

TOWARD PROMOTING STRATEGIC TOURISM MARKETING FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT: HALABJA CITY AS A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

Strategic marketing is a term used to refer to the business discipline which might be adopted to attract visitors to a particular tourist destination. The tourist destination can be anything that has the potential to attract tourists. This paper focuses on the strategic tourism marketing of Halabja city as a case study of the Kurdistan region of Iraq. Such conceptual and empirical investigation might offer greater insight toward realizing sustainable tourism development and facilitate novel approaches to community-based tourism studies for Iraq in general and the Kurdistan region in particular. To accomplish the main objectives of the study, we collect secondary data. In compiling the data, two forms of data collection tools were used. First, 100 interviews in the state of the written questionnaires are performed. The second form of data collection tool is online interviews. Different descriptive statistics tools were employed to analyze the data collected from both levels. Based on the obtained results, we came up with a couple of solutions and a suggestion that might help to improve and develop the tourism marketing of Halabja city.

keywords: Sustainable, Tourism, Marketing strategy, Halabja

1. INTRODUCTION

In the effort of different nations toward economic growth and development tourism industry has gained a significant situation among other sectors. Mainly because the tourism industry is one of the largest sectors to generate foreign currency and job creation. However, its impact varies from one country to another, and even from one region within the same country to another area, depending on many factors that motivate tourists to decide to spend money and time. From this standpoint, tourism is considered one of the growing industries worldwide. It has become the main goal for many societies seeking a better future, providing employment, contributing to capital growth, and bringing foreign currency. Moreover, sustainability in tourism, measured by the increase in income earned and employment generated, is vital to ensure consistent development of destinations; accordingly, boosting the tourism industry will help realize the worldwide 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In addition, promoting tourism in the city of Halabja has a unique benefit: informing the world about the crime of genocide that the town was subjected to in the past.

According to the latest annual research issued by World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), the travel and tourism industry generated nearly 9.2\$ trillion to the global economy in 2019. Moreover, travel and tourism's contribution to gross domestic product increased by \$1 trillion (+21.7% rise) in 2021, and it might reach 8.6\$ in 2022, following a loss of almost \$4.9 trillion in 2020 (-50.4% decline) as a result of Covid19 pandemic.

Before the pandemic, travel and overall tourism impacts accounted for 1 in 4 new jobs created worldwide, 10.3% of all jobs (333 million), and 10.3% of global GDP (US\$9.6 trillion). In the meantime, spending on international visitors amounted to \$1.8 trillion in 2019.

A critical feature of the tourism industry is a labor-intensive industry. Thus, countries with a high rate of unemployment, which is the case of Iraq in general and the Kurdistan region in particular, can create more jobs to overcome the existing unemployment problem.

The globalization of the world today permits for the saver, more convenience, less time, and low-cost travel. Modernization and social media have left nearly no place to be unknown. We may notice



that several destinations are now featuring after it was not like that. Tourism is highly a tool for bridging the gap between individuals and nations.

In the Kurdistan region of Iraq, travel and tourism is a rapidly growing service industry. It provides heritage, cultural, medical, commercial, and sports tourism. For many reasons, such as its political stability, security, being open to foreigners, and low temperature compared with other parts of Iraq and the Arabian Gulf countries, it has become one of the most attractive places to visit.

According to Kurdistan Region's Tourism Board, more than four million tourists visited the Iraqi Kurdistan region in 2021, while it was 3,057,000 in 2018. Sulaymaniyah and Halabja provinces received 1,375,000 tourists, rated as 34% percent of the total visits to the region. Moreover, tourism contributed about 19.3% to Kurdistan's gross domestic product in 2017 (Region | Kurdistan Economy (gov. krd). The number of visitors amounted to 4,093,888 in 2021, most drawing from Iraqi central and southern provinces.

Halabja is the fourth province of Kurdistan and the nineteenth of Iraq. It is located about (240 km) northeast of the capital of Iraq, Baghdad, and close to the Iraqi - Iranian border. It has many characteristics that can make it attractive to tourists. Yet, the city is not fully utilized its available natural resources and places in the best manner ([Altaee et al.,2017](#)). Indeed, Halabja city can use its location as part of the "Greater Hawraman," which recently became one of the most demanded places to visit. Thus, with some help from the government, tourism in Halabja can overgrow.

Kurdistan Region authorities can employ many strategies to motivate tourists toward this destination. To do so, the government may focus on attracting visitors to specific locations in Halabja. Globally, tourism marketing adopts a wide variety of techniques and strategies of communication to promote destinations and areas.

