourist attraction than Arab male students were.

From the results presented in the previous section, it is also possible to conclude that:

- 1 reputation and quality were always the most influencing factors
- 2 Arab college students are influenced by reputation even more than their own experience when it comes to their selection during travel
- 3 location and cost seems to be the second influencer among students
- 4 travel agents are not well-trusted by Arab student travellers
- 5 social media is not a common influencer among Arab college students
- 6 surprisingly, the price and previous experience as factors influencing the choice of tourism products and services are considered of medium importance by Arab college students
- 7 use of ICT and E-commerce tools for selling tourism products and services via internet and the exchange of value online by travel agencies are considered to be of high importance by Arab college students when choosing a travel agency
- 8 overall, Arab college students seem to have low confidence in commercial information when they travel and highly rely on reputation and other suggestions.

These conclusions provide useful data for tourism and hospitality marketers when targeting and offering tourism experiences for this market segment.

Exploring the key factors influencing Arab college students' travel decisions is vital for developing effective marketing strategies and creating sound promotional programmes. Furthermore, the research conclusions contribute insights for effective development of marketing strategies. In this context, Alsawafi (2017) and Hyde (2007) argued that the first step in effectively targeting any market is obtaining accurate information about their travel decision making. Thus, several key marketing implications can be derived from the empirical findings of the current study about Arab student travel market, which could be of major use to destination marketers and managers in meeting the special motivations and expectations of Arab college students. Therefore, in order to effectively target the Arab student travel market, it is critical that tourism marketers understand and consider the main factors that influence them when choosing different tourism products and services, such as 'reputation'; 'quality'; and, 'use of ICT and e-commerce tools' through developing marketing programmes/strategies that highlight and focus on these factors. Furthermore, in order to attract Arab college students to choose or visit a specific attraction and encourage them to stay longer, advertising and promotional programmes should highlight the availability of basic amenities and the quality of tourism services offered in the tourist attraction, such as paved roads, toilets and internet. Finally, given that Arab college female students were more influenced by 'Information and images available in social networking sites' when choosing or visiting a specific attraction than Arab college male students, destination marketers and travel agents who targeting and offering tourism experiences for female students have to increase their exposure through using social media, such as YouTube, TripAdvisor, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Google+, Pinterest and Myspace to promote and advertise

their products and services. Therefore, this result agrees with the findings of other studies, which suggested that in order to improve the efficiency and profitability of marketing activities, tourism and hospitality marketers should consider targeting potential male and female tourists differently when presenting information on tourism destinations (Ryan et al., 1998; Field, 1999; Kim et al., 2007; Meng and Uysal, 2008; Alsawafi, 2013; Akbari et al., 2015; Liu and Zhan, 2018; Marques et al., 2018; Alsawafi, 2018).

Table 8 The key factors influencing Arab college students' choice of tourism providers and suggested marketing and managerial implications

<i>N</i>	<i>Tourism providers</i>	<i>The main factors influencing Arab college students' choice of tourism providers</i>	<i>Marketing and managerial implications</i>
1	Tourist attractions (destination management organisation)	Availability of basic amenities; the cost of travel; and friends' recommendations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applying quality and reputation management strategies • Using word of mouth marketing strategies to promote their products and services
2	Accommodation	Reputation of the quality; location; and, costs of accommodation (price).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focusing on campus marketing
3	Mode of transport	Reputation and quality; entertainment available on the transport mode; and previous experience.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using multi-segment targeting strategy • Applying ICTs for maximising the efficiency & effectiveness
4	Restaurants	Reputation and quality; previous experience; and location.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Launching marketing communication campaigns to strengthen destination or provider image
5	Travel agency	Reputation and using of ICT; price and quality; and personal relationship.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managing their presence in different types of media.

The above findings indicate gender difference in relation to forming travel behaviour prior to travel, and potentially influencing travel decision making processes. This is interesting when it is considered along with the growing literature relating to Muslim Middle Eastern women's travel. We understand little about gender affect and differences in relation to travel decision making processes among young Arab travellers. Young Arab females appear more active and rely on social media when it comes to shaping their travel behaviours. Almuhrzi and Valek (2021) documented the growing segment of Muslim women travellers in the Middle East. Furthermore, Tavakoli and Paolo (2021) reviewed the literature and suggested that it is vital to understand how Muslim women travellers make their decisions and what are the constrains or facilitators contributing to their decision making. Findings here support their argument that Muslim travel is a distinctive segment that requires further attention by tourism researchers. The table below illustrates the main factors influencing Arab college students' choice of tourism providers and the suggested marketing and managerial implications. It must be noted that the suggested marketing and managerial implications are based upon the current study results and the analysis of the related literature on the college students travel market.

