Turkish Visitors in Armenia: Any Changes in Attitudes and Perceptions?

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Abstract

Being one of the fast7est-growing sectors world-wide since the 2000s, tourism mobility has risen to over one billion visitors world-wide, and is an important social event affecting both social relationships and cultural attitudes. This phenomenon has provided a wide productive field of study regarding various aspects in the study of sociology. This study has the characteristics of the tourist-local people interaction aspect especially, and aims to determine the effect of tourism on cultural attitudes in two controversial countries in terms of social relationships. In this study, in-depth interviews were carried out with 12 academics travelling from Turkey to Armenia for academic purposes in order to evaluate the changes in their pre-travel and post-travel perceptions and attitudes. As a result, the study has revealed that the ongoing problem of many decades between Turkey-Armenia can be solved, to some extent, through interaction via tourism. Thus, tourism can create a positive cultural attitude change.

Keywords: Cultural Attitude, Tourism, Armenia, Turkey

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1. Introduction

Tourism, encouraging cultural exchange, provides a positive contribution to international peace, and is considered important in academic, political, and social areas. With this feature, tourism has been involved in numerous studies. Since the 1970s especially, studies concerning the effects of tourism on the tourists' attitudes have been conducted. The findings from the studies that were carried out mainly with quantative approach confirm the effects of tourism on attitudes. However, some researchers claim that tourism has had no positive impact on attitude change or has not changed any negative cultural attitudes. In particular, the findings from some studies put forward the idea that political events and relationships between countries are the only effective factor in terms of attitude change. Some studies state that political relationships between countries and cultures, creating a positive opportunity for a relationship in societies, provides the opportunity to travel freely and ensure more positive pre-travel attitudes (Amir and Ben Ari, 1985; Pizam et al. 1991; Yang, 2011). In the literature, the number of studies relating to post-travel attitude changes is scarce. The ones in the literature often measure the attitude changes of the people travelling for education or leisure (holiday) purposes. However, literature reviews conducted on this subject revealed that no similar research has been carried out in the ten years. The most recent survey was carried out in 2002 with the Israeli citizens visiting Jordan (Pizam et al., 2002). This study will be the first among the existing national studies in this field.

On the basis of several studies in the literature (Pearce, 1982; Amir and Ben Ari, 1985; Pizam vd. 1991; Anastasopoulos, 1992; Jacinto et al., 1999; Pizam et al., 2002; Yang, 2011), in this study, the effect of tourism on the cultural attitude changes between two politically tense countries, Turkey-Armenia, were questioned. Via in depth-interviews (prior to and after their visit) with 12 Turkish academians visiting Armenia for academic purposes, the effect of their travel experience on their perceptions and attitudes towards Armenia and Armenian citizens were examined. In this study, qualitative research design and techniques have been chosen as these tools provide an in depth examination of the factors affecting post-travel perceptions and attitudes. Therefore, inspired by previous studies, the aim was an in-depth investigation of the factors that lead to attitude changes, their interaction with these attitudes, and the effects of interpersonal differences in this process.In conclusion, the study has disclosed the positive impact of tourism on tourists' attitudes.

Moreover, there is some evidence obtained that the interaction of both sides can be improved through some governmental implementations (for example, mutual visa facilitation, open customs policy etc.) and by tourism activities being carried out intensively.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Attitude and Attitude Change

