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STUDYING THE POTENTIAL OF BRANDING EGYPT AS A FESTIVAL TOURISM DESTINATION

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الملخص العربي :

لقد أصبحت المهرجانات في الآونة الأخيرة ظاهرة تتطور بسرعة ولها تأثير كبير على صناعة السياحة ، مما أدى إلى ظهور سياحة المهرجانات التي تتزايد أهميتها تدريجياً. وفي هذا الصدد، تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى دراسة إمكانات سياحة المهرجانات في مصر، باستخدام منهج البحث الوصفي النوعي الذي يركز على وصف طبيعة الظاهرة دون تغطية "لماذا" تحدث الظاهرة وذلك لوصف وضع سياحة المهرجانات في مصر وتوضيح تأثيراتها المحتملة على المقصد المصري. وأظهرت نتائج الدراسة أن المهرجانات تلعب دوراً هاماً في صناعة السياحة المصرية، حيث تساعد على جذب المزيد من السياح بدوافع مختلفة. إلى جانب ذلك، تقام فيها العديد من المهرجانات الدينية والفنية والثقافية التي تولد حركة سياحية و تزيد من حركة الطيران ومعدلات إشغال الفنادق أيضاً. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، هناك تأثيرات كبيرة للمهرجانات المصرية على التنمية السياحية للمقصد. لذا توصي الدراسة بالترويج للمهرجانات المصرية دولياً لوضع مصر على خريطة الوجهات السياحية للمهرجانات عبر المنصات الرسمية وقنوات الإعلام الإلكترونية المختلفة، لاستغلال سياحة المهرجانات على مدار العام وليس فقط في موسم الصيف مع وضع مبادئ التنمية المستدامة في الاعتبار.

Abstract

Festivals have become a phenomenon that is evolving rapidly. They have a major impact on tourism industry as they draw the attention of visitors, resulting in the emergence of festival tourism whose significance has been gradually growing. In this regard, this study aims at studying the potential of festival tourism in Egypt, using qualitative descriptive research method that focuses on describing the nature of a phenomenon without covering "why" it happens to describe the state of festival tourism in Egypt, and investigate the potential impacts of it on the Egyptian destination. The study findings demonstrate that Festivals play an important role in the Egyptian tourism industry, whereas it helps to

attract more tourists with different motivations. Besides, it holds several religious, arts, and cultural festivals which generate tourist traffic, aviation operations, and hotels' occupancy rates as well. Additionally, there are significant effects of the Egyptian Festivals on the tourism development destination. Therefore, the study recommends promoting the Egyptian festivals internationally to put Egypt on the map of festival tourism destinations via the official platforms and various electronic media channels, to exploit festival tourism all over the year, not just in summer season with consideration of the sustainable development principles.

Keywords: Festival tourism, festivals, festival theme, festival types.

1. Introduction

Festivals have existed for thousands of years (Hu, 2010). They are deeply rooted in human society and culture. Besides, they attract visitors leading the emergence of festival tourism (Kahramonovna, 2022; Cudny, 2013). Nowadays, festivals have grown in popularity, playing a vital role in tourism industry (Molina-Gómez et al., 2021), and adding a competitive advantage to destinations (Sun et al., 2019). Moreover, several studies suggest that the host destination image is directly influenced by the celebration of certain festivals (Duarte et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2010). The French city Cannes, for instance, was once a small city that turned into one of the most famous destinations due to the Film festival that it holds annually (Siam, 2022). However, Egypt is not on the

map of festival tourism destinations. Thus, this study aims to study the potential of Egypt as a festival tourism destination.

2. Literature Review

Festivals have recently become a growing industry (Deng et al., 2023; Podoshen et al., 2018), that is has been named the ‘the emerging giant’ over the past decade (Doe et al., 2022). They are themed and unique public celebrations that occur on a regular basis for a limited period of time, where visitors enjoy entertainment and cultural activities (Li and Yu, 2023; Li and Lau, 2022; Lee et al., 2015).

Destinations have started to hold festivals to benefit from its significant role in tourism development (Hai and Ngan, 2022; Pereira et al., 2021). Hence, a new type of tourism has evolved named festival tourism (Okech, 2011).

Festival tourism is one of the fastest growing types of tourism (Li and Yu, 2023; Choi et al., 2021; Nega and Debre Tabor, 2019). It is a type of tourism where the tourist travels to and stay in a destination to attend a certain festival (Stipanovic et al., 2015; Visser, 2005).

Festival tourism is characterized by uniqueness and rarity (Ma and Lew, 2012), as the more frequently the festival is held, the fewer tourists it attracts, and vice versa. Additionally, the festival's location is another important aspect that distinguishes festival tourism, where big cities are more suitable for holding festivals as they have proper infrastructure. Besides, the accessibility of the host city is an equally important aspect (Nagy and Nagy, 2015; Yancheva, 2015).

Festivals affect the host destination positively and negatively (Chang et al., 2022; Skoultzos et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2018). On one hand, festivals generate tourist traffic (Al-Azzam et al., 2023; Dychkovskyy and Ivanov, 2020; Pasya et al., 2016). They contribute to the local economy and support the local businesses (accomodation, recreation, food, etc.) (Olivier et al., 2023; Richards and Leal Londoño, 2022; Quinn, 2009). They also attract the attention of media locally and internationally (Skoultzos et al., 2020; Mair and Weber, 2019). Thus, they are a powerful promotional tool for destination branding (Chen et al., 2018; Akhoondnejad, 2016; Wan and Chan, 2013). Besides, they improve residents' quality of life (Galanopoulou, 2021; Düşmezkalender et al., 2019). Other advantages of festivals include cultural exchange (Akhundova, 2024), community engagement, and heritage preservation (Holmes and Ali-Knight, 2017; Vajirakachorn and Chongwatpol, 2017).

On the other hand, festivals also has negative impacts that need to be considered. They may cause overcroding and trafficjam in host cities (Stankova and Vassenska, 2015). They may also put additional strain on the limited community resources available in host cities. Besides, they may negatively impact the cultural and historical resources available in the destination (Düşmezkalender et al., 2019; Duran et al., 2014). Moreover, they may cause noise and pollution. Further, if not well organized, they can lead to the spread of social problems, rude behavior, and crimes (Bezirgan and Yetginer, 2020).

Festival tourists have several motivations to attend festivals among which are escaping the daily routine (Güneş, 2022), relaxation, socialization and togetherness, new culture exploration, or interesting festival theme (Zhang and Deng, 2022; Skoultos et al., 2020; Chang, 2011).

Festival tourism encompasses several types of festivals including art festivals, cinema festivals, music festivals, culinary festivals, religious festivals, science festivals and folk festivals (Yancheva, 2015; Çelik and Çetinkaya, 2013).

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Data collection Methods and Procedures

According to McCombes (2019), descriptive research purposes to accurately and methodically describe a population, situation or phenomenon. It is a proper choice when the study's aim is identifying characteristics, frequencies, trends, and categories.

In other words, it is defined as a qualitative research method that describes the characteristics of the phenomenon that is being studied. This methodology primarily focuses on describing the nature of a phenomenon (the subject of the research) without covering “why” it happens, as well as collecting and analyzing non-numerical data. In addition, it can be adopted via many methods such as case studies, which can be used to describe the characteristics of a particular topic or trend through gathering detailed data to identify closely the characteristics of defined topic (Shinija, 2024; Manjunatha ,2019).

Due to the lack of studies about festival tourism in Egypt despite the presence of different types of festivals that can be exploited in branding Egypt as a promising destination for festival tourism; this study adopted qualitative descriptive research approach to describe the state of festivals tourism in Egypt, and investigate the potential impacts of festival tourism that can be an effective tool for the destination branding. Some of the famous Egyptian festivals with different themes that are held frequently, and are significant in tourism context were selected such as: Sun Perpendicular Festival at Abu Simbel Temple, The Citadel Festival, and New Alamein Festival (SIS, 2023; e-Visa Website, 2022). Subsequently, collecting data about the cases were conducted by using the secondary research, such as the official authorities that have some publications related to the various Egyptian festivals. Depending on the data gathered, the analysis was done to examine the potential of festival tourism in the Egyptian destination, in addition to the its impacts of.

3.2 Festivals is Egypt

3.2.1 Abu Simbel Sun Festival

Abu Simbel Temples are one of the most famous attractions in Egypt. They were built by King Rameses II 1250 BC on the west bank of the Nile River, where one temple was built for the king himself and the other for his wife Queen Nefertiti (SIS, 2016). These temples were moved in the 60s by UNESCO to protect them from flood threat during the construction of the High Dam (Egypt Forward Website, 2022).

The sun perpendicular phenomenon occurs twice a year. The original dates were February 21 and October 21, but the relocation caused the

phenomenon to be delayed for one day, occurring on February 22 and October 22 every year (On the Go Tours Website, 2023)

During the Abu Simbel Sun Festival – in February and October – the sun rays light up the Holy of Holies of Abu Simbel temple (the larger temple) from the inside. There are four statues but the sun lights only three statues (Amun, Re-Harakty, and Ramesses II statues) for 20 minutes during the sunrise, but the sun does not touch the fourth statue, that is the god of darkness in ancient Egyptian mythology (On the Go Tours Website, 2023; SIS, 2016)

The temples are located more than a few hours' drive south of Aswan, but most tourists arrive at Abu Simbel by plane. The flight from Aswan is only 30 minutes and there are two timed flights a day, so that tourists have about two hours to spend at the temples (Egypt Forward Website, 2022).

In this day morning, enormous crowds gather very early to wait for the sunrise. Many people exploit this opportunity to meditate and feel peace before the festival starts. At sunrise, the quiet turns into enthusiasm as people gathering together to get a look at the stunning sight of the three statues covered with the sunlight. When the sun rises too high and the statues fall back into shadow, visitors start to eat, drinks, dances, and celebrate with full of fun and enjoyment. There are customary singers and dancers showing off their skills. In addition, handicraft workers of all kinds show their products. Tourists also have the opportunity to try delicious local Egyptian foods, socialize with friendly residents, and get some knowledge about the Egyptian culture as well (On the Go Tours Website, 2023; Egypt Forward Website, 2022).

3.2.2 *The Citadel Festival of Music and Singing*

The Citadel Festival of Music and Singing is one of most extraordinary cultural events in Egypt since its launch in 1989. Because of the diversity and the richness of its program and performances, it has succeeded in offering a unique variety of both classic and modern, Arab and international music, attracting huge number of music lovers and achieving huge popularity. The festival aims to enrich people's cultural awareness and attract music lovers from around the world who might not be interested in attending formal concerts (Cairo Opera, 2023; Ahram Online, 2022).

The festival is organized under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture, Cairo Opera House and in cooperation with the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, together with the Egyptian Tourist Authority (Experience Egypt Website, 2024).

The Citadel International Festival of Music and Singing is held every year during the summer season, specifically in August, for 14 sequential days, with the partaking of more than 40 various performances of singing stars from Egypt and the Arab world, in addition to some musicians who present their shows for the first time (international bands) in cooperation with the External Cultural Relations Sector. The festival usually holds two sequential concerts at the 'El-Mahky' theatre and a third one at the open-air theatre (Salah El-Din Citadel Theatre) (Cairo Opera, 2024; SIS, 2024).

Accordingly, the festival has grown in popularity throughout the years, which led to the development of the event's venue, where about 5000

seats were situated and stage LED screens were placed to further enrich the viewing experience of audiences (Cairo Opera, 2024).

Based on the previous sources, Saladin Citadel has always been a valuable site for visiting. Still, with this festival, this historic venue becomes an assured not to miss during summer vacation, in addition to its contributions to the enhancement of the Egyptian cultural and artistic heritage that help attract more visitors from all over the world.

3.2.3 New Alamein Festival

Salem (2024a) stated that "Alamein Festival" is considered the largest and the most varied entertainment festival in the Middle East and Egypt which was held for the first time on July 2023 at New Alamein City on the North Coast, under the slogan "The World is Alamein" for almost consecutive 45 days. Due to the huge success, the festival was held for the second time in 2024, receiving visitors from 104 countries. It involves a wide range of artistic, music, sports, culture, shopping and entertainment activities and events, with variety of festivals such as music and singing festival, food and theatre festival, and sports festival (Gamal, 2024).

The festival's goals are not limited to entertainment only, it also aims at attracting investments, promoting the city's urban development on the North Coast, increasing foreign inflows, boosting international tourism,

and performing a variety of cultural, sports, entertainment, and fashion shows (SIS, 2023).

Accordingly, this international festival generates significant job opportunities for the host community, companies, and other participating sectors, where around 50 Egyptian companies and more than 50,000 Egyptian workers were elaborated in the New Alamein Festival (Gamal, 2024; Salem, 2024b).

Moreover, the festival's activities positively influence the marketing of New Alamein City internationally and attract global attention, which turns it into a significant tourist destination, puts it on the international tourism map, generates tourist traffic and expenditures, especially that the city is easily accessible with a number of airports nearby such as Alamein International Airport and Borg El-Arab International Airport (Ahram Online, 2024; Gamal, 2024; SIS, 2023).

In addition to the previously mentioned festivals, many other Egyptian festivals and celebrations may be less popular, but they are very significant because of their relation to unique historical events and religious rituals, which support the potential of festival tourism in the Egyptian destination, they are concluded as follows (Egypt Time Travel, 2024; Cairo Top Tours, 2023; Egypt Tours Website, 2023):

- a. "Sham El Nessim" is a well-known and ancient Egyptian festival for one day, it is a public Egyptian holiday; Families are gathering together for enjoying its special vibes and activities like going to public parks, coloring eggs and eating salted fish. Additionally, in the evening, some Folklore dancing shows,

carnivals, and concerts occur at beaches, along the Nile, hotels and open-air areas.

- b. "Ramadan" is a holy and spiritual month, it is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar. Many tourists prefer to visit Egypt during this month to enjoy the unique vibes of Ramadan and the rituals and traditions with great enthusiasm and joy. During this period, the streets and homes are adorned with colorful lanterns and decorations that symbolize the joy and light of Ramadan. Besides, some celebrations (Ramadan Nights) are held at public cafes and restaurants, hotels, Nile cruises and Ramadan tents.
- c. The Sphinx Festival is one of the most famous and important tourist festivals in Egypt. It is an annual festival with a changeable date held in the coastal town "El Gouna" on Red Sea coast. It is a 5-day festival with number of exciting activities such as boat races, fireworks display, music and dancing concerts, in addition to art exhibitions showcasing local and international talents which attract several visitors and artists from all over the world. It aims to promote the ancient Egyptian culture for educating visitors and celebrating the rich heritage.

Further, Egypt has many other religious, cultural and recreational celebrations and events on which tourism marketing efforts can be focused to increase Egypt's opportunities for becoming a primary tourist destination for festival tourism such as; Moulid Al-Nabi (Prophet Muhammad's Birthday), Wafaa Al Nil (Honoring the Nile River), Eid al-

Fitra and al-Adha, Coptic Christmas, Egyptian National Day, Cairo Jazz Festival, World Tourism Day Festival, Cairo Festival for Arab Media, Cairo International Film Festival, Ismailia Folklore Festival, El Gouna International Film Festival, etc. (Nile Holiday Website, 2024; Egypt Tours Website, 2023).

3.3 Discussion and Results

Based on the mentioned festivals in Egypt and the previous literature review, the findings can be discussed and concluded as follows:

- a. Festivals play an important role in the Egyptian tourism context, where they are considered as tourism assets and are treated as unique tourism product. Besides, they are considered vital tourist attractions for a certain tourist destination at a specific time; such as the religious festivals or the cultural festivals that are linked to a fixed date like Abu Simbel Sun Festival.
- b. Festival tourism has lately become one of the fastest-growing and most popular trends in the global tourism industry that focuses on cultural exchange at international, national and local levels while maintaining high level of recreation; such as the previously mentioned New Alamein festival and the Citadel festival in Egypt.
- c. Egypt has a variety of religious, cultural (heritage and arts), and entertainment festivals in several coastal and urban cities, which helps to attract more tourists with different motivations, thus,

increasing both tourism traffic and aviation operations, and hotels' occupancy rates as well.

- d. Each festival, according to its type or features, is an opportunity for the presence of large numbers of celebrities, artists, visitors and participants, in addition to senior officials and representatives of the local and international media, which is a great tool to improve the image of the Egypt and brand it as a festival tourism destination.
- e. Festivals have significant effects on the tourism development of the whole destination, including supporting current businesses, boosting new investments in the festivals' venues, positively impacting the marketing efforts for the new cities, creating significant job opportunities for the host community, increasing promotional opportunities for the destination, increasing tourist numbers, and thus increasing the national income.
- f. There are many activities (cultural - entertainment - sports - artistic) that can be held in festivals. This happens in the New Alamein Festival and The Sphinx Festival, which enhances the importance of festivals as a tourist attraction for the Egyptian destination and its role as a tool for tourism promotion.
- g. One of the most important advantages of festivals in Egypt is that they are held in different venues (coastal, urban, and heritage cities), offering visitors varied experiences, and allowing them to escape their daily routine and experience something really special.

- h. Despite the several advantages and benefits of festival tourism for the tourist destination and the host community, some negative impacts may happen such as overcrowding, pollution, and deterioration of both natural and manmade resources, which contradicts the principles of sustainable development; such as the crowding that occurs inside the Abu Simbel Temple during the Sun Festival, which does not suit the carrying capacity of the temple and would deteriorate its walls and statues.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

Festivals play an integral role in tourism industry, and have become a new trend of tourism in many tourism destinations. They are considered a significant promotional tool that builds a positive tourism image for the destinations. Accordingly, they have become important tourist attractions that support the local economy of the host countries.

Additionally, Festival tourism is a niche type of tourism that includes traveling to several destinations to experience cultural, entertainment, religious, or any other type of festivals. This type of tourism has recently grown in popularity, as tourists seek unique and authentic experiences over traditional tourist activities. Moreover, festival tourism offers a lot of benefits for tourists such as; cultural exchange, socialization and memorable moments.

In Egypt, Festival Tourism benefits all involved parties; participants, sponsors, visitors, and the host community. It supports the local economy where the multiplier effect results in income growth, new jobs opportunities, improvement of infrastructure, drawing new investments, etc. Further, Egypt has the capabilities that allows it to be a pioneer festival tourism destination.

Accordingly, the study recommends the following to be considered by the official tourist authorities in Egypt to achieve the maximum benefits from festival tourism and minimize its negative impacts:

- 4.1 Cooperation between the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities and the Ministry of Culture to set an annual agenda for all Egyptian festivals, and promote them on official platforms and various media channels especially the electronic ones, to exploit festival tourism all over the year, not just in summer season.
- 4.2 Considering the carrying capacity of the festival venues, and determine the number of visitors accordingly. This allows all attendees to have the opportunity to enjoy the event, while minimizing the negative impacts of festivals such as overcrowding and unorganized gatherings, especially in closed heritage sites.
- 4.3 Directing tourism companies to prepare all-inclusive packages for festivals tourism, considering all festivals according to the previously mentioned festivals agenda, where the tourist program includes tourism activities according to the festival's venue.

- 4.4 Effective communication with all logistic services providers before the festival starting date and about the expected number of participants, to coordinate and provide all the required services such as transportation, accommodation, entry tickets, medical services.
- 4.5 Preparing attractive publications and videos in several languages about Egyptian culture customs and traditions, and publishing them on electronic platforms where tourists get all the needed information about the Egyptian destination to avoid cultural misunderstandings or behavioral infractions.
- 4.6 Cooperation with the Ministry of Environment and the Tourism Development Authority to consider the principles of sustainable development during the implementation of development projects related to festivals tourism in Egypt, in addition to setting some strict rules at festival venues about waste management, resources consumption, and energy usages; to raise the awareness about environment conservation and reduce the negative impacts on the environment.
- 4.7 Cooperation with the Ministry of Interior and security authorities to ensure safety and security of the festival visitors and prevent any problems or crimes that may take place in crowded venues.
- 4.8 Providing the maximum satisfaction for festival visitors through raising their awareness regarding what to do to enjoy their festival tourism experience. In this regard, the study recommends the following for those involved in festival tourism:

1. Making a travel plan that includes festivals research, and early booking of accommodation, transportation and festival entry tickets as well.
2. Showing respect for local customs and traditions, and getting familiar with culture norms.
3. Trying to engage with locals, interact with them, learn about their culture, and gain new connections and relations while attending the festival.
4. Being ready for any changes in the festival agenda due to any sudden circumstances that may occur, such as climate fluctuations.

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