The study's research question focused on whether specific strategic marketing can help boost tourism marketing in Halabja city, which will assist in realizing sustainable development in an oil renter country. However, as we are addressing this question as the main question that this study is trying to answer, we feel that some other questions deserve to address. Below is a list of such questions:

- What type of marketing strategies are needed to promote tourism in the Halabja area?
- Are small tourism cities need more marketing effort than big cities?
- How can local people of tourist places in Halabja be part of Halabja's marketing strategy or tourism development?
- What can drivers be used to develop the Halabja tourism industry?

The paper is structured as follows: A summary of previous studies is presented in Section 2. The methods and findings are obtainable in Section 3 theoretical framework. In section 4, respectively. The conclusion and policy implications are shown in Section 5.

2. Literature review

Tourism marketing is related to making potential customers sensitive to the service available or the product in the tourist area and convincing them that they will be satisfied and benefit if they become actual customers. The tourism industry is characterized by high competition between companies, regions, and countries. It requires a marketing strategy that can be relied upon in formulating plans for the present and future. Reviewing previous studies on case studies (city, region) is not much. Below is a review of some of these studies arranged from the oldest to the latest.

[Lewis, and Jönsson, \(2016\)](#). They aim to understand better the importance of promotional tools to successfully and efficiently market sports tourism. They constructed their study in two steps: first, to evaluate the tools used to promote sports tourism and sport tourism experiences in Barbados. In the second step, the authors present and analyze how marketing tools could improve market sport tourism practices. The study's main finding is that the promotional tools used in Barbados in their marketing process are similar to those used internationally.

[Sanda, \(1999\)](#) paper illustrates methodology issues and problems that emerged from drawing up the county's strategic tourism marketing plans. The methodology is based on several basic footholds, such as state-of-the-art in destination marketing, multidisciplinary approach, applicability, simplicity, and straightforwardness, and taking specifics into account. They found that strategic marketing planning in tourism is essential for Croatia.



[Arch, and Marcia, \(2015\)](#) used a meta-evaluation of seven government audits to explicitly improve the methods of evaluating government tourism-marketing programs. The seven tourism-marketing performance audits are program evaluations for Missouri, North Carolina, Tennessee, Minnesota, Australia, and Hawaii. The study ended by suggesting a need for scientific measurement of the long-run impacts of advertising on generating visits and attracting high-quality visits to become standard practice in tourism marketing program evaluations.

[Aynalem, et al., \(2015\)](#). This study focused on the valuation and identification of tourism resources of Bale Zone in Ethiopia. Local communities and tourism experts from culture and tourism offices were selected to collect his sample. A group of 150 representatives was assigned to survey questionnaires purposively. Moreover, four focus group discussions were held. However, the region has limited potential in tourism infrastructure facilities and services. The study revealed obstacles to developing the area as a tourist destination. Funding constraints, a scarcity of qualified human resources, limited infrastructure, and a lack of community awareness represented these constraints. The research reached many results, including that the region enjoys many picturesque places and rare types of trees and stones, waterfalls, historical and cultural tourist resources, and a religious vocation.

[Khatri's \(2018\)](#) study focused on Lumbini Nepal. Foremost religious site of Buddhism. The study can be classified as a field survey with 184 visitors to collect the needed information on the attractiveness and positioning of destination Lumbini. The author uses different data analysis methods, including multiple regression techniques with ANOVA table. Based on the obtained results from the study ended up with the following suggestion: First, improvement of adequate physical infrastructure and utilities. Second. He is encouraging repeat visits by different programs, packages, or offers. Third, development in tourism and hospitality, such as linguists, tour guides, chefs, and others. And fourth, regional cooperation and promotional campaigns within or outside the country.

[Gaikwad., Ragde, and Sawant's \(2020\)](#) study focused on tourists' destination loyalty based on their satisfaction at the world heritage site of Ellora caves in India. The sample group comprised 60 tourists who visited Ellora Caves in July 2019. He employed correlation analysis as an analytical for data analysis. The author found a strong positive affiliation between destination loyalty and tourist satisfaction.

In their study, [Varona and Jean \(2021\)](#)zha examine the influence of the destination image of Angeles City on tourist satisfaction. A survey instrument was used in the study. They employed regression analysis, correlation, and descriptive statistics as analytical tools. Data analysis revealed that infrastructure, socioeconomic, and cultural environment are predictors of tourist satisfaction. The study concludes that infrastructure and socioeconomic environment, cultural environment, and affective image most affect tourist satisfaction. These aspects must constantly be stressed in all tourism products and services of the city.

[Zhang, C. et al. \(2022\)](#) attempted to investigate the relationship between tourism and the development of communities in rural forest areas. They observed that publicly owned forest farm communities are disintegrating, and sustainable development faces significant threats. The authors felt that there is a need to understand the drivers and characteristics associated with these changes, including the impact of rural tourism on combating forest recession. Recent findings suggest that tourism has complicated social relations, transforming identity from an industrial and cultural identity predominantly situation-based to an inclusive regional identity.

Hence, the present research aims to provide conclusions and suggestions on how to improve tourism marketing. It will undoubtedly increase tourism sector revenues and create new job opportunities if reached.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1. *Tourism marketing*

Marketing is a significant activity in the life of any organization. This activity's primary purpose is to explore consumers' needs within a particular geographic area. Accordingly, to create or produce a service or product that satisfies the requirements and provides the consumers with a guideline and



awareness ([Pender & Sharpley, 2005](#)). On the ground that tourism is a dynamic industry. Thus, it is subject to constant influence resulting from many factors led by intense competition. Hence, marketing in tourism is an essential process that goes along with and appears throughout all stages of the service ([Middleton & Clarke, 2012](#)). In other words, tourism marketing is considered an effective tool for motivating tourists on the one hand and growing the tourism industry on the other hand.

Adapting tourism marketing in modern studies has shown many positive influences and goals it can provide. The main goal that marketing

can provide in tourism is to boost the destination to a specific area by increasing the competition and strengthening the tourism supply system. Marketing in tourism can go beyond that, and it simultaneously promotes the goal and the products. Through tourism marketing, visitors can be satisfied, and therefore, the industry in the area can grow wider ([Cox & Wray, 2011](#)).

Applying marketing to tourism requires careful and adequate planning and strategies to achieve the goals set for tourism. The planning and design must cover accommodation, transportation, travel, tour operators, and other elements. The process requires more than caring, and there must be coordination between the components to complete the process successfully. A tourist chooses a destination that guarantees food service, accommodation, and entertainment. Tourism marketing has to inform tourists to select the destination and motivate them of such services ([Crawford & Di Benedetto, 2008](#)).

4. METHODOLOGY

This case study focusing on the Strategic Tourism Marketing of Halabja City has a clear goal and importance. It also demonstrates several of the most significant issues of the region due to various reasons. The problems in this case study vary between the lack of responsibility and care in the area. For instance, suitable places for tourists are not available in Halabja city. Moreover, enough funds are not allocated for the tourism marketing of Halabja city, which has immensely affected tourism marketing.

5. RESEARCH SITE AND METHODS

5.1. Research site

As a starting point, Halabja Governorate is an ancient city dating back to the Lullubis era. It is located east of Sulaymaniyah province and nearly 90 KM far from Sulaymaniyah, in the north of Iraq ([Abudlqadir et al., 2020](#)). It is about 718 km (446 mi) northeast of Baghdad and 14 km (9 mi) from the Iranian border. It is located at an elevation of 721 meters above sea level, and its population amounts to 65,200. Halabja area 1,599.00.

5.2. Sampling and data collection

The qualitative research we worked with as a group were the questions we had written to ask the interviewees. The interview was subcategorized into three different interviews. Moreover, each interview contained some questions that were answered in multiple choices or opinion-based questions in a text box. One type of Likert scale (Not interesting=1, to some extent interesting =2, Neutral=3, Interesting=4, Very interesting=5) was used in the first part of this study. And also another type of Likert scale (strongly disagree=1, disagree =2, Neutral=3, agree=4, strongly agree=5) is the third part of the questionnaire that we used for some other questions in this research. Data were analyzed using SPSS V.22 ([Armonk, 2013](#)), and descriptive analysis was used to show frequency, percentage, and mean scores ([Aroian et al., 2017](#)). The Chi-Square Test of Independence is used to determine if there is a significant relationship between two nominal (categorical) variables (Pearson. K., 1900, 157-175). The frequency of each category for one nominal variable is compared across the types of the second nominal variable. The data can be displayed in a contingency table where each row represents a category for one variable, and each column represents a category for the other variable. This test is also known as the Chi-Square Test of Association. The critical value for the chi-square statistic is determined by the level of significance (typically $\alpha = .05$), the degrees of freedom

for the chi-square, and the degree of freedom (df) = (r-1) (c-1), where r is the number of rows and c is the number of columns. This test utilizes a contingency table to analyze the data. A contingency table is an arrangement in which data are classified according to two categorical variables. The value of the Chi-Square Test of Independence ([Shahen et al., 2020](#)):

$$\chi^2 = \sum \frac{(O_{ij} - E_{ij})^2}{E_{ij}}$$

Where:

χ^2 = Chi - Square of Independence

O_{ij} is the observed frequency of the cell in the i^{th} row and j^{th} column,

E_{ij} is the expected frequency of the cell in the i^{th} row and j^{th} column.

Our research hypothesis:

H_0 : There is no statistically significant relationship between our variables.

H_1 : There is a statistically significant relationship between our variables.

To assess the consistency of the data, researchers conducted a pilot study for 30 cases to confirm the validity of the questionnaires using Cronbach's alpha. The value of Cronbach's alpha ranges from zero to one. The closer Cronbach's alpha is to 1, implying the items measure the same dimension, while a low value means some or all things are not counted to the same extent ([Cronbach, 1951](#)).

Cronbach alpha calculated using the following formula:

$$\alpha = \frac{N * \overline{Cov}}{\overline{Var} + (N - 1) * \overline{Cov}}$$

Where:

N : The items number

Cov : represents the covariance between the two items, and

Var : means item variance (square of standard deviation).

The calculated Cronbach's alpha is 0.85. It's minimally acceptable by most standards.

5.3. Data collection methods

As previously mentioned, the methods we used to collect data were primary data collection method as well as secondary data collection method. Most of the work was done online for the secondary data collection method. We had to write questions and conduct interviews for the primary data collection method. Along with the questions, we also prepared a sheet that asks fundamental questions to the interviewee, such as gender, age, education level, and having been to Halabja City. The questionnaire's questions were organized into three categories for three different interviews. A total of 100 persons were included in our sample and were conducted in person. It is essential to mention that we have interviewed different age groups and different education stats, and additional income levels. It is because we wanted to gather opinions from other people with diverse backgrounds.

5.4. Analysis and discussion

[Table 1](#) shows the characteristics of the sampled respondents. A considerable portion of the respondents are educated, with 35% having a university degree or completed higher education, while 30% had a diploma and 15 percent have completed an early level of education; the percentage of the demographic questions about our participants that 59% of them were women and 41% were men. This percentage is good because it shows that we have managed to an equal extent to collect the opinion of both men and women regarding this case study. As we see, most of the participants we interviewed were between the ages of 25-34 and 35-45, with a percentage of 30%. And 25% of the participants we interviewed were between the ages of 46 and 55. Also, only 10% of the participants were less than 25 years old, and we noted that 5% were more than 55 years old. One of the good things about our sampling is interviewing people from different age groups. It helped to figure out how people from other age groups think about the strategic tourism marketing of Halabja city. Moreover, most of the people we interviewed have already visited Halabja city. It was great because it showed us that they have already had some experiences in the city as tourists, which means that their answers are vital. 81% of the people we interviewed have been to Halabja city, and only 19% have never seen



the town of Halabja (Table 1).

In the second stage, the perception of the responders is analyzed to accomplish the study's objectives. For this purpose, the following hypotheses are developed and tested: Regarding whether the current tourism marketing strategy is exciting or not, we found, and as [figure 3](#) shows, that the majority of the responders, 40% were, thinking that the current tourism marketing of Halabja city is terrible or not fascinating. Only 5% believe that Halabja's current tourism marketing is engaging. The rest of the resonances went to neutral opinion with 30%, and 25% said it is to some extent attractive. It implies that the current marketing strategy needs to be revised for development.

Moreover, the majority of the people, about 81%, were interested in getting to know more about the marketing tourism of Halabja city, while 20% were not interested at all ([figure 4](#)).

This percentage indicates the importance of our case study was interested in almost all of the different ways to make the city livelier in terms of tourism marketing, such as taking care of the resorts, roads, culture, and reputation of the place. Moreover, most interviewees indicated that renovating the existing alternatives is a positive thing that can contribute to developing the region's tourism marketing. At the same time, the negative items are the lack of responsibility and carelessness in the area.

Figure 3, and also from interview A, we can see that %80 of our participants said that working in private sectors of marketing strategies are needed to promote tourism in Halabja city, while %20 They mentioned that working in public sectors of marketing strategies is needed to promote tourism in Halabja city. So the interviewees believe that better can be done if both the private and public sectors work together towards improving and developing the tourism marketing of Halabja city.

From interview B, we observed some critical factors. For example, first, we asked the participants were lived in Halabja city or not and do they know any tourist places in Halabja city. Figure 4 observed that %74 of them said they do not live in Halabja. Still, they know tourist places well % Of the 16 who resided in Halabja and surely know tourist places and only %10 of them mentioned that they did not live in Halabja. They do not know tourist places, while none of our participants said they live in Halabja and do not see any tourist places.

People, in general, like to travel to Halabja due to its nature, history, unique characteristics, etc. ([Figure 7](#)) showed that with %42 of our participants included tourists who are interested in Halabja's nature, after that %26 who were interested in Halabja's history. Also with %18 of them are interested in the pomegranates festival, and finally, % and 13 of our participant's tourists are on vacation.

The interviewees also cleared that the people of Halabja city can immensely contribute to the development of the tourism market of Halabja by showing kindness with %38 of interviewees, providing local products with %36, providing good quality food and products %14, and providing hospitality with %13. Further, all the interviewees 100% agreed that, indeed, the government could improve and develop the tourism marketing of Halabja by delivering some of the essential services, such as maintaining the natural resources with %33, suitable accommodation with %22, appropriate transportation along with building resorts with %18 and %27 respectively ([figure 8](#)).

[Figure 9](#) demonstrates that renovating the existing resorts, buildings, and parks, building museums, and providing tourist goods and services can also highly help the tourism industry to develop in the future with %22, %18, %27, and %33, respectively.

From interview C, the majority of the interviewees also think that marketing is quite crucial when it comes to boosting and developing the tourism market industry of a region while considering how big or small the area is. Also, around 95% of the people either agreed with boosting the tourism industry to promote tourism marketing in Halabja city.

[Figure 10](#) shows that most of the participants toughly approve that strategic tourism marketing helps a tourism area in attracting more tourists with mean and standard deviation (4.46 ± 0.771) correspondingly. The above figure demonstrates that approximately 90% of the participants agree that cultures are reasons for visiting Halabja city and boosting tourism marketing with mean and standard deviation (4.26 ± 0.824) correspondingly. 80% of them reach a result that tourism marketing alone cannot help small area tourism industry, so other factors also need to be considered with mean

and standard deviation (4.19 ± 1.134) disparately. From the above figure, it is clear that small-area tourism industry cities need more marketing than big cities, with a mean and standard deviation (3.32 ± 1.246). Finally, it can see from figure5 that the size of the city or the town does not matter to tourists when they decide to visit the city with mean and standard deviation (2.30 ± 1.068).

5.5. Testing the Hypotheses

Statistical test chi-square helps us to determine the relationship between variables. The chi-square test values in [table 2](#) show that our p-values are greater than our significant level (0.05). That said, there is no statistical relationship between the variables (Gender, Age and Qualification, and Have been visited Halabja city). That is good for our study because it means that visiting Halabja city by tourists does not depend on gender, age, and qualification.

5.6. Results of research


The result of our research shows the importance of our study. It is because our report focuses on the tourism market of Halabja city. Our research has demonstrated that Halabja city already has unique characteristics, such as its culture, nature, resorts, history, etc. That said, the town of Halabja still requires lots of work to become more attractive to tourists. Our research shows that a strategic plan needs to be developed to boost and improve the tourism market industry of Halabja city. Based on the interviews we have conducted, we have come to realize that the government and the private sectors can work together towards improving and developing the tourism marketing of Halabja city. They can do this by providing funds and resources for local businesses. They can also do this by building new resorts and parks. Further, the result also shows that the local people of Halabja city can help with this improvement by providing good quality food and products and showing hospitality, love, and kindness.

6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we have noted that Halabja is one of the most attractive destinations in northern Iraq, Kurdistan. However, the town lacks proper accommodations, such as hotels, motels, and resorts. Further, it also lacks adequate transportation, highways, and parks. Improving the situation required the allocation of more public funds. Aside from the government and the private sectors, the community of Halabja can also highly contribute to their local tourism industry development through warm welcoming and kindness. Government, private sectors, and the community of Halabja can jointly work towards boosting the tourism industry of Halabja city through a more effective marketing strategy; more effort is needed on tourism advertising, event marketing, commercial advertising, social media marketing, print advertising, sales promotion, and so on.

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