The concept "attitude" was first used by Calkins in the science of Sociology in 1862, and defined as "a kind of basic relationship established via features such as understanding, empathy, and selfishness" (Albu and Nicolau, 2010:202). According to another definition, attitude is a form of thinking and perception that turns into habit; is composed of one's information, thoughts and beliefs about an object; and may occur in the form of emotional, intellectual, and operational activities (Rızaoğlu, 2012:116). Attitude is also an expressed psychological intention evaluating a specific asset depending on the degree of positivity or negativity (Eagly and Chaiken, 2007: 598). Although it has many definitions, researchers agree on the definition that attitude is one's own assessment of any object (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1977). In light of these definitions, it is possible to say attitudes occur as a result of a long deep- rooted process. Therefore the concept "attitude change" brings up the issue of whether change is possible or not. Attitude change occurs in a limited range and such changes are difficult for many reasons (Kelly, 2006). They are; a person's selfishness and skepticism against differences as an innate structure, a persons' tendency to be inactive against any momentum, developing different tolerance levels to accept or reject issues, the complex structure of the concept attitude itself (when prompted, feelings, beliefs, the tendency to act are all together), the ability of people to live with cognitive dissonance, in other words, the inconsistency among what they know, and how they feel and the behavior developed respectfully. However, despite all these obstacles, some studies suggest that attitudes can be changed through observation, effective communication with other people, effective mass media, and conditioning (Hovland, 1973; Sampson, 1991; Albu and Nicolau, 2010).

2.2. The Effect of Tourism on Cultural Attitude and Cultural Attitude Change

       Despite the difficulty to know how international tourism activities worldwide are influenced by cultural issues in terms of travel decision making and post travel attitudes, its cultural aspect should be strongly emphasized (Weiermair, 2000: 402) since tourism, with its structure and content, is very complex, and is a great experience. Moreover, tourism is known to be effective in improving the quality of life in the weaker economies, preservation of the environmental and social-cultural structures, eliminating conflicts and cultural prejudices by developing positive attitudes between local people and tourists (Kelly, 2006). The contribution of tourism to international world peace has been questioned in several studies conducted between USA and Russia (Pizam et al., 1991), Turkey and Greece (Anastasopoulos, 1992), Israel and Jordan (Pizam et al., 2002) and Israel and Egypt (Milman et al., 1990) in terms of its effect of reducing conflict, tension, and prejudices between the countries that have had negative political relationships.

       As for methodological aspect, previous studies were conducted on control and experimental groups before and after their travel, employed questionnaires for data collection and analyzed by quantitative techniques (Pearce, 1982; Amir and Ben Ari, 1985; Welds and Dukes, 1985 as cited in Pizam et al. 1991; Pizam et al., 1991; Anastasopoulos, 1992). Not seeing any attitude change in the control group either before or after their travel means that travel is a significant factor in this regard (Pearce, 1982). Concerning the findings, previous studies indicate that attitude change can be detected in different ways and levels. Attitude changes via tourism are affected by the attitudes prior to travel, and the deep beliefs regarding other cultures are not (Smith, 1977 as cited in Pearce, 1982; Grothe, 1970 as cited in Pizam et al. 1991). In comparative studies, the attitudes of different cultures do not change equally, or in the same way (Triandis and Vassiliou, 1977 as cited in Pearce, 1982). Another study suggests that when tourists return to their home countries, their attitudes change regarding their own citizens as well as to the people of the country they have visited (Pearce, 1982). Some differences in attitude change are also seen according to the country they have travelled to (Pearce, 1982). Studies also reveal that attitude change regarding both the country visited and the host society are largely positive (Pearce, 1982; Jacinto et al., 1999; Pizam et al. 2002; Yang, 2011) Attitudes prior to travel expose a negative change in intellectual dimension, but in social dimension, the changes are positive (Amir and Ben Ari, 1985).

Generally, attitudes do not change; if there are any changes, these take place mostly in a negative way (Pizam et al 1991), and cultural items affect the satisfaction constructed by the travel experiences and thus, cause the attitudes to change by the end of travel (Jacinto et al. 1999; Weiermair, 2000). In the literature, some studies that evaluate the sociological impacts of tourism through interaction between countries in conflict are also available. This starts from the assumption that social relations may affect the attitudes of both sides (Pizam vd. 1991, Anastasopoulos 1992). Grothe's (Grothe, 1970 as cited in Pizam et al. 1991) study reveals that tourists have different attitudes towards the state and the citizens of the country they travel to and their travel experience strengthens their attitude at the beginning of their trip.

The study conducted in Jordan and Israel shows that tourism leads to a positive change in attitude, and the thriving atmosphere of peace between the two countries, trade and economic relations, and the increasing effect of transportation and tourism opportunities are the key factors leading to this positive change (Pizam et al. 2002). Kelly (2006) explain the reasons for experiencing different changes in varying degrees as follows: Short and rare interaction between tourists and local people, router publicity regarding the country to be visited, a lack of natural environment leading to local people and tourist interaction, inadequate guidance, the dominance within group relationships, concern, language and cultural barriers, and presentations of the form of communication.

2.3. Political Relationships between Turkey and Armenia

Weber (2002 as cited in Bozkurt, 2012) defines social relationship as "the behavior of some actors which is adapted to others in its meaningful content". The content of this relationship can be based on social, economic, emotional and political aspects, and can be encountered in attractive (cooperation, agreement, consensus, assimilation) and repulsive (competition, conflict) patterns (Avcıkurt, 2009). From the social relationship theory perspective, there is ongoing conflict between Turkey and Armenia in terms of diplomatic relations. This relationship has had both political and economic consequences. Having experienced difficult times throughout history, the establishment of social, diplomatic and economic relations is not easy. The three major problems between the two countries hamper the possibility of reconciliation.

These are the territorial claim of Armenia on Turkey, the allegation of genocide between Armenia and Turkey, and the occupation of the Nagarno-Karabakh region on the Azerbaijan borders by Armenia in 1993 (Çelikpala, 2010; Çiftçi, 2012). Armenia became Turkey's new neighbor with her declaration of independence in 1991 after the Soviet Union's collapse. Turkey, one of the first countries to recognize Armenia's independence, took steps to secure international support for Armenia until the occupation in 1993 (Çelikpala, 2010: 98), and started to apply some political enforcements (cancelling flights, closing boundaries and airways) (Aslanlı, 2012). In addition, the problems experienced by Turkey and Armenia have affected its relations with Western Allies. In this regard, the Armenian diaspora activities, particularly the recognition of the "Armenian Genocide" by the US Parliament has also had a direct impact on Turkey's foreign policy (Çelikpala, 2010). Meanwhile, Turkey's efforts to maintain relations with Armenia have led to economic and political problems with Azerbaijan (Aslanlı, 2012).

The normalization of relations between the two countries began in 2005 due to the dominate peace and tranquility in the Southern Caucasus region with its critical geographical location in transferring energy from the region (Çiftçi, 2012) The two countries agreed upon the establishment of a committee with the participation of historians from both countries to investigate the events of 1915. Some tough protocols were implemented between the years 2007 –2009, but these have been frozen since 2010 as they were not finalized through the legal processes in the countries (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013). The presuppositions regarding the positive effect of tourism on ethnic attitudes, and international relations, especially in societies (such as Turkey and Armenia) where political issues have increased, have been open to discussion in the studies of Milman vd. (1990), Pizam vd. (2002), and the effective role of tourism in changing deep-rooted beliefs has come into question. Amir (1969, as cited in Anastasopoulos, 1992) indicates the conditions supporting the relationship among ethnic groups as equal status, positive social climate, friendly and polite interaction, and common goals, but unfortunately, considering the historical process of the two countries, none of these conditions by and large ever occur. Although some efforts have been taken throughout time to create those conditions, these practices have currently been frozen. However, when the statistics are examined, the trend of continuous increase in the number of arrivals and departures to and from countries is obvious.

According to the arrivals-departure figures between the years 2000-2013, the number of foreigners and citizens departing from Turkey to Armenia grew from about 15.000 to 73.000, whereas the number of foreign visitors and citizens departing from Armenia to Turkey increased from about 18.000 to 73.000 (Tourism Statistics, 2013a). Concerning mutual tourist mobility, Armenia has become one of the countries sending tourists to Turkey after the collapse of the USSR. Between 2010 and 2013, approximately 5.000-6.000 Armenian tourists entered Turkey. In 2012, the number of tourists declined by 2% when compared to the previous year, but in 2013, there was a 1% increase (Tourism Statistics, 2013b). The number of tourists to Armenia from Turkey was 19.200 in 2010, whereas in 2011, tourist numbers were 10.600 with a 14.2% decline ("Number of Turkish Tourists", 2012). This decline could be explained by the Cessation of bilateral relations in 2010.

3. Methodology

Studies that aim to uncover the attitudes and events in a more realistic, natural environment, and in an integrated manner prefer qualitative research design (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2006). The interview technique is the most commonly used data collection tool in this type of research. The study employed standard interview technique with the aim of ensuring all the aspects and problems related to the research questions were addressed (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2006). In this context, an interview form was developed in order to standardize the data to be collected during the interview process. The interview form provides flexibility to some extent (Yazıcıoğlu and Erdoğan, 2011). The form was prepared with inspirations from the studies of Pearce (1982) and Pizam et al. (1991). Given the necessity to reach relevant and educated individuals on the subject, the purposive sampling technique was chosen. For the researcher, the sample representing the general population is the main goal (Özen and Gül, 2007). In this sense, the participants in this research were selected from academic individuals who were in Armenia during an average of five to seven days in order to participate in various academic activities in different time frames. Table 1. Includes the profile information about participants.

Table 1: The Profile of the Participants

Codes of Interviewed Participants	Sex	Age	Educational Attainment	Academic title
Participant 1	Female	40	PhD.	Associate Professor
Participant 2	Male	34	MBA	Research Assistant
Participant 3	Male	44	PhD.	Assistant Professor
Participant 4	Male	50	PhD.	Professor
Participant 5	Female	27	MBA	Research Assistant
Participant 6	Male	60	PhD.	Professor
Participant 7	Female	28	MBA	Research Assistant
Participant 8	Male	55	PhD.	Professor
Participant 9	Female	27	MBA	Research Assistant
Participant 10	Female	55	PhD.	Professor
Participant 11	Male	34	MBA	Research Assistant
Participant 12	Female	25	Undergraduate	Research Assistant

Based upon the findings in the literature review, and the mobility and relations between Armenia and Turkey, the main question in this study was determined as seen below: "Had there been any changes in the attitudes and perceptions of Turkish citizens towards Armenia and the Armenian people when they returned from Armenia to their home country?"

In this context, 10 questions regarding both their pre- and post-travel attitudes and perceptions were asked of 12 academics that travelled to Armenia from Turkey to participate in academic activities. The main issues that the interview questions focused on were as follows:

- Pre-travel attitudes and perceptions about Armenia and Armenians,
- The status of interaction with the Armenians,
- The similarities and differences with Armenians and Armenian culture,
- Changes in post-travel perceptions and attitudes,
- The impact of tourism on perception and attitude change.

3.1. Data Collection and Analysis

After the determination of the Turkish participants with different academic titles travelling to Armenia on academic purposes, a request for interview has been sent via e-mail and phone calls. The identity of the researchers and the purpose and the importance of the research were mentioned at this stage.

During the interviews, a voice recorder was used and in addition notes were taken by a reporter. For the efficiency of the interviews, physical and human elements were brought in compliance with the objective of the research.The data obtained through in depth interviews was subjected to content analysis and discussed in the light of attitudes change and social relationships perspectives.

4. Findings

4.1. Attitudes and Perceptions about Armenia and Armenians before Travelling

Firstly, some questions were asked of the participants before travelling in order to learn about their attitudes and perceptions towards Armenia and Armenians. The majority of participants stated that they were neutral before travelling, and only three participants expressed that they expected hostile attitudes from the Armenians and therefore, they imagined a disturbing environment. Some of the statements given by the participants are as follows: "I was a little bit uncomfortable. I was wondering what kind of a place Armenia was, and I was concerned about how people would behave towards us. I was expecting a hostile and offensive environment."

Participant 1

"I have never had any friends from Armenia before. Therefore, I have got no prejudices. Now, I do not have, either I expected a reaction. The first meeting was not friendly. It took time to break the ice."

Participant 3

"I was neutral before travelling. People were very warm. I didn't expect that. We did not have any trouble even though they knew we were Turkish. The nature in the city was nice, because I expected a more arid region. The architecture was also very impressive and harmonious."

Participant 9

"We went with a group of academics. If I had gone alone, I would have been worried and I wouldn't have wanted to go. Also I read about the city, Yerevan, before I went."

Participant 10

"My thoughts did not change before and after my trip. The trip was enjoyable and instructive in all aspects. I can say I've just learned about the city, Yerevan, Armenian cuisine and beverage culture."

Participant 12

Almost all the participants stated that their thoughts towards Armenia and Armenians before their trip were not mostly negative, but they were not   seriously concerned about security, and did not encounter a negative reaction.

4.2. Interaction with the Armenians throughout their Travel

The participants had stayed in Yerevan, the capital city of Armenia, for different academic purposes, at different times, for an average of five to seven days. The academic activities they attended were organized by the Armenians, so they could interact with them. At the same time, most of the participants felt delighted with the organization, and they described the Armenian people as "hospitable". "I went to Armenia to attend a conference as a participant in Armenia and stayed there for five days. I had the opportunity to meet and spend time with many Armenian during the conference and the other activities organized by the host civil society instution. Armenia was a country I enjoyed visiting. Particularly, I enjoyed having the chance to wander around and learn more about Yerevan thanks to the local people guiding us."

Participant 12

"We spent seven days there. We attended academic meetings, had cultural experiences, and made visits. We also went on some trips in the area. We had the chance to meet Armenians in both Yerevan and rural areas. We ate together, listened to music, chatted, shared various experiences together, and we had the chance to discuss our common cultural characteristics."

Participant 6

4.3. Similarities and Differences with the Armenians and Armenian Culture

The participants found many similarities (eating, drinking, hospitality, and culture) in all aspects of life. They reflected on their statements and said that the similarities occurred with their common social life and culture from the past. As for the comparison of Armenia and the Armenians with Turkey and the Turkish, the participants expressed that there were a few differences: "We have a lot in common. They are warm. They like dancing. They are hospitable. I felt at home. The only difference was that they drink wine every night. They have a very well-organized city as well."

Participant 7

"We are the same rather than we are similar. I feel like I am at home. Everything is in Armenian subtitles, in an environment I otherwise know well. They are warm and the only difference is their religion."

Participant 11

4.4. Changes in Perceptions and Attitudes after Travel

While participants expressed their preperceptions as neutral, they stated that they obtained positive thoughts about Armenia, and particularly Armenians, after their travel. "When I think of the locals, I am more positive. I went there worried, but felt very comfortable. I wandered around freely outside at night, and I think I was more comfortable there than I am in Turkey. Yerevan is a big city and a vibrant place."

Participant 1

"I had no preconceptions about Armenians. Our attitudes towards each other were quite ok. I met a woman at the flea market selling trinkets. I was looking for a record shop and she took me there. We agreed with the man that he would get me a record for the next day. I couldn't go. I went there later as I promised to do so, but the man had gone. I saw the woman and I apologized. The woman told me that she had no doubt that I would come, but the man was very angry.

The man said that the Turks have cheated us again, and got angry. I asked her to tell the man that I had gone there."

Participant 2

"I saw that we had many more similarities than I had originally thought. The Armenians that I met were warmer and more sincere than I had expected."

Participant 4

4.5. Impact of Tourism on Perceptions and Attitudes

The majority of the participants stated that tourism may lead to positive changes in both attitudes and perceptions. However, they also expressed the necessity of dealing with the relationships between Armenia and Turkey at state level by the governments of each country. They stated that the borders should be opened and an opportunity given to both countries' citizens to see how close they have become to each other through travelling. "Tourism is definitely effective as it introduces cultures to each other and leads the differences to the same environment. Perceptions and values of the people can change only when they know a place and tourism may be the key for this recognition. It shows us generalization is not a proper attitude and the people we get to know as enemies through time in fact are not, so changes in attitudes are certainly possible. Tourism, student exchange, exhibitions (concerning tragedies on both sides) can improve the relations between the two parts as communication keeps people and differences together. What is most important than the opening of the borders by government or law decision makers is that public dialogue. If you do not provide this, opening the borders cannot be a sign of peace, but tourism and being together can provide it."

Participant 5

"If the borders are opened, Ani and Akdamar can be visited for the purpose of cultural heritage. Therefore, the Armenians' visits to Turkey would be easier. I think particularly the people in Eastern Anatolia might be interested in Armenia, too. Narrow the social distance! Initial meetings sometimes do not work, but interactions can break the prejudice, as this stems from fear and ignorance.

It will also develop our relations with other countries. The power of Diaspora is great. With the opening of the borders, the dependence on Diaspora will reduce."

Participant 11

"I think tourism can certainly play a very effective role in this regard. Meeting people, and experiencing the culture itself is really important. The people that are recognized as hostile are people rather than enemies. Tourism may be effective, but I do not think tourism itself would have a serious impact on the improvement of the relationships. I think after steps are taken by the governments with the intention of improving the relationship, tourism can be affective in the process of improvement between the people."

Participant 12

5. Results and Discussion

Boyer (1966) defines tourism as an exchange between economic and cultural values, also, shows a parallelism with the definition of Lucques: "tourism is a kind of passport to the building of peace through dialogue" (Olalı and Timur, 1988). Moreover, authors such as Salustiano (1970), Burkart and Medlik (1974), Haulot (1974) express that tourism increases the interest in the lifestyles of other societies and institutions/organizations, and improves the tolerance between different cultures and societies by triggering emotions such as good will (as cited in Doğan, 2004:138-139). However, the results of the studies, particularly when comparing those countries in conflict, show that relationships are unchanged. Many studies state that people's attitudes have to some extent changed in a positive way towards people in the countries they have travelled to, and that tourism has indeed eliminated the reactionary perspective in particular (Pizam et al. 1991; Milman et al. 1990). This study has revealed similar findings, and that the ongoing troubles between Armenia and Turkey can be overcome to some extent through tourism, and with improved communication between the two societies. In this context, the findings of the study are as follows:

- The participants' perceptions on Armenia and the Armenians before their trip were generally neutral or positive.

- They mostly interacted with the Armenians at the places they visited.
- As a result of the interaction, despite several differences between the Armenian and Turkish cultures, there are also intense similarities.
- With the participants who were neutral in their attitudes and perceptions, their travel has led to positive change in the process; likewise, the ones who were positive before their trip also finished their trips with positive attitudes and perceptions.
- Tourism played an important role in this change process with some adjustments at the state level (opening the borders, the provision of reciprocal visa facilitation, etc.). Interaction between the societies will increase as a result of intense tourism movements.

The results of this study are similar to those of the study conducted on Jordan and Israel by Pizam et al. (2002). The reason for positive attitude change in that particular study was the developing peaceful atmosphere between the two countries, increased trade and economic relations, and transportation and tourism opportunities. For the case of Armenia and Turkey, there is not an environment of this kind between two parts despite that tourism has had a positive impact on attitudes and perceptions towards Armenia and Armenians. Given the fact that tourism has a complex structure and content heavily influenced by cultural elements, studies of tourism with a sociological dimension can be either very comprehensive or otherwise, remain incomplete in some aspects, and have some risks and limitations from the beginning of the study. In this context, this study is limited with data collected from one country citizens; therefore, a comparable analysis was not possible. Therefore, the next step of the study can be carried out on Armenians visiting Turkey. The probable effect of this touristic phenomenon, which is created, developed and shaped by this neighborhood, on diplomatic and political relationships can be observed throughout time. Some further studies can be conducted to reveal the mutual attitude changes between the two parties and its direction and strength when some developments occur in future.

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