

Impact of Social Marketing Channels upon Customer's Loyalty Tourism in Iraq-Case Study

تأثير قنوات التسويق الاجتماعي على ولاء الزبون السياحة

في العراق - دراسة حالة

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Abstract

The research problem- after many economic crises around the world since many decades; the opportunity to discover novel sources of incomes become a serious issue. Economy in Iraq for many decades considered as “*Unilateral Economy*” which means that Oil is almost the unique source of income and other kind of incomes were neglected enough such as industry, agriculture and tourism as well. Thus, due to rapid changes around the world & globalization towards having other sources of income rather than Oil especially after many global sounds for renewable energy, sustainable environment; and due to the special geographical region of Iraq, it could be a benefit for enhancing, developing its economy, environment, society if invested in a right way! as happened in other either Arabian or Foreign countries. One of these opportunities is tourism, which considered as a “*double-edged sword!*” in which it could be an alternative source of income meanwhile it needs high efforts to rehabilitate its infrastructure, use of technologies, developing the mentality towards the importance of this source. The paper adopted Marketing Model called “*Branding Pentagram*” to analysis and understand the situation of tourism in Iraq meanwhile it serves a framework to develop and improve tourism marketing channels through defining its strategy by answering three main questions that suggested by founder of this model (Baker & Hart in 1999 and cited then by Berg & Pietersma in 2015): **who** is the product or service for? **What** does the product or service do? **How** is it useful to me as a client? The paper shows that although there are fertile opportunities to invest in tourism sector in Iraq; but for many decades Iraqi environment suffered from many threats that represented by lack of technologies, lack of marketing channels, unqualified tourism skills, political situations and safety as well as the neglecting of tourist's facilities. On the contrary, recently exactly during Gulf Cup 25 in Basra the image is completely different and it gives a sense of strength towards improving and developing this sector. So, this paper tries to discuss and analysis the challenges and threats of tourism in Iraq.

Key words: Unilateral Economy, Brand Pentagram, tourism, marketing channels, economic crises, globalization.

المستخلص

مشكلة البحث - بعد العديد من الأزمات الاقتصادية حول العالم منذ عقود عديدة ؛ أصبحت فرصة اكتشاف مصادر جديدة للدخل قضية مهمة وإساسية. يعتبر الاقتصاد في العراق لعقود عديدة "اقتصاد أحادي الجانب" مما يعني أن النفط هو المصدر الرئيسي للدخل تقريباً وأن الأنواع الأخرى من الدخل تم إهمالها مثل الصناعة والزراعة والسياحة. إلا أن التغيرات السريعة في جميع أنحاء العالم و ظهور العولمة نحو الحصول على مصادر أخرى للدخل بدلاً من النفط مع ظهور العديد من الأصوات العالمية تطالب باستخدام الطاقة المتجددة والبيئة المستدامة ؛ ونظراً لخصوصية منطقة العراق الجغرافية ، يمكن أن يكون مفيداً في تعزيز وتنمية اقتصاده وبيئته ومجتمعه إذا استثمر بالطريقة الصحيحة! كما حدث في دول عربية أو أجنبية أخرى. ومن بين هذه الفرص السياحة التي تعتبر "سيف ذو حدين!" حيث يمكن أن تكون مصدراً بديلاً للدخل وفي الوقت نفسه تحتاج إلى جهود كبيرة لإعادة تأهيل بنيتها التحتية ، واستخدام التقنيات ، وتطوير العقلية تجاه أهمية هذا المصدر. اعتمدت الورقة النموذج التسويقي المسمى "Branding Pentagram" لتحليل وفهم وضع السياحة في العراق وفي الوقت نفسه يخدم إطار عمل لتطوير وتحسين قنوات التسويق السياحي من خلال تحديد استراتيجيتها من خلال الإجابة على ثلاثة أسئلة رئيسية اقترحها مؤسس هذا النموذج (Baker & Hart في عام 1999 واستشهد بها بعد ذلك من قبل Pietersma & Berg في عام 2015): لمن هو المنتج أو الخدمة؟ ماذا يفعل المنتج أو الخدمة؟ كيف هو مفيد لي كزبون؟ وتبين الورقة البحثية الحالية أنه على الرغم من وجود فرص خصبة للاستثمار في قطاع السياحة في العراق ؛ لكن البيئة العراقية عانت لعقود عديدة من العديد من التهديدات المتمثلة في نقص التقنيات ، وقلة القنوات التسويقية ، والمهارات السياحية غير المؤهلة ، والأوضاع السياسية والأمنية ، فضلاً عن إهمال المرافق السياحية. على العكس من ذلك ، في الآونة الأخيرة بالضبط خلال كأس الخليج 25 في البصرة ، ظهر العراق بصورة مختلفة تماماً وتعطي إحساساً بالقوة نحو تحسين وتطوير هذا القطاع. لذلك ، نحاول هنا مناقشة وتحليل تحديات وتهديدات السياحة في العراق.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الاقتصاد الأحادي ، العلامة التجارية الخماسية ، السياحة ، قنوات التسويق ، الأزمات الاقتصادية ، العولمة.

Introduction

Marketing through internet, websites and other social channels is growing faster than before; moreover, tourism industry widely spread in its activities to cover hospitality, transportation, food beverage, producing many kinds of souvenirs like (traditional clothes, ceramic antic and even some packaging kind of foods) and so on; whereas around (2.4 billion/ users) in 2012 used internet for travel services (Ulkarch, 2014 cited by Rop, 2015; Dhanapriya et.al, 2023: 1-2) to get information about their future destinations; lately, tourism industry has its role in improving and diverse the sources of income, developing the infrastructure, enhancing and improving value chain of related industries as well (Rop, 2015: 2-3). Globally speaking tourism industry has (10.4%) of Global GDP in 2019 (UNWTO, 2019); moreover, tourism industry achieved around (2,892.94 billion/\$) of GDP in 2019 which was expected to increase to (3,593 billion/\$) in 2022 regardless the situation of shutdown due to COVID-19 Pandemic (Statista, 2021). But even though, and with reference to the wide technology such tourism organizations around the world started their *virtual tourist program* to make *virtual journeys* to cities, museums, and so on to overcome those bad times, and to encourage tourists to make *actual journeys* in future due to the influence of website images in directing the decisions of tourists.

In Iraq, the scene is completely different between supporters and opponents, supporters found that Iraq is very rich in its tourism heritages that has many cultures, historical places, religious destinations, and even natural ones as in North or South of Iraq, and they believe in its great role towards increasing the employment opportunities and diverse income sources; especially if this fact compared with the actual numbers of Iraq's GDP that refers to (228.4 billion/\$) in 2014

had been achieved from tourism industry, whereas in 2015, GDP was plunged to (166.7 billion/4) then in 2019, the tourism total contribution was plunged again to (8.4%) of GDP (WTTC, 2019); while in 2022 during the Gulf Cup-25 in Basra, website marketing channels reflect a positive indication of tourists in number in which indicates that within two days only, around (55.000/ person) visited Basra and other Iraqi places (<https://www.kurdistan24.net>). On the contrary, opponents do not support the idea of having positive actions towards improving and developing those tourism destinations and they prefer to keep silent!

Tourism in Iraq is not an ordinary one, it is a combination of many kind of activities such as safari life in South and/ or North of Iraq; destinations for all religious sects as in Kurdistan, Mosul, Najaf & Karbala; Baghdad as well, and heritage tourism activities all around Iraq such as Sumerian, Babylonian, Assyrian & Chaldean civilization remains, many popular websites and social channels are interested in showing the beauty and antiquity of those cities because they believe that websites and social channels become a main source of information of those destinations. Here, the paper will use **Branding Pentagram Model** to translate the desired tourism strategies into branding policy (Simoes & Dibb, 2001) and then adopting it as everyday action (Knox & Bickerton, 2003; Rop, 2015).

Literature Review

The dynamic competitive correlation between social marketing channels and customer (tourist) loyalty

Globally, many previous studies referred that tourism in 2008 were around 922 million and the number will be increased to reach 1.6 billion by 2020 and till 2030 the growth in tourism industry estimated to reach (1.8 billion \$/ yearly) as UNWTO reported in 2016; the destinations are expanded from Europe, Middle East, Africa, China to other uncounted destinations, due to the active sharing information throughout social marketing channels; UNWTO's expected that tourism industry will grow by (1.56%) in 2020 and it will reach (3.3%) in 2030 (Rop, 2015; Cronje et al., 2020).

So, the tourism contribution to the global GDP can be modified through figure (1).



Figure (1) Global GDP according to tourism contribution

Source: Statista, 2019

With respect to few expectations, the traditional competing tourism model depends on the destinations that aligned with services and/ or activities feedback which presented through social marketing channels; and by reviewing few literatures, it is obvious that social marketing channels have a great role in presenting either positive or negative impressions (Santos et al., 2014: 1-3; Jeevankarthick & Kowshik, 2023: 1-4). Promoting through these channels have to be matured enough in order to compete and sustain. Destination attractiveness can be considered as an indicator to build (*destination Branding Pentagon*) for those tourists who came to Iraq to visit their tourism destinations (Ndivo et. al., 2012); especially after 2022 which can stand as an example due to the reports of such social marketing channels which indicates that more than (3 million) tourists visited Iraq during 2022 as CNBC US reported (www.an.news, 2023).

Despite of these facts but by logic, still Iraqi tourism destinations are affected by four factors as research notified; the deterioration of tourism infrastructure, environmental facilities are not qualified enough yet, failure of managing tourism destinations, and lack of planning tourism as a source of economic vitality. Therefore, throughout coming section the research will discuss and analyze those factors under the effect of *Destination Branding Pentagon*.

Destination Stands as Branding Pentagon Model

Generally, destination attractiveness depends on high quality accommodations feedback in most of cities or regions (Principal & Kumar, 2023: 1); but in Iraq, destination is related mostly to emotional, socio- psychological objectives, especially for those religious destinations that related to certain religious traditions (Farnia et. al., 2018), in this context, Iraqi religious destinations received around (4.32 million/ tourist) in 2019 that it is equivalent to 72.1% of total tourists around the year (<https://www.reportlinker.com>), while total expenditure during peak seasons reached (1.56 billion/ IQD) as shown in figure (2).

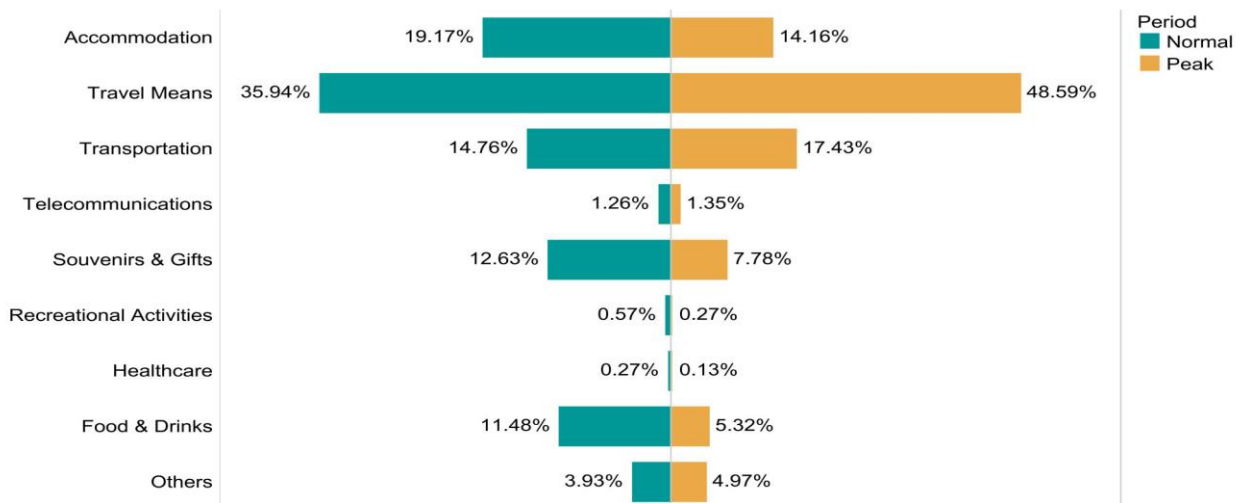


Figure (2) expenditures related to religious tourism

Source: COSIT, Tourism Expenditure Survey, 2019.

Earlier, in this paper, three questions were mentioned; 1) *who is the product or service for?* And the answer is to those tourists who visit Iraqi religious destinations; 2) *what does the product or service do?* It is a continuous spiritual & symbolic relationship between tourists and his/ her believes for (*Muslims, Christians and others*); 3) *how is it useful to me as a client and/ or society?* It is very useful because tourist gets his/ her spiritual needs and for society (Hartl, 2002: 46-48), it is important due to the dynamic process of tourism cycle that characterized as sustainable process if it is invested in a right way; which means that religious tourism destination grantees the economic

vitality as happened yearly during Haj season in Macca. Dinnie who was cited by (Rop, 2015) shared “*posits that in addition to attracting tourists, stimulating inward investment and boosting exports, nation branding also focuses its actions on increasing exchange-rate stability, re-establishing international credibility and investor confidence, increasing political influence, strengthening international alliances and, in general, improving the nation’s image in the global arena*”; thus, religious tourism destination of Iraq could stands as central axis that links all of emotional image, destination brand and territory as well (Santos, 2014).

Basically, if those four factors (*the deterioration of tourism infrastructure, environmental facilities are not qualified enough yet, failure of managing tourism destinations, and lack of planning tourism as a source of economic vitality*) were being under consideration with skilled qualified management, the situation of economy in Iraq will be different, especially under the conditions of promoting through social marketing channels that characterized as not expensive whereas very valuable.

Branding pentagram stands as a tool that can be used to develop and improve branding, and here for research’s case the branding is “*destination tourism branding*”; this tool was firstly submitted by a group of teamwork in 1972 in London (<http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pentagram>), where they tried to design a strategy consists of set of plans and trying to achieve them consequently to solve the pre-designed dilemma (Van den Berg & Pietersma, 2015: 149-152). *Brand* is a set of certain indicators that surround either a product, service, company or industry while *Branding* is the process of managing those indicators; so, *Branding Pentagram* is a tool to evaluate and elaborate five indicators that influence branding strategy. Those five factors are shown in figure (3) could be stand as a daily practice to any organization that seeks to sustain, meanwhile, those five indicators help other relative activities to grow as well.

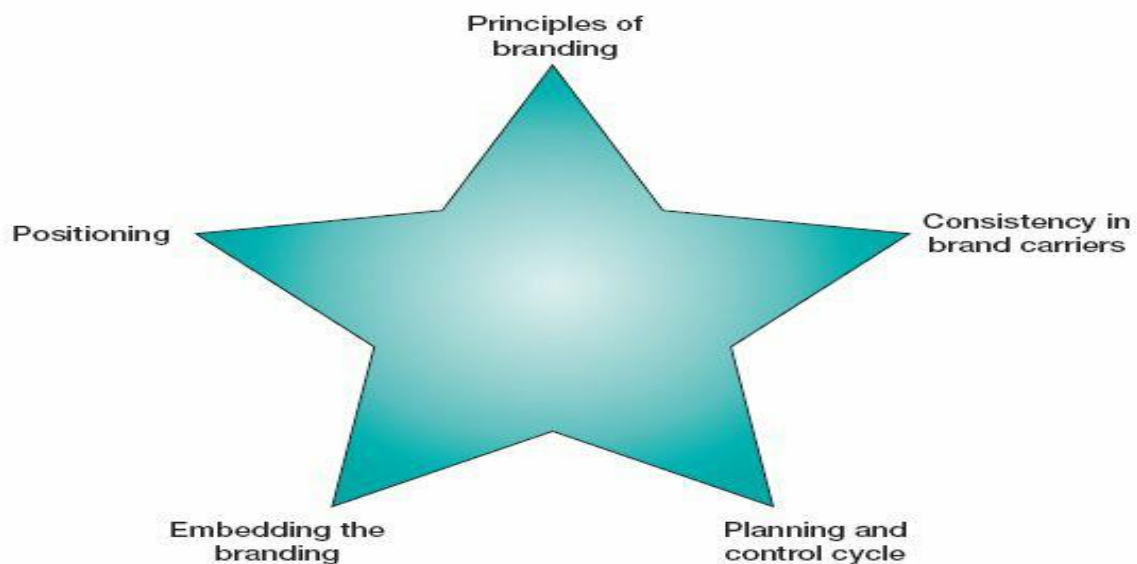


Figure (3) Branding Pentagram

Source: Van den Berg & Pietersma, 2015

To understand this model, five indicators of Branding Pentagonagram have to analyze as the following sequence (Van den Berg & Pietersma, 2015; Rop, 2015; Zhe et al., 2020):

- 1) Principles of Branding; includes *brand mission; desired brand perception; brand architecture*; starting from naming the objectives, naming the core values of this brand and naming the suitable portfolio that organization have to address.
- 2) Positioning; based on *segmentation; target group; position*; the organization has to follow certain standard segmentation to use; meanwhile, classify their targets into group(s) with reference to clients, then working on balancing between the client's perception and the organization's performance.
- 3) Consistency in brand carriers; it means *organizations have to be clever enough to decide which social communication channels to follow with respect to cultures and behaviors*.
- 4) Embedding the branding; the founders of this model drawn their model as "pentagram" to hint that without **Consistency**, embedding cannot be existed! Due to the high responsibility of appointed person who will merge the policies of organization with its cultures and behaviors.
- 5) Planning & control cycle; it characterized as **SMART** (*Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time specific*) targets for both short- and long-term brand polices. Therefore, branding is done when the actual brand experiences are equal to those desired ones.

Research Methodology

Data and information that published by World Bank Data (2013, 2019) and the statistical data of COSIT – tourism expenditure survey (2019) is adopted here to exam the "Impact of Social Marketing Channels upon Customer's Loyalty", in addition to tens websites, and social marketing channels are reviewed to understand this phenomenon, but the road is still long and unobvious to decide if social marketing channels are enough to promote and marketing for tourism activities and destinations.

This research allows to make a comparison among different kinds of tourism destinations in Iraq to present which one is more valuable than others, with regards to those four factors as mentioned earlier; *the deterioration of tourism infrastructure, environmental facilities are not qualified enough yet, failure of managing tourism destinations, and lack of planning tourism as a source of economic vitality*, so, this research attempts to simulate the current situation and gets the lessons as well as the benefits to overcome through "**Branding Pentagonagram model**".

Results & Discussion

The results that registered from many sources of data in figure (4) below indicates that Going on *Religious destination* is the most marketed tourism activity in Iraq (Except Kurdistan Region) then cultural & heritage and lastly the leisure and nature destinations; with respect to the normal and peak times. It indicates also that branding destination as a concept is critical for such destinations while it is an opportunity for religious destination which means many efforts have to be taken towards improving and developing those destinations to overcome the four factors of tourism deterioration.

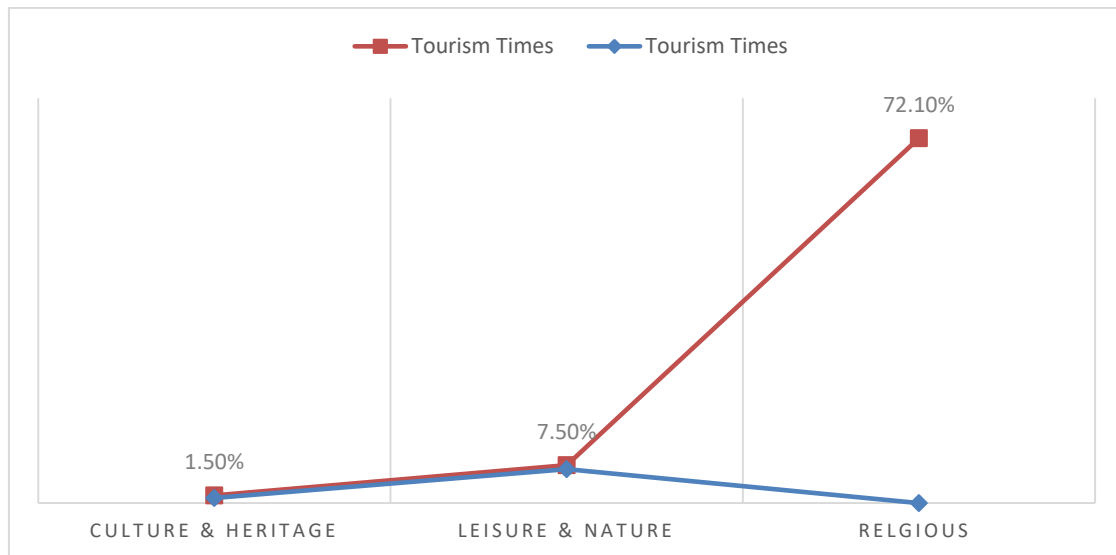


Figure (4) Tourism Destination according to Total Number of Tourists, Except Kurdistan of Iraq

On the contrary; Kurdistan Region addressed by Board of Investment worked hardly on developing and improving tourism industry and information shows that Kurdistan Investment Commission has licensed (161) of total number of projects from 2006-2020, and the expenditure amount is around (14.85%) of total expenditures among other industries as in figure (5)

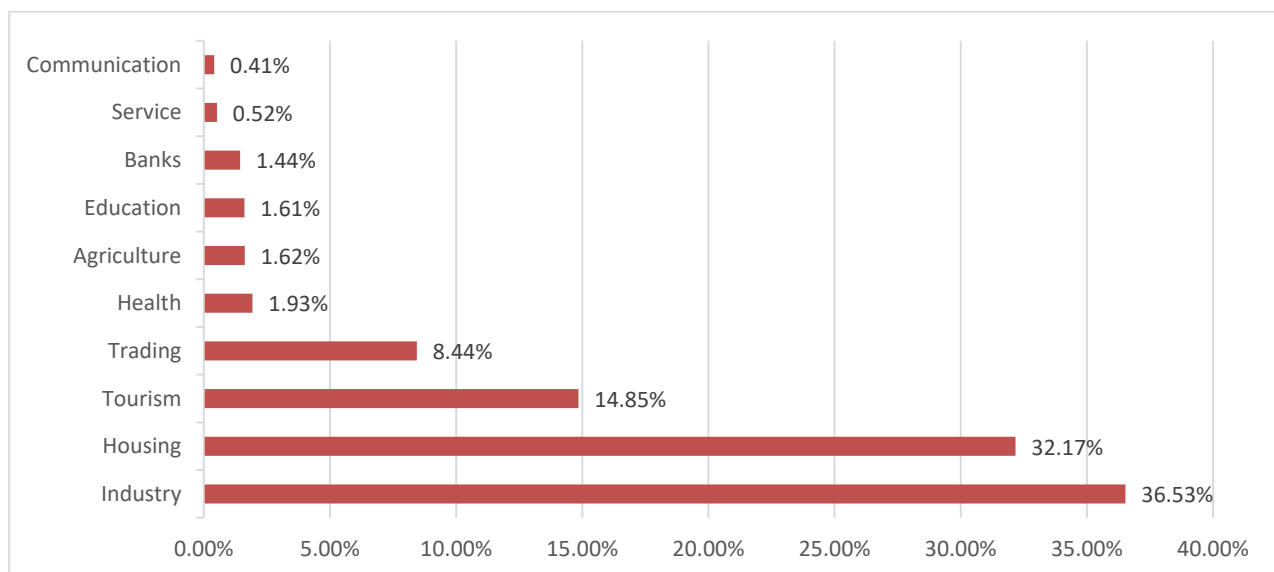


Figure (5) Investment by Sector in Kurdistan Region (2006-2020)

So, tourism destination in Kurdistan region differs that what is shown earlier in (figure, 4), because according to GOV.KRD report that published in 2023, Kurdistan successes to balancing (8) different religions and sects (www.gov.krd). Meanwhile, the leisure and nature places are very desirable destinations especially during national holidays, spring time and so on as shown in figure (6).

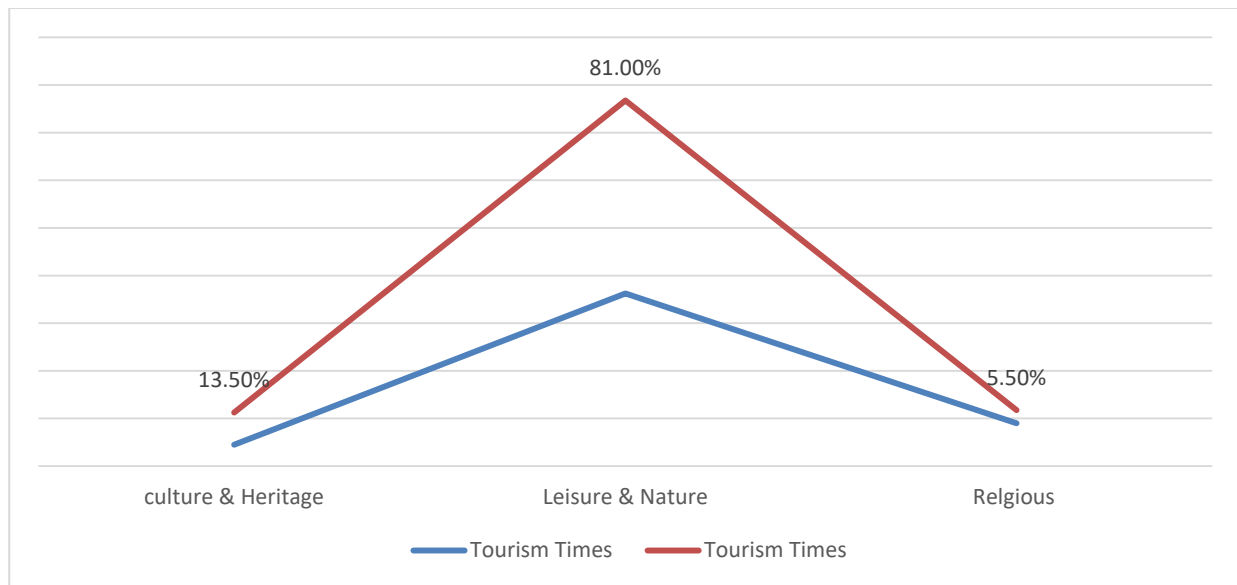


Figure (6) Tourism Destination according to Total Number of Tourists in Kurdistan Region

However, the results are different, but this differentiation makes a sense, due to the diversity of places, times of tourism, Iraq has many different cultures, religions & sects, and natural beautiful places that can stand as a ***Destination Branding***.

Conclusion & further suggested views

In brief, to place the destination as a branding challenge; Iraqi government, institutes, private organizations and public ones have to work in parallel to develop and improve their tourism destinations all around Iraq, by adopting new technologies of promoting through social marketing channels and other digital methods of promotions in addition to developing the tourism infrastructure and enhancing the tourism skills through educational and training programs that leads to economic vitality at the end of the tourism cycle process. Destination branding can be influenced by individual practices by all populations, societies and governments as well, moreover, innovation and creation of identity considered as main elements of sustainable destination branding.

It is clear that tourism literature in general and in Iraq in specific still immature enough to enrich societies and economies with the future of tourism carve, and many efforts are still hidden and have to analyze into statical data to be more reliable and useful.

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