5 Study limitations and future study

Owing to the nature of the study sample (covered only public universities in Oman), the results of this study cannot be generalised to all Arab college students who are studying in private institutions of higher education in Oman. Thus, it is suggested for future research to explore the key factors influencing Arab college students' travel decisions in other private universities in Oman. In addition, the current study examines only the influence of (gender and the number of vacation trips taken) as sociodemographic variables on students' travel decisions. Therefore, it is recommended for future work to include other sociodemographic variables, such as age, income, ethnicity, major of study etc. Finally, a quantitative research approach was adopted to examine the research phenomenon. Therefore, it is also proposed that future studies study the key factors influencing Arab college students' travel decisions by using a qualitative research approach or by adopting a mixed method approach.

This study empirically contributes to the previous attention given to the college travel market segment through exploring the main factors influencing Arab college students' travel decisions, representing Muslim college students, in terms of their selection of tourist attractions, accommodation, mode of transport, restaurants and travel agency. From a practical perspective, the current study also suggested interesting managerial implications for the tourism sector.

References

- Akbari, M., Chajjani, M. and Derakhshan, M. (2015) 'Investigating the effect of place quality and word-of-mouth communication on intention to revisit the city of military service', *Int. J. Leisure and Tourism Marketing*, Vol. 4, Nos. 3–4, pp.207–221.
- Almuhzzi, H.M. and Alsawafi, A.M. (2017) 'Muslim perspectives on spiritual and religious travel beyond Hajj: Toward understanding motivations for Umrah travel in Oman', *Tourism Management Perspectives*, Vol. 24, pp.235–242.
- Almuhzzi, H. and Valek, N.S. (2021) 'Introduction', in Valek, N.S. and Almuhzzi, H. (Eds.): *Women in Tourism in Asian Muslim Countries*, Springer [online] <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-33-4757-1>.
- Alsawafi, A.M. (2013) *Holiday Destinations: Understanding the Perceptions of Omani Outbound Tourists*, Thesis, Doctor of Philosophy (PhD), University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand [online] <http://hdl.handle.net/10289/7980> (accessed 22 June 2021).
- Alsawafi, A.M. (2017) 'Sport tourism: an exploration of the travel motivations and constraints of Omani tourists', *Anatolia*, Vol. 28, No. 2, pp.239–249.
- Alsawafi, A.M. (2018) 'The influence of social media on destination choice of Omani pleasure travellers', *International Journal of Qualitative Research in Services*, Vol. 3, No. 1, pp.77–91.
- Ankomah, P.K., Crompton, J.L. and Baker, D. (1996) 'Influence of cognitive distance in vacation choice', *Annals of Tourism Research*, Vol. 23, No. 1, pp.138–150.
- Battour, M.M., Ismail, M.N. and Battor, M. (2011) 'The impact of destination attributes on Muslim tourist's choice', *International Journal of Tourism Research*, Vol. 13, No. 6, pp.527–540.
- Bicikova, K. (2014). Understanding student travel behavior: a segmentation analysis of British University Students', *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, Vol. 31, No. 7, pp.854–867.
- Bywater, M. (1993) 'Market segments in the youth and student travel market', *EIU Travel and Tourism Analyst*, Vol. 3, pp.35–50.
- Chadee, D. and Cutler, J. (1996) 'Insight into international travel by students', *Journal of Travel Research*, Vol. 35, No. 2, pp.75–80.

