

## **THE EFFECT OF SYRIAN WAR ON FRENCH PEOPLE'S DECISION TO TRAVEL TO LEBANON: REMEDY THROUGH BRANDING**

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**ABSTRACT:** *The aim of this study was to find out the effects of War in Syria on the decision of French people to travel to Lebanon. Based on a survey, the study findings showed that people in France are aware of the Syrian War as well as the subsequent occurring refugee crisis. The war and refugee crisis are highly affecting their decisions to travel not only to Lebanon but also to other Middle East countries such as Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Jordan. Demographic characteristics of the people play as well an imperative role on their decisions to travel to Lebanon. Branding Lebanon as a tourist destination based on the attributes that influence French travellers can be a fundamental part of the remedy.*

**KEYWORDS:** Lebanon, Tourism, Syrian War, Refugee, Crises, Destination Branding, French Tourists, Tourist decision.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Today, humanity is facing the Syrian refugee crisis, which has been regarded as the world's biggest humanitarian crisis since the Second World War and finding a solution to it has become now a concern of each and every country in the world. The crisis began in March of 2011 when some civil demonstrations against the government started to take place. The Syrian Government responded heavily to these demonstrations and thousands of Syrians were killed. One thing led to another; after a while situation got worse as civil groups within the country started to fight with each other. As a result of these occurrences, the number of people who moved from the country reached millions (Berti, 2015). In fact, according to the European Commission report (2015), the approximate number of individuals in need of humanitarian aid within Syria reached to 13.5 million. There are also further 4.5 million people who are not reachable due to geographical conditions (European Commission, 2015). As mentioned, these are the people who need aid within the country. However, there are also people who fled Syria due to the fights, which create more humanitarian issues. The approximate number of people who were displaced from Syria reached to 4.289.792 million (Lebanon: 1.075.637, Turkey: 2.181.293, Jordan: 633.644, Iraq: 244.765, Egypt & North Africa: 127.681) (European Commission, 2015). As it can be seen, the crisis moved out from being Syrian's domestic problem to become a world issue because of the created refugee population in other countries. Clearly, these refugees are not living in good conditions and thus causing another humanitarian problem from the human rights point view. All these circumstances generate further social and economic issues which need to be solved. In fact, tourism is one of the most affected industries in the Middle East, since people are scared to visit because of the war and refugee crisis. Therefore, the aim of this study is to find out the effects of War in Syria on French travellers' perceptions regarding their visit to Lebanon. French travellers were chosen for this study because, based on the arrivals statistics of the Lebanese Ministry of

Tourism (2013), they are among the ones who visit Lebanon the most frequently. They ranked second among all nationalities and first among European visiting Lebanon.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of branding has been a hot topic for both researchers as well as marketing managers since it has been recognised as the most important tool in attracting customers. Branding has a long past which dated back to medieval times when artists and craftsmen mark their products to differentiate their work from cheap copies (Kotler & Keller, 2006). Since then, branding has evolved and become a basic instrument for companies as a competitive weapon, particularly during the past decades. The driving motive behind this brand recognition was regarded as establishing a competitive edge which could last for several years. Having illustrated the importance of branding, it is essential to define what branding is.

O'Malley (1991, p.107) defines a brand as “a name, symbol, design or some combination which identifies the product of a particular organisation as having a substantial, differentiated advantage”. In this context, branding is defined as a set of practices employed by an organisation in order to differentiate their products or services from their rivals and therefore suggested that a unique label, packaging and model should be generated while establishing a brand (Jobber, 2007).

Branding provides several benefits. From the customers' point of view, Keller (1998) suggests that a brand, at first place, is a sign of quality and a source of identification that helps consumers to recognise the products of producers. As it helps to recognise the producers; it allows consumers to assign responsibility in the case of brand failure. This increases their confidence during shopping as it reduces the risk in buying goods and services. In addition, as the brand is a way of communication, it helps to develop a relationship between consumers and producers. Moreover, familiarity with a brand helps the consumers to avoid the information search cost. Finally, consumers also protect the self-image that they build by using a particular brand (Keller, 1998).

