

Tourist behaviour of highly educated young women with a Turkish background living in Limburg

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A B S T R A C T

The author looked into the factors that are decisive for a particular group of immigrant women in their preference for a specific tourist destination. In order to find an answer to the basic research question 'How do highly educated young women of Turkish origin choose their vacation?' she divided their answers into three periods, being their experiences during childhood, their actual behaviour and their intentions for the future. The results show that this specific group of women are traditional in their choice of holiday destinations. In their childhood and adolescence, children have little influence on their parents' choice of holiday destination. All parents travel back to Turkey to visit relatives and friends. In the age group of 18 to 28 years old, all respondents that actually travelled or plan to do so without their parents choose Turkey as their destination, the attraction of which is mainly due to their Turkish cultural identity. Other factors such as VFR-tourism (Visiting Friends and Relatives), money, language and food influence their choice for Turkey as a holiday destination as well. In the future, the respondents would like to visit other regions as well, but they still visit Turkey on a regular base, mainly to broaden their horizon and to discover other cultures and traditions. The general conclusion is that search for one's own origin is the determining factor in the choice of a holiday destination of this subgroup.

A R T I C L E I N F O

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University students

What is the behaviour of highly educated female Turkish students born and raised in Belgium? Which are the factors that are decisive for their choice of a particular tourist destination?

We distinguish three periods, being their experiences during childhood (under 18 years of age), their actual behaviour (ages between 18 and 28 years) and their intentions for the future. It is logical to presume that the respondents, all being between 18 and 28 years, have no or little influence on the decision where to go on holiday during their childhood. The parents make the decision, but it is certainly of interest to know where, how long and why these families travelled for holidays.

In a second part, the question is whether the participants make their own choice of holiday destinations themselves and how far these choices are influenced by their (family) environment? Are they allowed to travel individually or in group, with (female) companions, or is it always in companionship of their parents? If they travel without their parents, where do they go to?

The third subsection of the research deals with the intentions of the respondents for their future tourist destinations. Where do they plan to go for holidays, once they have finished their studies? Are they influenced by former tourist behaviour in their infant and student years? As an appendix, we also asked for information about matrimonial migration within the group of respondents. How do they evaluate the possibility to travel to Turkey in order to find a partner?

The profile of the target group is the highly educated female student of Turkish origin, between ages 18 and 28, residing in Limburg (Belgium) but studying at a university in Brussels (VUB) or in Leuven (KU Leuven). All participants are second or third generation immigrants, born and raised in Limburg and of Islamic religion. We have to realise that the participants form an extraordinary group, regarding the fact that most Young females of Turkish descent till today do rarely participate at university-level education in Belgium. As a result, the conclusions of this study may, in theory, differ from the average behaviour of the Turkish community in Limburg. As there is practically no earlier research on this topic, we were eager to find out in how far the results of this study would confirm the existing prejudices on this community.

Research

After in-depth interviewing and focus-group interviewing, we had the obtained information controlled by an expert group, consisting of owners of or collaborators in "Turkish" travel agencies in the province of Limburg. The control is based on interviews and on an inquiry form at ten different travel agencies.

We joined website of Turkish students (www.turksestudent.be), where we placed a summons for answers on the inquiry form by female students according to the research criteria. After the first answers, we conducted a snowball sample survey in which we obtained information from several relevant and informative persons that are normally not easy to find. As a lot of "Turkish" persons have got the Belgian nationality, statistics do not allow a mathematic calculation on

the representation of the research population. The snowball sample survey was conducted both for the selection of respondents for the in depth interviews as for the composition of the focus group. The quality of the results in this type of research is highly dependent on the beginning of the chain. The first candidate meeting all requirements for the survey was finally found through the family of a fellow student at VUB. Thanks to her, we were able to compose a group of ten correspondents for the in depth interviews.

During a period of three months we conducted 26 personal in depth interviews (six persons were interviewed three times; the other four members were interviewed twice). In the same period, we organized three focus-group interviews. The obtained results allowed us to form a qualitative image of the tourist behaviour of the focus group. The three following months were covered by a second inquiry form in www.turksestudent.be and the control through the travel agencies. After that, the inquiry forms and the interviews were analysed and confronted with the results of the in-depth interviews and the focus group discussions. We also obtained the results on the enquiry about matrimonial migration and the tourist behaviour of the group.

Tourist behaviour during childhood and adolescence

During the study we realised that the specific environment and the socio-economic profile of the respondents need to be taken into account in formulating the research questions. Specifically the education of female youngsters in a "foreign" family of Islamic faith is determining tourist behaviour, through a number of limitations of freedom to act.