- Crompton, J.L. (1977) *A Systems Model of Tourist's Destination Selection Process with Particular Reference to the Role of Image and Perceived Constraints*, Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Texas A&M University.
- Dassanayake, D.M.C. (2017) *The Role of Values in Destination Decision-Making: The Indian Travel Market*, Thesis, Doctor of Philosophy (PhD), University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand [online] <https://hdl.handle.net/10289/11089> (accessed 22 June 2021).
- Deng, R. and Ritchie, B.W. (2018) 'International university students' travel risk perceptions: an exploratory study', *Current Issues in Tourism*, Vol. 21, No. 4, pp.455–476.
- Eusébio, C. and Carneiro, M.J. (2015) 'How diverse is the youth tourism market? An activity-based segmentation study', *Tourism*, Vol. 63, No. 3, pp.295–316.
- Field, A.M. (1999) 'The college student market segment: a comparative study of travel behaviours of international and domestic students at a South-Eastern university', *Journal of Travel Research*, Vol. 37, No. 4, pp.375–382.
- Gmelch, G. (1997) 'Crossing cultures: student travel and personal development', *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, Vol. 21, No. 4, pp.475–490.
- Griffith, D.A. and Albanese, P.J. (1996) 'An examination of Plog's psychographic travel model within a student population', *Journal of Travel Research*, Vol. 34, No. 4, pp.47–51 [online] <https://doi.org/10.1177/004728759603400407>.
- Herbig, P. and Milewicz, J. (1993) 'The relationship of reputation and credibility to brand success', *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, Vol. 10, No. 3, pp.18–24.
- Hsu, C.H.C. and Sung, S. (1997) 'Travel behaviour of international students at a Midwestern University', *Journal of Travel Research*, Vol. 36, No. 1, pp.59–65.
- Hyde, K. (2007) 'Marketing', in Collier, A. and Brocx, M. (Eds.): *Tourism Industry Management*, pp.117–145, Pearson Education, Auckland, New Zealand.
- Ibrahim, Z., Zahari, M.S., Sulaiman, M., Othman, Z. and Jusoff, K. (2009) 'Travelling pattern and preferences of the Arab tourists in Malaysian hotels', *International Journal of Business and Management*, Vol. 4, No. 7, pp.3–9.
- Inversini, A., Marchiori, E., Dedekind, C. and Cantoni, L. (2010) 'Applying a conceptual framework to analyze online reputation of tourism destinations', in Gretzel, U., Law, R. and Fuchs, M. (Eds.): *Information and Communication Technologies in Tourism 2010. Proceedings of the International Conference in Lugano*, Switzerland, Springer, Wien-New York, 10–12 February, pp.321–332.
- Jafari, J. and Scott, N. (2014) 'Muslim world and its tourisms', *Annals of Tourism Research*, Vol. 44, pp.1–19, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2013.08.011>.
- Kim, D-Y., Lehto, X. and Morrison, A.M. (2007) 'Gender differences in online travel information search: Implications for marketing communications on the internet', *Tourism Management*, Vol. 28, No. 2, pp.423–433.
- Kim, K., Jogaratnam, G. and Noh, J. (2006a) 'Travel decisions of students at a US university: segmenting the international market', *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, Vol. 12, No. 4, pp.345–357.
- Kim, K., Oh, I. and Jogaratnam, G. (2006b) 'College student travel: a revised model of push motives', *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, Vol. 13, No. 1, pp.73–85.
- Leontidou, L. (1994) 'Gender dimensions of tourism in Greece: employment, sub-structuring and restructuring', in Kinnaird, V. and Hall, D. (Eds.): *Tourism: A Gender Analysis*, pp.74–105, Wiley, Chichester.
- Liu, G. (2008) *Travel Behaviour and Expenditure Patterns of the Chinese University Student and the Associated Visiting Friends and Relatives (VFRs) Markets in New Zealand*, Unpublished doctoral dissertation, The University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand.
- Liu, Y. and Zhan, H. (2018) 'Transformation and upgrading innovation of university student travel agency: an empirical study in Shenzhen', *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research (ASSEHR), 2nd International Conference on Education Science and Economic Management (ICESEM 2018)*, Vol. 184, pp.87–91.

- Mahika, E. (2011) 'Current trends in tourist motivation', *Cactus Tourism Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 2, pp.15–24.
- Malhotra, N.K. (2006) *Questionnaire Design and Scale Development*, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Marcevovala, K. (2011). *Group Influences on Individual Holiday Decision-Making and Behaviour: A Study of Group Dynamics in Tourist Parties of Young People*. Doctor of Philosophy in Management Studies, University of Exeter [online] <https://ore.exeter.ac.uk/repository/bitstream/handle/10036/3460/MarcevovalaK.pdf?sequence=2>.
- Marques, C., Mohsin, A. and Lengler, J. (2018) 'A multinational comparative study highlighting students' travel motivations and touristic trends', *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management*, Vol. 10, pp.87–100.
- Mazzarol, T. and Soutar, G. (2002) 'Push-Pull factors influencing international students destination choice', *International Journal of Educational Management*, Vol. 16, pp.82–90 [online] <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/09513540210418403>.
- Meng, F. and Uysal, M. (2008) 'Effects of gender differences on perceptions of destination attributes, motivations, and travel values: an examination of a nature-based resort destination', *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, Vol. 16, No. 4, pp.445–466.
- Micera, R. and Crispino, R. (2017) 'Destination web reputation as 'smart tool' for image building: the case analysis of Naples city-destination', *International Journal of Tourism Cities*, Vol. 3, No. 4, pp.406–423.
- Michael, I, Armstrong, A. and King, B. (2004) 'The travel behaviour of international students: the relationship between studying abroad and their choice of tourist destinations', *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, Vol. 10, No. 1, pp.57–66.
- Mirkin, B. (2010) *Population Levels, Trends and Policies in the Arab region: Challenges and Opportunities*, Arab Human Development Report, Research Paper Series, United Nations Development Program [online] <http://www.arab-hdr.org/publications/other/ahdrps/paper01-en.pdf> (accessed 22 June 2021).
- Morgan, N., Pritchard, A. and Pride, R. (2011) *Destination Brands: Managing Place Reputation*, 3rd ed., Butterworth-Heinemann, Oxford.
- National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI) (2020) *Statistical Year Book* [online] https://www.ncsi.gov.om/Elibrary/LibraryContentDoc/bar_Statistical%20Year%20Book%202020-11_aa4ae455-e298-467a-b627-b506d36cfdb1.pdf (accessed 25 June 2021).
- Nunnally, J.C. (1967) *Psychometric Theory*, McGraw-Hill, New York
- Nyaupane, G., Paris, C. and Teye, V. (2011) 'Study abroad motivations, destination selection and pre-trip attitude formation', *International Journal of Tourism Research*, Vol. 13, pp.205–217, DOI: 10.1002/jtr.811.
- Nyaupane, G.P., White, D. and Budruk, M. (2006) 'Motive-based tourist market segmentation: an application to Native American cultural heritage sites in Arizona, USA', *Journal of Heritage Tourism*, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp.81–99.
- Park, S.H., Latkova, P. and Nicholls, S. (2006) 'Image of the United States as a travel destination: a case study of United Kingdom college students', *2006 Northeastern Recreation Research Symposium*, 9–11 April, Bolton Landing, New York, USA.
- Pearce, P. and Son, A. (2004) 'Youth tourism markets in Australia: comparing the travel behaviours of international English language students and backpackers', *Tourism (Zagreb)*, Vol. 52, No. 4, pp.341–350.
- Prayag, G. and Hosany, S. (2014) 'When middle east meets west: understanding the motives and perceptions of young tourists from United Arab Emirates', *Tourism Management*, Vol. 40, pp.35–45.
- Richards, G. and Wilson, J. (2004a) *The Global Nomad: Backpacker Travel in Theory and Practice*, Vol. 3, Channel View Publications, Clevedon, UK.