Like in products or services, there has been an ongoing competition between places, and the degree of competition has been intensifying. As a result, a need for developing sustainable competitive advantage has emerged (Medway & Warnaby, 2008) of which generally in the form of branding places. Application of branding to destinations started with the acceptance of service brands by consumers and it is realised that by branding, significant progress can be made in achieving economic development of places. This is evident from the accomplishments made by several campaigns i.e. “Glasgow – Smiles better”, “New York- I love NY”, etc. (Hankinson, 2004).

Increase in the application of promoting activities of places led the researchers to explore and examine the possibility of branding destinations. In this context, de Chernatony and McDonald (1992) argue that places can be branded like products and services. Within this context, several communalities are identified with destinations and services since tourism has been brought forward in promoting places and therefore consumption in regards to destinations is based on gaining group of experiences (Clarke, 2000).

Consequently a destination brand is referred to as “name, symbol, logo, word or other graphic that both identifies and differentiates the destination; it conveys the promise of a memorable travel experience that is uniquely associated with the destination and serves to consolidate and reinforce the recollection of pleasurable memories of destination experience” (Kerr, 2006, p.277).

In relation to this, place branding is described as “the practice of applying brand strategy and other marketing techniques and disciplines to a place” (Mommas, 2003, p.34). The efforts in establishing place branding have been subject to severe criticism from several scholars. Debate on this issue is examined in the following section.

It is well recognised that places can be viewed as products; however it is argued that classical branding frameworks cannot be applied to destinations (Balakrishnan, 2008). The major criticism of application of branding framework relies on the fact that places have complex structure.

Several authors argue that branding destinations or places is complicated as well as difficult when compared to branding products and services because of the place characteristics. First of all, primary stakeholders of destinations include governments, travel agencies, tourists, local community, etc. and their impact on destinations cannot be fit into the common interest of those who have stake in tangible products and services. For instance, governments are the main actors in determining the destiny of places since they have the authoritarian power which cannot be controlled (Hankinson, 2004; Pike, 2005) In addition to this, when the interest of local community is considered, branding of a place can cause conflict as it may disturb the local life. Moreover, it is argued that it is not possible to create loyalty towards a destination since most visitors have touristic aims which are mostly driven by exploring different places. Furthermore, when considering the amount of investment required for branding, providing such financial support for destinations would be problematic (Pike, 2005). In addition to these factors, there are several other factors that are inherent to destinations: past history and geographical conditions such as weather, resources, location, people etc. which cannot be changed and therefore may constrain the success of branding (Balakrishnan, 2008).

Factors highlighted above clearly make branding places challenging and difficult but not impossible. Scholars insist that despite these factors, branding framework for destinations can be developed by looking at corporate branding strategy as well as brand portfolio strategy since destination branding involves creating mental images in consumers’ mind (Hankinson, 2004).

Two approaches are found useful in developing a framework for measuring destination brands. The first one comes from corporate branding strategy framework. Corporate brand is a term that includes each and every brand that the organisations have in their product or service range (Keller, 1998). However, the definition made by Aaker (1996) was much broader than Keller’s ones. In his definition Aaker (1996) suggests that corporate brand is not about the products that a firm produces, it is spotting out the organisation that is shaded by its products and services. An organisation is an entity formed by a group of people and includes a wide variety of systems and programmes

which bond together by values and culture and thereby the term corporate brand represents them all.

To show the applicability of corporate branding to places, Parkenson and Saunders (2004), highlight the similarities between a place and an organisation. According to the authors, although places run by governments and their activities draw the borders of a place, places and organisations both consist of people and include values and culture. In the same way, Keller (1998) asserts that corporate branding provides a method to determine the relationship between consumer and organisation by exploring the level of meanings that a customer attaches to the corporate image and the product of the corporation. These assertions suggest that similar method used in measuring corporate branding can be applied in measuring the brand of a place since the aim is to explore perception in relation to people, their values and their culture (Parkenson & Saunders, 2004).