All respondents emphasise that the education in Turkish families is largely the same as in Belgian families and that the prejudice of "female oppression" is largely exaggerated. Even in the small survey-group, a gradation in traditional education is observed. Some respondents have had a more severe education than others, and the difference in education between boys and girls is explained by the fact that girls are being seen as members of the weaker sex, having trouble to defend themselves and as a consequence needing more protection. The more severe restrictions for the female youngsters are a result of the concern of the parents and a sign of the extra protection they want to give, and in no way a confirmation of the prejudice of inferiority to the male members of the family. On the other hand, the respondents affirm that they were primarily raised with Turkish values and standards, but that these standards were adapted to the Western way of life. Respondents are well aware

of differences with first generation immigrants, who seem to have more difficulties in adapting their traditional standards and values. The enquiry forms show an education described as “severe but fair”, and some respondents qualify their education as quite liberal and free. None of the interviewed sees their education as too severe.

Concerning the tourist experiences, the decisions are clearly made by the parents. All respondents have the same behaviour until the age of eighteen. It is only since the eighties of the last century that immigrants have realised and accepted that returning to the native land is highly restricted by the circumstances in the guest land. The education of the children, the local group of friends and the social relationships, the better social security system, health care and level of education have made them postpone the return. Parents hope to fulfil their dream of returning once the children have grown up and can take care of themselves. First generation migrants went back to Turkey every year for as long as their professional duties allowed mainly visiting friends and relatives. As they had left with the idea that their absence would be temporal, a lot of migrants had kept their house in the native land and use this family house during vacations.

Also for the respondents' parents, this type of VFR tourism (Visiting Friends and Relatives), is the most important reason to return to Turkey during holidays. They mainly stay in the environment where the family and /or relatives live during this period. Practically all the time is reserved for living together with these former friends and relatives. Exceptionally trips for own leisure are undertaken.

A second but less important factor for the choice of Turkey is the language. Most participants admit that their parents do not speak any other language than Turkish well, which means that language is an obstacle to go elsewhere.

Travel agencies confirm that families with younger children often return to Turkey for a longer period (kids are free from school). The older the children, the more often these families combine the traditional return with a (short) period of leisure for their own, primarily to be together as a family.

The agencies made an additional observation, namely that most families only book the flight-tickets, and no hotel, boarding-house or other reservation for their local stay. This confirms that most families either are in possession of a house or can stay with friends or family during their holidays. The students mostly went to Turkey in this period of their

lives and mostly the journey was made with the family car, because it provided the means to visit family and friends locally and made it possible to travel for leisure in the environment.

Actual tourist behaviour of the participants

In this part a summary of determining factors for the present tourist behaviour of the respondents is given. The emphasis is on travelling by the participants alone or in a Group of (female) friends, without their parents, as in the previous part the survey of factors determining their behaviour in company of their parents was already made. Nevertheless, there is a difference between that behaviour and the behaviour in choosing a destination for themselves.

Actual factors for travelling accompanied by the parents

Naturally, the behaviour does not dramatically change when the respondents become eighteen years of age. In the first part it was explained that during childhood and adolescence the most important goal of travelling was VFR-tourism. This is combined with leisure-travel as the children become adolescents, when also other regions are visited (mostly coastal holidays).

The same determination is found for the group of 18 to 28-year olds travelling accompanied by their parents, emphasising the importance of the leisure part of the combined period. Not only the VFR-tourism is of importance, but also the trips with the own family in the strict sense. Seven out of ten respondents declare going to Turkey each year both for VFR and for their own leisure.

Older daughters with increased responsibilities are allowed to stay in the family house or the boarding house, while their parents are visiting friends or family in other regions, or they occasionally stay with peers of the same age group.

Although most participants obtain permission to travel alone, some parents still do not want their daughter to leave for holidays on their own. Mostly the reason is that parents are too concerned.

All fifteen respondents on the enquiry form go back to Turkey with their parents on a yearly base for a period of approximately one month, filling the remaining period with a temporary job or preparing for September examinations. Remarkable is that parents often stay longer (and without their children) when work and other conditions allow it. During this family vacation they all stay in the family-owned

house or with friends or relatives. Half of the families prefer their own car as transportation vehicle, while the other half go by plane. In most cases a trip of a week is organised for the family, very often an allinclusive beach holiday.

Actual factors for travelling alone

Eight out of ten participants of the focus group are allowed to travel alone or accompanied by female friends. Only three actually made a trip without the parents. Five others plan to do so in the near future and did not go as yet because of financial obstacles or lack of time.

The in depth interviews show that the respondents who already made individual trips, always chose for Turkey as their destination. All others prefer going to Turkey also, if allowed. In the following sections the determining reasons for choosing Turkey as a destination are listed.

Ethno-cultural identity and language

During the research, the relationships between the participants of Turkish origin are remarkable. They prefer friendships with other females of Turkish origin rather than others. Although they were all born in Belgium, they are still strongly related to Turkish identity and this relationship is one of the most important factors for their choice for Turkey as their holiday destination. As seen before, they were all raised with great respect for Turkish standards and values, Turkish mentality and hospitality. During every day life at school and in their social relationships, they are continually confronted with the Belgian (or West-European) way of life. Very regularly the differences between Belgian and Turkish mentality are mentioned during the interviews and discussions, and this by all participants. According to the travel agencies, girls of this age-period and of Turkish origin are struggling with the balance between their Turkish and Belgian cultural identity. To find this balance, the respondents are drawn towards their roots to find out for themselves what this Turkish identity means for them. They are curious for their heritage, the region where their family originated from, they want to explore the region and the people they feel attracted to.

Nine of the respondents of the inquiry form stipulated they chose Turkey because of the local mentality, which they appreciate as helpful, friendly and hospitable. These factors are very often absent in Belgium, they feel.

Contrary to the parents, the respondents have no language restrictions at all, being at a university level. Nowhere in the survey nor in the travel agency-interviews a significant

factor for language was found. Needless to say that on a subconscious level, language is part of the cultural attraction felt by the respondents, but it was never actually felt as one of the determining factors.

Financial aspect, food regulations and prescriptions

As respondents are full time students. They do not dispose of a regular income and their budget is limited. Although none of them sees these budgetary reasons as decisive for their choice of a destination, they admit that Turkey is still affordable as a destination abroad.

There is no consensus on the factor of food regulations. As all of the participants are of Islamic faith, the degree of practising is possibly decisive for this aspect. Nine students out of fifteen that responded to the enquiry form do not think that this food aspect is of importance, two definitely want to go where these food regulations are followed and the remaining four state that they take this aspect into account although it is not decisive for their choice.

Future tourist behaviour

We also surveyed the intentions of the participants in relation to their future choice of holiday destinations. How do respondents plan to make a decision for the destination of their future holidays? To be able to do so, the respondents must have a perception of their future as adults after their studies, disposing of a regular income. It became clear during the research that the partner choice is very important in relation to these future destinations. Therefore this is presented as a separate topic in this part of the research.

The focus-group interviews revealed that, beside Turkey, all ten participants would like to visit other destinations as well. At the moment, the holiday destination is mostly Turkey, both when travelling with their parents and when in company of (female) friends. This was explained in the previous parts mainly because their parents want to combine VFRtourism with a family leisure trip, or because the students do have financial restrictions in choosing the destination when travelling in a group of friends. Although the respondents did not travel to other destinations than Turkey as yet, they certainly do not exclude other (exotic) locations in the future.

During the discussions the majority of the participants associate travelling to unknown destinations with the discovery of new cultures, as opposed to the actual trips with friends that are primarily seen as leisure and distraction.

In general, none of the respondents of the control-group answering the inquiry form sees "tourism" as only related with pleasure and leisure. Eight answers combine leisure with the possibility to discover other cultures and traditions. The other respondents define tourism as a "renewal". Travelling leads to an open state of mind for changes and enlarges the comprehension of other cultures. This is confirmed by the travel agencies, who state that highly educated female students of Turkish origin tend to explore other cultures and destinations.

Asked if they can see themselves going to Turkey to live there, the respondents are very well aware of the difference between holiday circumstances and every day life.

Although all participants feel much attached to Turkish culture, the majority is having doubts on their ability to integrate in Turkish society. Some respondents would like to try under the condition of a regular job corresponding to their level of schooling, to find out where they fit in best. The control group is not unanimous about living permanently in Turkey either. Most of them plan a future in Belgium, mostly because of job and career opportunities, expected income level and social or medical security.

Future partner choice

The future partner choice is a logical consequence of the above. Eight out of ten prefer a partner of Turkish origin; two do not think that love can be planned. Unanimously the group that prefers a partner of Turkish origin chooses for a "Turkish" partner raised in Belgium, to avoid possible integration problems.