- Richards, G. and Wilson, J. (2004b) 'The international student travel market: travelstyle, motivations, and activities', *Tourism Review International*, Vol. 8, No. 2, pp.57–67.
- Ryan, M., Henley, N. and Soutar, G. (1998) 'Gender differences in tourism destination choice: implications for tourism marketers', *Australian and New Zealand Marketing Conference*, Dunedin, New Zealand.
- Shoham, A., Schrage, C. and Eeden, S. (2004) 'Student travel behavior', *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, Vol. 17, No. 4, pp.1–10.
- Shu, K., Sliva, A., Wang, S., Tang, J. and Liu, H. (2017) 'Fake news detection on social media: a data mining perspective', *SIGKDD Explor. Newsl.*, June, Vol. 19, No. 1, pp.22–36.
- Skift + Student Universe Report (2014) *The State of Student Travel* [online] <https://skift.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/StudentUniverse-Sponsored-SkiftReport-State-of-Student-Travel-2.pdf> (accessed 22 June 2021).
- Statistical Centre for the Cooperation Council for the Arab Countries of the Gulf (GCC-Stat) (2019) *Education Statistics in the Arab Countries of the Gulf*, in Arabic [online] <https://www.gccstat.org/ar/statistic/publications/education-series> (accessed 20 June 2021).
- Tavakoli, R. and Paolo, M. (2021) 'Muslim women travellers' constraints: a critical review', in Valek, N.S. and Almuhrzi, H. (Eds.): *Women in Tourism in Asian Muslim Countries*, Springer [online] <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-33-4757-1>.
- Tebourbi, S. and Neifar, K. (2018) 'Influence factors of wellness tourism on revisit intention', *Int. J. Leisure and Tourism Marketing*, Vol. 6, No. 2, pp.86–95.
- Varasteh, H., Marzuki, A. and Rasoolimanesh, S.M. (2015) 'Factors affecting international students' travel behavior', *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, Vol. 21, No. 2, pp.131–149.
- World Tourism Organization (WTO) (1991) *International Conference on Youth Tourism: Final Report*, 18–21 November, New Delhi (India), 13pp.
- World Tourism Organization (WTO) (2016) *Affiliate Members Global Reports*, Vol. 13, The Power of Youth Travel, UNWTO, Madrid.
- Xiao, U., So, K.K.F and Wang, Y. (2015) 'The university student travel market: motivations and preferences for activities', *Tourism Analysis*, Vol. 20, No. 4, pp.399–412.
- Xu, F., Morgan, M. and Song, P. (2009) 'Students' travel behaviour: a cross-cultural comparison of UK and China', *International Journal of Tourism Research*, Vol. 11, No. 3, pp.255–268.
- Zhang, W. (2009) *The Motivations, Constraints and Decision-Making of Beijing Outbound Tourists*, Unpublished doctoral dissertation, The University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand.