Journal of
TANMIYAT AL-RAFIDAIN
(TANRA)
A scientific, quarterly, international, open access, and peer-reviewed journal

Vol. 45 , No. 149
March 2026

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Citation: Nejmeddin, A. I. (2026). Investigating the Impact of Social Media on Attracting International Tourists: Survey Study in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. *TANMIYAT AL-RAFIDAIN, 45* (149), 183-200. https://doi.org/10.33899/tanra.v45i149.49388

P-ISSN: 1609-591X
e-ISSN: 2664-276X
tanmiyat.uomosul.edu.iq

Research Paper

Investigating the Impact of Social Media on Attracting International Tourists: A Survey Study in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.33899/tanra.v45i149.49388

Article History: *Received*: 7/9/2025, *Revised*:25/10/2025, *Accepted*: 16/11 /2025, *Published*: 1/3/2026.

Abstract

Despite the significant tourism potential of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, its international presence remains limited, creating a clear research gap on how social media effectively influences the travel decisions of foreign tourists. Accordingly, this study addresses the main research question: To what extent do social media influence the attractiveness of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq for international tourists? This study was conducted with an applied purpose and a descriptive survey methodology. Primary data were collected from 384 international tourists visiting Erbil during peak tourism periods using a structured and pre-validated questionnaire. Convenience sampling was used, and the instrument demonstrated acceptable reliability, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients exceeding 0.80. Statistical analyses, including descriptive statistics, normality assessment, and a one-sample t-test, were performed using SPSS software. The results show that social media has a statistically significant and positive impact on international tourist attractions ($t > 1.96$, $p < 0.05$). Among the components analyzed, the quality of visual content, user-generated comments, and targeted social media advertising were identified as the most influential determinants of tourist perceptions and travel intentions. Among the limitations of the fieldwork were limited tourist access to certain locations and seasonal variations in visitor numbers, which affected the stability of participants' access. The study recommends developing culturally appropriate digital marketing strategies, enhancing multilingual social media content, and strengthening professional management of online tourism campaigns to enhance the region's global digital presence. This research contributes to filling the limited knowledge base on emerging tourism destinations and provides practical insights for policymakers and tourism stakeholders seeking to increase international tourist arrivals.

Keywords:
Social media, international tourism, digital marketing, Kurdistan Region of Iraq, tourism advertising

ورقة بحثية

دراسة تأثير وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي على جذب السياح الدوليين: دراسة حالة: إقليم كردستان العراق

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.33899/tanra.v45i149.49388

تاريخ المقالة: *الاستلام:* 2025/9/7، *التعديل،التنقيح:* 2025/10/25، *القبول:* 2025/11/16، *النشر:* 2026/3/1

المستخلص

على الرغم من الإمكانات السياحية الكبيرة التي يتمتع بها إقليم كردستان العراق، إلا أن حضوره الدولي ما يزال محدودًا، مما يخلق فجوة بحثية واضحة بشأن مدى تأثير وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي في قرارات السفر لدى السياح الأجانب. وبناءً على ذلك، تتناول هذه الدراسة سؤال البحث الرئيس: إلى أي مدى تؤثر وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي في جاذبية إقليم كردستان العراق للسياح الدوليين؟ *تعتمد الدراسة على هدف تطبيقي ومنهج المسح الوصفي. وقد تم جمع البيانات الأولية من 384 سائحًا دوليًا زاروا أربيل خلال المواسم السياحية العالية، وذلك باستخدام استبانة منظمة ومتحقَّق من صدقها مسبقًا. تم استخدام أسلوب العينة المتاحة، وأظهرت أداة البحث مستوى مقبولاً من الموثوقية، إذ تجاوزت معاملات ألفا كرونباخ قيمة 0.80. كما أُجريت التحليلات الإحصائية — بما في ذلك الإحصاءات الوصفية واختبار التوزيع الطبيعي واختبار (t) لعينة واحدة — باستخدام برنامج SPSS ، أظهرت النتائج أن وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي لها تأثير إيجابي ودالّ إحصائيًا في جذب السياح الدوليين. ($t > 1.96, p < 0.05$) ومن بين العوامل المدروسة، كانت جودة المحتوى المرئي، وتعليقات المستخدمين، والإعلانات الموجَّهة عبر وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي من أكثر المحددات تأثيرًا في تصورات السياح ونواياهم في السفر. واجه العمل الميداني عدة قيود، منها صعوبة الوصول إلى بعض المواقع السياحية، والتقلبات الموسمية في أعداد الزوار، مما أثر على استقرار الوصول إلى المشاركين. توصي الدراسة بتطوير استراتيجيات تسويق رقمي تراعي البعد الثقافي، وتحسين المحتوى متعدد اللغات على وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي، وتعزيز الإدارة المهنية للحملات السياحية الرقمية بهدف تقوية الحضور الدولي للإقليم. وتُسهم هذه الدراسة في سد الفجوة المعرفية المتعلقة بالوجهات السياحية الناشئة، كما تقدم رؤى عملية لصناع القرار وأصحاب المصلحة في القطاع السياحي الساعين إلى زيادة أعداد السياح الدوليين.*

الكلمات المفتاحية:

وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي، السياحة الدولية، التسويق الرقمي، إقليم كردستان العراق، الإعلان السياحي

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المجلد (45)، العدد (149)، آذار 2026

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الاقتباس: نجم الدين، ارام عزالدين. (2026). دراسة تأثير وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي على جذب السياح الدوليين: دراسة حالة: إقليم كردستان العراق. *تنمية الرافدين*، 45 (149)،183-200. https://doi.org/10.33899/tanra.v45i149.49388

P-ISSN: 1609-591X
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1. Introduction

Tourism has become one of the world's largest and fastest-growing economic sectors, contributing significantly to employment, investment, cultural exchange, and regional development. The number of tourists worldwide has steadily increased over the past two decades, and despite cyclical disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic, international tourism continues its rapid recovery and is projected to reach nearly 90% of its pre-pandemic level by 2023 (United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2023). This upward trend requires destinations to implement effective and innovative approaches to attract visitors in an increasingly competitive global tourism market. Rapid technological advancements and the widespread use of digital platforms have radically transformed how destinations communicate with potential tourists. Social media, in particular, has become one of the most influential channels for tourism promotion. These media offer interactive, visual, and up-to-date content that influences travelers' perceptions, trust, and destination choices (Ahn & Lee, 2019; Hernández-Méndez & Muñoz- Leiva , 2025). With the rise of user-generated content (UGC), electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), and visual storytelling, social media platforms have become essential tools for tourism marketing agencies, enabling them to quickly and effectively reach a global audience (Sotiriadis & van Zyl , 2023; Michaëlidou et al., 2022). In this digital context, Iraqi Kurdistan (IKU) is an emerging tourist destination, rich in exceptional cultural, historical, and natural heritage. Erbil, the regional capital, is recognized as the region's main tourist hub thanks to its ancient citadel, museums, vibrant markets, cultural heritage, and constantly improving hotel infrastructure. Despite challenges related to political perception, a limited international presence, and insufficient marketing efforts, the number of international tourists has gradually increased over the past decade (Hamarashid & Ismael, 2022). However, the region's promotional strategies, particularly in the digital sphere, remain underdeveloped and inconsistent. Within this digital landscape, the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (IRK) is emerging as a tourist destination, rich in unique cultural, historical, and natural heritage. Erbil, its capital, with its ancient citadel, museums, vibrant markets, cultural heritage, and quality hotel infrastructure, is recognized as the region's main tourist hub. Erbil has considerable potential to attract more international tourists if it is strategically promoted using modern digital communication tools (Abbas & Al-Khalid, 2023). Given the growing role of social media in shaping a country's image and influencing travel motivations, it is essential to leverage these platforms to enhance the international image of Erbil's tourism offering.

This gap underscores the need for a systematic analysis of the role of social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and travel review sites in shaping perceptions of the Iraqi Kurdistan region and influencing visitor decisions among international tourists. Addressing this gap is crucial for policymakers, marketing professionals, and tourism stakeholders seeking to enhance Erbil's global tourism competitiveness through targeted, evidence-based digital marketing strategies.

This situation raises a fundamental research question: To what extent do social media platforms influence international tourists' perceptions and decisions to visit the Iraqi Kurdistan region? And how effectively does the region utilize digital platforms compared to global trends? The objective of this study is to examine the impact of social media content and online advertising on international tourists' travel motivations and on Erbil's image as a destination. By focusing on the perceptions of international tourists, this research offers practical implications and contributes to the growing literature on digital tourism marketing, particularly for emerging destinations in the Middle East. Based on gaps identified in the literature, this study demonstrates that social media has a significant positive impact on the tourist appeal of the Iraqi Kurdistan region for international tourists. This study aims to analyze the impact of social media content and online advertising on the motivation of international tourists and the image of Erbil as a tourist destination. By focusing on the perceptions of international tourists, it offers practical implications and contributes to the growing literature on digital tourism marketing, particularly for emerging destinations in the Middle East. Based on an analysis of the existing literature and identified gaps, this study demonstrates that social media has a significant positive impact on the tourist appeal of the Iraqi Kurdistan region.

2. Theoretical review

Social media has revolutionized tourism marketing by enabling destinations to communicate directly with potential tourists and influence their decisions. Studies show that platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter are frequently used by travelers to search for information, evaluate destinations, and share their experiences (Xiang and Gertzel , 2021; Milano et al., 2021). The use of social media facilitates the creation of user-generated content (UGC) and increases reputation and engagement among potential tourists (Sotiriadis and Ziel , 2023). Research also highlights the importance of content quality and reputation. Loda (2021) found that credible information, while not directly influencing purchase intent, significantly improves communication effectiveness. Hernandez-Méndez and Munoz-Leyva (2025) also found that textual content in online tourism advertising attracts more attention than visual content, thus highlighting the need for structured digital content to attract tourists. (Oger) Hajar Salim et al. (2025). Study on the Impact of the Tourism Sector on the Economy of Erbil, Turkestan. This study aimed to analyze the impact of the tourism sector on the economy. It focused on the consequences of achieving the main objectives of the tourism sector for the economy of the Kurdistan Region. These impacts were assessed using primary data collected from 300 tourists. Fieldwork was conducted in the Erbil Governorate in July 2022. The research methodology is based on quantitative analysis and uses a survey to identify factors that respondents consider important for the economy, particularly those related to tourism. The collected data were analyzed using SPSS software. The results indicate that the environment, technology, history, culture, infrastructure, transportation, as well as legal and political aspects, have a positive and significant

impact on the economy. In contrast, gender and education level, considered separately, do not have a significant impact.

In 2023, Syed Anwar Hossaini studied the impact of social media on international tourism in northern India. This study aimed to analyze this impact by examining the reasons why international tourists use social media and categorizing them according to their attitudes toward these platforms. Each group was then segmented based on personal and demographic characteristics, as well as their vacation and travel preferences. A random sample of 63 participants was selected, and a questionnaire was distributed to international tourists visiting northern India. The data was analyzed descriptively. The study shows that social media offers engaging and inspiring visual content that encourages tourists to choose northern India as a destination and to explore the diversity of its tourism offerings. The main factors influencing tourists' use of social media are entertainment and flight information. This study recommends increasing the sample size and broadening the scope of the study to examine the impact of social media on tourism in greater depth.

In 2021, Dashti Hossein Ali studied the impact of tourism marketing on tourism attractiveness in Shuklawa . The study concluded that tourism marketing is the primary driver of development in this sector, its importance stemming from its role in global tourism competitiveness. Every country strives to enhance its tourism offerings to maximize the benefits of the tourism export market. This is achieved by creating a positive image and reinforcing it in the minds of tourists through various marketing strategies. The results confirmed that, despite existing tourism resources and attractions, Erbil's tourism sector, particularly in the Shuklawa region , lags significantly behind Arab and international competitiveness rankings. This is also reflected in its low ranking in the 2021 Global Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index, as well as in comparison to the tourism situation in Iran and Turkey. Consequently, no tourism development plan reflected the country's tourism potential or effectively implemented the laws and principles of tourism marketing. Tourism development depends not only on the availability of tourist resources and attractions, but also on their use and promotion.

Atom Abdulkadhim (2017). Tourism Promotion in Iraqi Kurdistan (Case Study: Halabja Province). This study examines the state of tourism promotion in Iraqi Kurdistan, using Halabja Province as a case study. The results show that visitors primarily seek experiences related to nature and leisure activities. Word-of-mouth proves to be the most effective marketing method. Approximately 77% of respondents reported being more than satisfied. This underscores the need to create a positive culture for international tourists. The concept of destination image plays a fundamental role in tourism research. Gann's (1997) Destination Image Formation Model explains that tourists form a mental image of a tourist destination through organic (word-of-mouth, social media) and induced (advertising, marketing campaigns) sources. Micheledou et al. (2022) identified differences between tourists' perceptions and those of marketing professionals and highlighted the need to tailor digital content to tourists' expectations to enhance authenticity. This is particularly important for developing destinations like Erbil, which suffer from limited international visibility. Social media does more than

simply provide information; it also influences tourists' motivation to travel and their trust in a given destination. Effective social media marketing can change tourists' perceptions, increase their engagement, and ultimately boost visitor numbers. For example, Sotiriadis and Zell (2023) argue that integrating social media and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) into marketing strategies has a significant impact on trust and decision-making. Zeng and Gretsen (2024) note that research on emerging destinations is limited and emphasize the need for specific studies on how social media can contribute to local tourism development. Erbil, located in Iraqi Kurdistan, possesses a rich cultural and historical heritage but struggles to gain international recognition. Effective use of social media can dispel misconceptions, update outdated perceptions, and provide accurate information on social, cultural, and tourism aspects. Research by Aghili and Karimi (2019) and Khalid Hussein et al. (2024) demonstrates that social media is a cost-effective and widely used tool for promoting new tourist destinations. While previous studies have confirmed the importance of social media in tourism marketing, few have examined its role in destination development in underserved or post-conflict regions. Iraqi Kurdistan, and Erbil in particular, remains an area largely unexplored empirically. In conclusion, these studies suggest that raising public awareness and utilizing digital advertising channels are essential for increasing tourist arrivals. Given the growing role of social media in shaping destination image and influencing travel motivations, the use of these platforms is crucial for enhancing the international visibility of Erbil's tourism offerings. However, despite the importance of digital advertising, few empirical studies have examined how international tourists perceive social media content about Kurdistan and how this content influences their travel intentions. Existing studies primarily focus on the overall development of tourism in the region. The specific role of social media in shaping international tourists' perceptions, trust, and motivations to visit Erbil remains understudied. This study addresses this gap by analyzing how social media influences international tourists' perceptions, motivations, and trust in online information when deciding whether to travel to Erbil.

3. Research methodology

This study designed specifically for this purpose, uses a quantitative and descriptive survey methodology. Applied research aims to solve concrete problems and improve practical outcomes (Khaqi , 2005). A quantitative approach was favored because the study aims to measure and analyze the influence of social media and online advertising on tourists' decision-making using digital data to test hypotheses. A questionnaire was chosen as the data collection instrument because it allows for the efficient collection of standardized information from a large number of participants and enables comparisons between different demographic groups.

3.1 Sample and sampling techniques

The target group consisted of international tourists in Erbil, in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region. According to official tourism statistics for the Kurdistan Region in 2024 (https://kurdishglobe.krd/tourism-in-the-kurdistan-region-a-major-government-perspective/), the number of international tourist arrivals exceeded one million. A

sample size of 384 respondents was calculated using the Cochran formula, and 386 questionnaires were distributed to ensure a sufficient response rate. Convenience sampling was used. Data collection took place at key tourist locations, including historical sites, cultural centers, popular hotels, shopping malls, and public squares. Surveys were conducted during peak hours (10:00 a.m.–7:00 p.m.) to collect a representative sample of the tourist population. The participants represented a wide range of nationalities, ages, and reasons for travel, reflecting the diversity of international tourists visiting the region. Due to practical difficulties in accessing tourists in public places, a convenience sampling method was employed.

3.2 Data Collection Tools

The questionnaire was developed by the researcher and adapted to the specific tourism context of Erbil. Some questions were drawn from instruments validated in previous studies on tourism marketing, destination image, and the influence of social media (e.g., Hernandez-Méndez and Munoz- Liva , 2015; Xiang and Gertzel , 2021; An et al., 2019), while others were designed to take into account the perceptual and motivational characteristics specific to the region. Content validity was ensured through review by the research directors, research consultants, and five tourism marketing experts, which improved the questionnaire's clarity, relevance, and cultural dimension. Reliability was confirmed by Cronbach's alpha coefficients greater than 0.70 for all variables. Drawing on the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen , 1991) and Gann's attractiveness model (1997), this study tests the following main hypothesis: that social media significantly and positively influence the attractiveness of Iraqi Kurdistan for international tourists. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS 26 software, including descriptive statistics to summarize respondent profiles and regression analysis to examine the impact of social media on tourist behavior. Ethical considerations, such as voluntary participation, informed consent, and confidentiality, were taken into account. Environmental factors, such as tourist diversity and internet access, were considered contextual elements influencing the fieldwork without compromising data validity.

3.3 Hypotheses

Despite the significant tourism potential of Iraqi Kurdistan, the region suffers from low international visibility and limited digital advertising. Social media has become a major tool for influencing tourist perceptions. However, no empirical study has examined the impact of social media on the region's attractiveness to international tourists. The research question addressed within this methodology is therefore as follows:

"To what extent do social media influence foreign tourists' interest in Iraqi Kurdistan?"

This question is important because understanding tourists' reactions to online content can help inform marketing decisions and improve a region's overall image.

Main hypothesis (H1):

Social media has a positive and significant impact on attracting foreign tourists to Iraqi Kurdistan.

3.4 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using SPSS 26 software, with descriptive statistics to summarize the characteristics of the respondents and regression analysis to test the relationships between variables and examine the impact of social media on tourist behavior . Ethical principles were respected, and anonymity and voluntary participation were guaranteed .

3.5 Data Collection Tools

In this study, data were collected using a questionnaire. This questionnaire, written in English, contained 23 questions. It began with three demographic questions and continued with structured questions (Likert scale), as shown in Table 1. The questions focused on foreign tourists' level of knowledge about Erbil, the amount of information they had received, and the influence of social media and advertising on the city's tourist appeal. The response scale was as follows:

Table (1). Questionnaire response scale

Very large	Summit	Midsized	Short	Very low	Response range
5	4	3	2	1	

4. Results

4.1. Validity and reliability of the questionnaire

4.1.1 Questionnaire validity

To ensure the accuracy of the questionnaire, it was reviewed by the study director, a lecturer, and several tourism experts.

4.1.2. Questionnaire reliability

Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated using SPSS software to assess the reliability of the Q questionnaire. Since this coefficient was greater than 0.7, our approach was rejected. The closer Cronbach's alpha coefficient is to 1, the higher the internal consistency of the instrument (Danaieifard et al., 2004). To this end, 31 Qw classes , corresponding to the characteristics of the target location, were used . The coefficients were not reported after data entry into SPSS. The reliability estimates for the items used to test the hypothesis are presented in Table 2. We demonstrate that the corresponding instrument is valid and reliable.

Table (2). Evaluation of questionnaire reliability

Assumption	Cronbach's Alpha	Number of items	Structure/Variable
Total number of questionnaires	0.825	1–23	Fill out the form.

Cronbach's alpha values greater than 0.70 indicate acceptable internal consistency (Hare et al., 2019). The questionnaire was developed by the researcher specifically for this study and included questions from previous validated studies on tourism marketing, destination image, and social media influence. Content validity was confirmed by the research director, the research consultant, and five tourism experts **.**

4.2. Descriptive statistics of the sample

This section analyzes the descriptive statistics of the respondents in the statistical sample using the specified methods.

3.2.1. Distribution of sample size by nationality

The table below shows the distribution of respondents by nationality:

Table (3). Distribution of nationalities by frequency of occurrence

Percentage of frequency	Frequency	Nationality
73/8	285	European
3/15	59	Asian
8/5	33	American
2/3	7	Australia and the ocean
0	0	African
100	384	General

Table 3 shows the distribution of respondents by nationality and sample size. Based on the available data, the majority of respondents are from various European countries. Table 4 shows the distribution of respondents by gender.

Table (4). Distribution of frequencies by sex

retained earnings	Percentage of frequency	Frequency	Ground
43	43	131	Man
100	57	220	Women
	100	384	General

Table 4 above shows the distribution of respondents by sex and sample size. Based on the available data, the majority of respondents were women (57%) and 43% were men. Table 5 shows the distribution of respondents by age.

Table (5). Distribution of frequencies by age

Standard deviation	Medium	Maximum	At least	For	
13/20611	5/33	74	20	384	Age

Table 5 presents the respondents' status by age and sample size. According to the available data, the minimum age of survey participants was 20 to 25 years, the maximum age was 70 to 74 years, and the average age was 36.5 years. Table 6 shows the distribution of respondents according to their knowledge of Erbil.

Table (6). Distribution of respondents' knowledge frequencies about Erbil

retained earnings	Percentage of frequency	Frequency	Ways to explore Erbil
23/03	23/03	91	Read a book
3/31	7/8	29	Social media and television
7/41	September 3	33	Social networks
87/3	3/43	181	Advice from friends and other travelers
111	December 7	49	Other sources
	111	384	General

Table 6 presents the frequency and percentage distribution of recommendations concerning Erbil made by respondents. The data shows that recommendations from friends and other tourists are the most frequent (43.3%), while those from social media and television are the least frequent (7.8% of the total sample).

4.3 Inferential Sample Statistics

4.3.1 Normality test of research variables

The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test is used to verify the normality of the variables studied. The null and alternative hypotheses of this normality test are as follows:

• Null hypothesis: the distribution of data variables is normal.

• Inverse hypothesis: The data distribution is not normal. If the p-value (significance level) is greater than 0.05, the null hypothesis that the variables studied follow a normal distribution is accepted. See Table 7.

Table (7). Normality test of the research variables (Kolmogorov-Smirnov test)

Variable	**North**	**Kolmogorov-Smirnov Statistics**	**DF**	**Signature (value p)**	**The result is normal.**
The influence of social media	384	0.056	384	0.072	Generally
Trust the information you find on the internet.	384	0.062	384	0.081	Generally
Pick-up at destination	384	0.049	384	0.091	Generally
Purpose of the trip	384	0.054	384	0.065	Generally

Table 8 presents the statistical results of the study on the impact of social media on attracting foreign tourists, based on the sample. This table shows the mean, standard deviation, and standard error obtained from the responses of 384 participants.

Table (8). Statistics for individual samples

Standard error	Standard deviation	Medium	For	
1/12933	1/57315	3/9788	384	The impact of social media on attracting foreign tourists

The results presented in Table 8 show that the mean value (3.97) indicates a general consensus among respondents regarding the significant impact of social media on the acceptance of foreign tourists. This conclusion is supported by the variance and error values. Table 9 presents the results of a one-sample t-test designed to assess whether the impact of social media on the acceptance of foreign tourists is significantly different from the test value of 3. This test checks whether respondents' perceptions are above the neutral point.

Table (9). One-sample test

Test value = 3						
95% reliability Distance		Difference Resources	Importance Level	Ladder Freedom	T Statistics	
Superior Border	Below Border					
0.0365	0.9212	0.9788	0/000	385	33/379	The impact of social media on attracting foreign tourists

As shown in Table 9, the t-test value is 33.379 with a significance level of 0.000, indicating a statistically significant mean estimate (0.9788, greater than the test value). The confidence interval (0.9212 to 0.0365) does not include zero, confirming that the respondents' perceived influence of social media on the attractiveness of foreign tourists significantly exceeds the neutral reference point. Table 10 presents the effect of each question on the tested hypothesis and also analyzes its components.

Table (10). One-sample statistics and Student's t-test for the components of the first hypothesis

Question / Component	North	Medium	Standard deviation	Difference from the test value (3)	Statistics t	DF	Signature (front and back)	Result
Question 1. The influence of social media content on visitor interest	384	4.15	0.62	1.15	41.10	383	0.000	Notable
Question 2: The influence of user opinion on trust and decision-making	384	4.08	0.65	1.08	36.40	383	0.000	Notable
Question 3: The impact of targeted advertising on the desire to visit	384	4.13	0.61	1.13	39.90	383	0.000	Notable
Question 4: Public perception of Erbil according to social media	384	4.12	0.63	1.12	38.80	383	0.000	Notable

Table 10 presents the results of the one-sample Student's t-test for the components of the main hypothesis (H1), which examines the impact of social media on international tourist attractions in the Iraqi Kurdistan region. The significance level is set at 3, which corresponds to a neutral value on a 5-point Likert scale. All four components of the hypothesis—the impact of social media content on tourist interest, the impact of user opinions on trust and decision-making, the impact of targeted advertising on the intention to visit Erbil, and the overall perception of Erbil based on social media—all had a mean score greater than 4.0. The t-statistic values range from 36.40 to 41.10 with 385 degrees of freedom, and all p-values are less than 0.001, indicating a statistically significant difference from the neutral value. These results confirm that social media has a positive and significant impact on tourists' travel intentions, thus validating the main hypothesis and highlighting the key role of social media in shaping tourists' perceptions and travel intentions. Table 11 presents the results of a linear regression analysis conducted to examine the impact of social media on international tourism attractiveness. The model assesses the importance of social media in predicting tourism attractiveness using standardized and unstandardized coefficients.

Table (11). Linear regression analysis of the impact of social networks on international tourism attractiveness

Model	**Non-standard coefficients**	**Standardized coefficients (beta)**	**T**	**Signature (value p)**	**R^2**	**adjusted R^2**
	B.	Standard error				
Fixed	2.134	0.157		13,594	<0.001	0.462
The influence of social media	0.723	0.048	0.680	15,063	<0.001	

As shown in Table 11, the results of the regression analysis indicate that social media has a significant and statistically significant impact on international tourism attractiveness. The coefficient ($B = 0.723$, $p < 0.001$) and the high standardized beta value (0.680) confirm that increased social media use is associated with greater tourism attractiveness. Furthermore, the model explains 46.2% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.462$), indicating significant explanatory power.

Table 12 presents an extended linear regression analysis examining the impact of social media on the attractiveness of international tourism. In addition to the classic regression coefficients, the model includes additional diagnostic indicators to assess multicollinearity and autocorrelation, such as the VIF and the Durbin-Watson coefficient.

Table (12). Linear regression analysis of the impact of social networks on international tourism attractiveness

Model	Non-standard coefficients	Standardized coefficients (beta)	T	Signature (value p)	VIP	R^2	adjusted R^2	Durbin-Watson
	B.	Standard error						
Fixed	2.134	0.157		13,594		0.462	0.458	1975
The influence of social media	0.723	0.048	0.680	15,063	<0.001	1.00		

As shown in Table 12, social media has a substantial and statistically significant effect on international tourism attractiveness (B = 0.723, $p < 0.001$), with a high standardized beta coefficient (0.680). A VIF of 1.00 confirms the absence of multicollinearity , and a Durbin-Watson coefficient of 1.975 indicates the absence of autocorrelation between the residuals. Furthermore, the model explains 46.2% of the variance in tourism attractiveness ($R^2 = 0.462$), thus demonstrating significant predictive power.

4.3.2. Discussion and Conclusion

The results of this study confirm the positive and significant impact of social media on the international tourist appeal of the Iraqi Kurdistan region, thus validating the main hypothesis (H1). Linear and inferential regression analyses revealed that factors such as visual content, user reviews, and targeted advertising play an important role in tourists' travel decisions. Descriptive statistics indicate that the majority of respondents discovered Erbil through recommendations from friends and other tourists (43.3%), while social media and television accounted for only 7.8% of initial awareness. This suggests that social media complements traditional word-of-mouth. This finding underscores the complementarity of social media and traditional word-of-mouth and supports Gunn's (1997) model of destination image formation, which emphasizes organic and inductive sources in shaping perceptions of a destination. Regression analysis showed that the use of social media, including visual content, user reviews and targeted advertising, positively influences tourists' intention to visit a certain region, which is consistent with previous studies (Xiang and Gretzl , 2021; Sotiriadis and Zeil, 2023).These results corroborate previous studies highlighting the strategic role of social media in tourism marketing. For example, Xiang and Gretzl (2021) and Sotiriadis and Zille (2023) demonstrate that interactive platforms and user-generated content strengthen engagement and trust. Similarly, Hernandez-Méndez and Muñoz- Liva (2025) and Michelido et al. (2022) note that the quality and authenticity of content are essential in shaping tourists' perceptions. Local studies, such as those conducted with immigrant Hajar Salim et al. (2025) and Hatem Abdul- Kadim (2017), also confirm the effectiveness of digital marketing in improving a destination's image and attracting

international tourists, thus highlighting Erbil's still untapped potential as a developing tourism destination.The study also highlights the influence of demographic factors such as age, gender, and nationality on how tourists use social media and consume its content. For example, the majority of European respondents were between 20 and 74 years old, suggesting the potential for developing targeted campaigns to reach these highly active groups.Finally, regression analysis using the VIF and the Durbin-Watson model confirms the statistical robustness of the model, the absence of multicollinearity, and the independence of the residuals. This reinforces the conclusion regarding the important role of social media in shaping tourist behavior in the region.

This study provides empirical evidence that social media is a strategic tool for promoting international tourism in Iraqi Kurdistan.Significant influence of social media: Social media has a positive impact on tourists' decision-making and their intention to visit a destination, thus confirming the main hypothesis (H1). Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, as well as user-generated content, increase awareness, trust, and engagement with a destination.

Although social media plays a vital role in promoting destinations, personal recommendations remain the primary source of awareness, suggesting that integrated marketing strategies combining digital campaigns and traditional word-of-mouth are the most effective. The quality of the content is crucial: authentic, culturally relevant and visually appealing content increases tourists' understanding and trust, thus confirming previous research on the reliability of online information.

Tourism authorities should conduct targeted social media campaigns to highlight Erbil's cultural, historical, and natural attractions. Digital marketing strategies should be adaptive, culturally sensitive, and integrated with offline tourism promotion to expand international reach. This study, based on a convenience sample and focusing on tourists who visited Erbil during a specific period, may limit the generalizability of its results. Future studies plan to expand the sample, include more cities in Kurdistan, and examine tourism trends following the COVID-19 pandemic.

5. Future research

Future research should examine the comparative effectiveness of different social media platforms, analyze long-term engagement rates, and assess the role of new technologies such as virtual reality and augmented reality in improving tourist experiences.

In summary, this study demonstrates that social media is not only a cost-effective advertising tool, but also a key factor in building trust, influencing public opinion, and attracting international tourists to developing regions like Erbil. By implementing evidence-based digital strategies, policymakers and tourism marketing professionals can enhance the global profile and competitiveness of the Kurdistan Region.

Based on these results, several suggestions can be made:

Targeted digital campaigns: Develop social media campaigns tailored to cultural realities, using high-quality images and authentic information, to generate interest and engagement from international tourists.

Integration with traditional methods: Combine social media marketing with word-of-mouth and travel recommendations to increase your visibility and brand awareness. Targeted strategies: Focus on marketing content aimed at your highest-performing

traveler groups, such as European tourists and specific age groups receptive to online content.
In-depth pilot study: Conducting follow-up studies in other cities and tourist sites in Kurdistan to generalize the results and optimize social media strategies.
Innovative technologies: Integration of virtual and augmented reality tools to enrich and motivate the tourist experience before their trip.In conclusion, this study demonstrates that the strategic use of social media can significantly improve Erbil's international presence and increase tourist arrivals, provides practical recommendations to policymakers and tourism officials, and enriches the literature on social media marketing in developing and post-conflict regions.

6. Limitations

Although this study contributes significantly to the understanding of international tourists in Erbil, it has some limitations:
1. Sample and context: The study focused on international tourists visiting Erbil, which means that the results may not be generalizable to other parts of Kurdistan or to other countries.
2. Cross-sectional nature: The data were collected at a single point in time. This limits our ability to observe seasonal variations or identify long-term changes in social media use.
3. Self-assessment measures: The accuracy of questionnaire responses may be affected by biases related to social desirability or possible memory biases, which may influence how tourists perceive social media and intend to interact with it.
4. Platform Analysis: Although major social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter were included in the analysis, emerging platforms such as TikTok and YouTube were not examined in depth, even though they can have a significant impact on young people exploring tourism options.
5. Research Perspectives: To further develop this study, future research could focus on addressing the identified limitations. For example, expanding the geographical scope of the study to include more cities or regions in Kurdistan or neighboring countries would improve the generalizability of the results. Ongoing research could track changes in tourist behavior to assess the lasting impact of social media initiatives on destination perceptions and visitor numbers. Furthermore, it would be relevant to explore different social media platforms and their specific impact on tourist engagement and decision-making. Integrating behavioral analysis using qualitative methods, such as interviews and the study of user-generated content, would provide a better understanding of tourist motivations and preferences. Finally, research could explore how government digital strategies interact with social media marketing and infrastructure investments to increase tourist arrivals.

- Acknowledgment

I express my sincere appreciation to all the experts in the Erbil tourism industry, the Kurdistan Region, who cooperated with the researcher in the interview and questionnaire process. I sincerely express my deepest appreciation and gratitude to all participants whose support and assistance in accessing individuals and information contributed to the successful completion and enhancement of this article.

- Funding:

The author received no funding to continue finishing this article.

- Conflict of interest

The author acknowledges that there are no conflicts of interest or disclosures related to this research.

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