The second approach that can be used in measuring destination brands is brand equity model suggested by Aaker (1996). "Brand equity is the assets or liabilities associated with the brand" (Aaker, 1996, p.216). Measuring brand equity from the customers' perspective can be defined as identifying customers' judgements about a product or service (Zimmermann, Klein-Bolting, Sander & Murad-Aga, 2001).

Aaker's (1996) brand equity model is based on five determinants: brand awareness, brand associations, brand loyalty, perceived quality and other proprietary brand assets. Brand loyalty is assessed by repetitive purchases; brand awareness is used to measure the level of preconditions for a product or service that exists in customers' mind before they make the buying decision; brand associations indicates the meanings and the values that are given to a product or service by consumer and perceived quality shows how a customer perceives the quality of a product or service in comparison to the alternative products and services (Aaker, 1996).

This model is reformulated by Konecnik (2006) to measure brand equity of a tourism destination. He suggested that image of a destination is the most important part of determining brand equity. This is because; image has a strong influence on customers' awareness of a product and quality that a customer perceives from a product. In other words, destination brand can be assessed by investigating the destination image and therefore the destination awareness, perceived quality of a destination and loyalty towards the destination.

Review of these models shows that both approaches are useful in measuring destination brand however, the application of only one model might cause overlooking several areas. Therefore, combining these two models would be useful to cover all the attributes associated with destination brands.

## METHODOLOGY

Considering the objective of the present work, positivist philosophy is adopted since determining the effects of War in Syria on French travellers' perception to visit Lebanon can only be accomplished when quantitative methods are used. A deductive approach is preferred to follow. In this procedure, initially a conceptive and theoretical structure of the study is generated and then empirical observation is tested. For Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2007), this approach claims conveying from the general to the specific.

The attempt in this study is to portray perceptions of people about Lebanon as a tourist destination. The object of descriptive research is "to portray an accurate profile of persons, events or situations" (Robson, 2002, p.59). Therefore, descriptive research is chosen for this study.

In this study, quantitative research approach is applied and survey method is preferred among quantitative methods. In the light of these determinants, the questionnaire is designed in structured type. According to Collis and Hussey (2003), formation of this type of questionnaire can be done by using close-ended questions in the questionnaire. They further stated that questions are called closed-end when the answers are pre-determined.

The questionnaire consists of two parts. Part 1 includes five questions which aim to collect data about the respondents' characteristics and consequently ask respondents to indicate their gender, age, education, employment and annual income. Part 2 includes 8 questions which aim to identify awareness of the War in Syria and the refugee crisis occurred because of the War in Syria; how this situation affected people's holiday plan to the Middle East; which of the countries is mostly affected by the War in Syria; factors affecting people's decision to go or not to go to Lebanon and; effects of War in Syria in the decision to travel Lebanon.

In collecting the participants' opinions, yes/no questions are used and ranking scales are preferred. The advantage of using both methods is that the responses obtained for these questions can be quantified and variation in opinions can be demonstrated easily. Population of this study are people living in France. Sample size was calculated by using the sample size calculator located in the internet. Population of France is 66.808m as of 2015 (World Bank, 2016). In the calculation, confidence level was taken as 99%, confidence interval was taken as 3.5%. Accordingly, the number of 1358 was achieved to target as a sample to be used in this study. Questionnaires were carried out in Paris, Marseille and Montpellier by the researcher. People were chosen randomly and a total of 1358 questionnaires were distributed by the researcher and all of them were returned back to him. However, 66 questionnaires were not filled appropriately by some of the respondents and therefore, they were excluded from the analysis. In this analysis, descriptive statistics were provided firstly and then regression analyses were carried out to understand the role of demographics on the decision to visit Lebanon.

**FINDINGS**

Emerging from the research were the following results which will constitute the basis of the suggested recommendations.

**Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the respondents**

		Frequency	Percent			Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	684	52.9%	Approximate gross combined household income	Low income	368	28.5%
	Female	608	47.1%		Mid-income	516	39.9%
Age	18-25	224	17.3%		High income	408	31.6%
	26-35	308	23.8%				
	36-45	288	22.3%				
	46-55	232	18.0%				
	56-65	180	13.9%				
66+	60	4.6%	Employment status	Full-time	1080	83.6%	
Highest Level of Completed Education	Primary school	20		1.5%	Part-time	172	13.3%
	Secondary school	48		3.7%	Unemployed	40	3.1%
	High school	136		10.5%			
	University	784		60.7%			
	Master / PhD	304	23.5%				

**Table 2: Awareness of the War in Syria and refugee crisis**

**Awareness of the War in Syria**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Yes	1292	100.0	100.0	100.0

**Awareness of refugee crisis because of the War in Syria**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Yes	1292	100.0	100.0	100.0

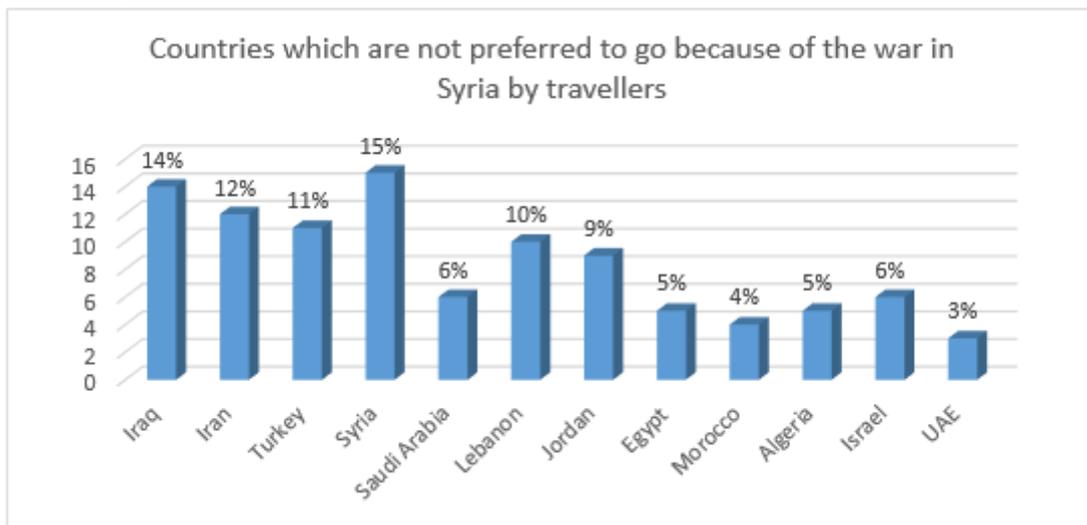
According to the table, all participants are aware of the War in Syria and are aware of the refugee crisis because of the War in Syria.

**Table 3: Effect of Syrian War on holiday plan to the Middle East**  
**Effect of Syrian War on holiday plan to the Middle East**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Yes	924	71.5	71.5	71.5
No	368	28.5	28.5	100.0
Total	1292	100.0	100.0	

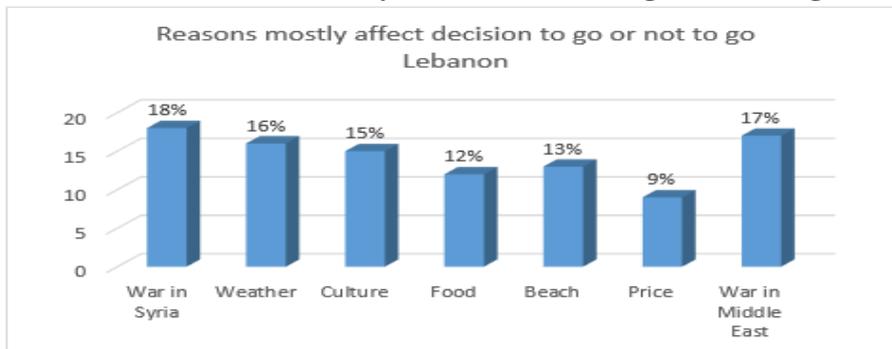
As it can be seen in the table above, Syrian War highly affected the holiday plan of the participants to the Middle East.

**Bar Chart 1: Countries which are not preferred to go by travellers because of the War in Syria**



As it can be seen in the above chart, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan are the countries which are highly affected by the War in Syria since many travellers do not consider travelling to those countries.

**Bar Chart 2: Reasons mostly affect decision to go or not to go Lebanon**



As shown in the above chart, War in Syria and the Middle East are the negative issues which affect travellers' decisions to visit Lebanon whereas weather, culture and food are the positive ones that motivate travellers to visit Lebanon.

**Table 4: Effect of War in Syria on travellers' decisions to visit Lebanon for leisure purposes****Effect of War in Syria on travellers' decisions to visit Lebanon for leisure purposes**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Not important at all	128	9.9	9.9	9.9
Not important	124	9.6	9.6	19.5
Neutral	180	13.9	13.9	33.4
Important	420	32.5	32.5	65.9
Highly important	440	34.1	34.1	100.0
Total	1292	100.0	100.0	

The results showed that the effect of War in Syria on travellers' decisions is very high.

**Table 5: Effect of War in Syria on travellers' decisions to visit Lebanon for business purposes**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Not important at all	436	33.7	33.7	33.7
Not important	308	23.8	23.8	57.6
Neutral	252	19.5	19.5	77.1
Important	196	15.2	15.2	92.3
Highly important	100	7.7	7.7	100.0
Total	1292	100.0	100.0	

As it can be understood from the results that business visits are not affected as much as the leisure visits are affected.

**Table 6: Regression analysis - demographic characteristics / leisure travel to Lebanon****Model Summary**

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.956 <sup>a</sup>	.914	.913	.383

a. Predictors: (Constant), Annual income, Employment status, Education, Gender, Age

**ANOVA<sup>b</sup>**

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	493.756	5	98.751	673.682	.000 <sup>a</sup>
	Residual	46.467	317	.147		
	Total	540.223	322			

a. Predictors: (Constant), Annual income, Employment status, Education, Gender, Age

b. Dependent Variable: leisure travel to Lebanon

**Coefficients<sup>a</sup>**

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	.205	.168		1.220	.223
	Gender	-.139	.081	-.054	-1.706	.089
	Age	.494	.054	.552	9.171	<b>.000</b>
	Education	.470	.047	.288	9.979	<b>.000</b>
	Employment status	-.804	.069	-.291	-11.701	<b>.000</b>
	Annual income	.640	.067	.384	9.597	<b>.000</b>

a. Dependent Variable: leisure travel to Lebanon

According to results, leisure travel to Lebanon is affected by age, education levels, employment status and income level of the travellers. These results are significant at  $p=.000$ . Results indicate that leisure travel to Lebanon increases when travellers' age increases (constant + .494), when education level of the travellers increases (constant +.470), when unemployment decreases (constant-.804) and when the travellers' income increases (constant+.640).