Parents of the respondents find it much more important that their daughters finish their education successfully. Marriage is not a topic, contrarily to parents of young females that finish studying earlier. At least the respondents think so.

Islamic faith is another aspect in the partner choice. Subconsciously, the participants are less attracted to possible Belgian partners, avoiding religious problems. All of the respondents to the inquiry forms plan to marry a Muslim. Twelve of them choose the future partner themselves, depending on the permission of their parents; the other three students choose freely, without interference of their parents. No one plans to go to Turkey to find a partner.

Travel agencies state that most young couples of Turkish origin that order a holiday trip are practically always both raised in Belgium, certainly when more highly educated. The partner is found in the Turkish community in Belgium.

Conclusions and recommendations

The objective of the research was to find out if an evolution could be found in the choice of holiday destinations of highly educated female students of Turkish origin living in Limburg.

Scientific research in this field is very scarce, so that it is very delicate to generalise the findings of this research to the whole of the Turkish community in Belgium, or to suppose the same outcomes for the Moroccan female students. Nevertheless the results show that, even when highly educated, female students of Turkish background are very traditional in their choice of holiday destinations.

In general we assume that the children have no or little influence in their parents' choice of holiday destination during childhood, and to a lesser degree during adolescence. All participants go back to Turkey on a yearly base during holidays, always to visit relatives and friends. As the children grow older, this VFR-tourism is mostly combined with a coastal leisure trip in Turkey of approximately a week (all-in formula). Families mostly stay in their privately owned (second) house, a house of relatives or in a boarding house. Where first generation immigrants mostly parted from their homeland with the idea of a temporary absence (make money during a certain period of time and go back), younger generations realise that this is an illusion. On the other hand, relations with the "homeland" are very strong, as all respondents admit they go to visit friends and relatives.

In the age group of 18 to 28 year-olds, only a minority of respondents have already travelled alone. Although more of them are allowed to travel alone or accompanied by female friends, they do not, due to budgetary restrictions or lack of time. It is striking that all respondents that actually travelled or plan to do so without their parents also choose Turkey as their destination. This is mainly due to the attraction students feel to their Turkish cultural identity. As opposed to every day life in Belgium, where they are confronted with Belgian standards and traditions, they visit Turkey to uphold the relations with their friends and relatives and in a search for their (cultural) roots. The price tag of Turkey is (still) very interesting and certainly plays a role for students with no regular income and budgetary restrictions. As could be predicted for highly educated students, language plays only a minor role in the choice-process. Also (Islamic) food prescriptions are of lesser influence.

Even the 18 to 28 year-olds that travel together with their parents go to Turkey on a yearly base. No family was found that travelled elsewhere. We can conclude that the attraction to

the roots is still determining the choice of the holiday destination. In the future, the respondents want to visit other regions as well, but still will visit Turkey on a regular base. Here we have to conclude that participants do not want to go to other regions for leisure or their own pleasure, but rather to broaden their horizon and to discover other cultures and traditions.

Complementary to this attitude towards tourism, great hesitation can be found when participants are asked if they can imagine to go and live in Turkey permanently. Factors such as level of income, social security and health care withhold participants to do so and they all see themselves living in Belgium in the future. This is confirmed by the way respondents see their future partner choice. All participants prefer a partner of Turkish background, raised in Belgium and of Islamic faith. Once again the adherence to the roots is the determining factor.

In general, the research shows that even for highly educated female students the search for ethno-cultural identity and the upholding of relations with relatives and friends is the most important reason why the respondents want to go to Turkey for their holidays.

As mentioned earlier, it is very delicate to generalise the outcome of this research. Nevertheless, it is almost certain that the general conduct of other female youngsters with a Turkish background living in Limburg (Belgium) will not differ as far as choosing a holiday destination. The partner choice however might differ in more traditional and closed environments.

It would be very interesting to see whether the findings for male students share similarities, or whether do they go to destinations other than the source country? On the other hand, research could be done on a similar group, either of another faith (not Islamic, Italians for instance) or of the same faith but from another country (Morocco). In doing so, we can control the finding of cultural identity as the most important factor for only choosing the homeland as a holiday destination with the findings of the other group(s). This could result in an answer to the question of the importance of the Islamic cultural attraction on immigrants in Limburg as compared to the same religious environment. In our examples, does the fact of being of Islamic faith and culture influence the choice of the homeland as a holiday destination? Are the results for girls and boys the same for Moroccan and Italian background families, or do other motives underlying this behaviour interfere?

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