**Table 7: Regression analysis - demographic characteristics / business travel to Lebanon****Model Summary**

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.963 <sup>a</sup>	.927	.926	.353

a. Predictors: (Constant), Annual income , Employment status, Education, Gender, Age

**ANOVA<sup>b</sup>**

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	503.667	5	100.733	810.520	.000 <sup>a</sup>
	Residual	39.398	317	.124		
	Total	543.065	322			

a. Predictors: (Constant), Annual income , Employment status, Education, Gender, Age

b. Dependent Variable: business travel to Lebanon

**Coefficients<sup>a</sup>**

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.162	.155		7.519	.000
	Gender	.661	.075	.255	8.829	.000
	Age	.310	.050	.346	6.255	.000
	Education	.018	.043	.011	.416	.678
	Employment status	.548	.063	.198	8.669	.000
	Annual income	.453	.061	.271	7.375	.000

a. Dependent Variable: business travel to Lebanon

According to results, business travel to Lebanon is affected by age, gender, employment status and income level of the travellers. These results are significant at  $p=.000$ . Results indicate that business travel to Lebanon increases when travellers' age increases (constant + .310), when employment increases (constant .548) and when the travellers' income increases (constant+.453).

## CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This study aimed at highlighting the effects of War in Syria on the travel decision of the French travellers. Survey was conducted among 1292 French participants. Findings demonstrated that people in France are aware of the Syrian War as well as the refugee crisis it caused, which is highly affecting their decisions to travel not only to Lebanon but also to other Middle East countries such as Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Jordan. On another hand demographic characteristics of respondents are also playing an eminent important role on their decisions to travel to Lebanon. In this context, this study found that age, education level, employment status and income play important roles in French travellers' leisure travel decisions to Lebanon while gender, age, employment status and income play important roles in French travellers' business travel decisions to Lebanon.

Results indicate that Lebanon can reshape its tourism strategies based on the new insights offered by this study. A well thought out branding strategy of Lebanon as a destination is strongly needed and can constitute a remedy for the Syrian War effects on Lebanese Tourism and French tourists' travel decision. For example, the country' weather combined with the Lebanese culture as well as other influential attributes seem to affect positively French travellers' decision to visit Lebanon. Therefore, this mix of elements should form the basis of any branding strategy. And consequently, they can be put forward in advertisement campaigns run by the government. Along with these, employed, older and high- income French travellers can be specifically targeted as they are more willing to visit Lebanon compared to others. Thus, different tourism products can be offered to these groups. For example, accessible cultural tracks can be created to attract elderly visitors while paying more attention to golf tourism to attract high income visitors. Hence, Lebanon needs significant and well-targeted international campaigns in order to raise people's awareness regarding these offerings (Hankinson, 2004). Especially that the application of branding to destinations starts with the acceptance of service brands by consumers and it is reckoned that branding leads to significant progress in achieving economic development of places (Hankinson, 2004). Therefore, conducting an international campaign can be helpful in getting more people to be aware of what Lebanon can offer. Problematic issues on financing those campaigns (Pike, 2005) can be overcome by the incentives provided by international organisations.

However, conducting an international campaign would not be enough for the country since Lebanon needs to create a competitive edge among its competitors. In fact, as stated earlier, like in products or services, there has been an ongoing competition between places and the competition degree has been intensifying. As a result, a need for developing sustainable competitive advantage has emerged (Medway & Warnaby, 2008). In this context, Lebanon can put forward the value for money provided by innovative tourism offerings in order to create an advantage among the competing countries. Image of the country should also be improved since the War in Syria significantly damaged the images of all Middle Eastern countries. Considering that visitors picture what type of experience they will get in their memories taking into account the image of that particular destination (Hankinson, 2004); it can be said that

Lebanese campaigns may create higher positive image of country. In this perspective, recalling that image has strong influence on customers' awareness of a country and the quality that a customer perceives from a place (Konecnik, 2006); Lebanon may create significant competitive advantage among its peers.

Nevertheless, these alone will not help in overcoming the war effects. According to Amnesty International Refugee Report (2015), there are number of preventive measures that can be taken by the governments to improve the current situation incurred because of the war. First of all, international summits should be held to debate continuously the circumstances and to monitor the situation. Secondly, a global refugee fund should be established to help Syrians, knowing that such can be beneficial for the countries that locate high numbers of refugees.

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