

Promoting the Tourism Industry of Kurdistan Region of Iraq (Halabja Province as a Case Study)

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Abstract

Kurdistan Region is gradually gaining recognition from the other parts of Iraq as a tourist destination. However, internationally, not much is known or has been documented concerning the potential of the tourism industry in the Region. Despite having many prospects, this industry in the Kurdistan region remains neglected for a long time and sharing of KRI in world tourism is poor. This study represents an exploratory attempt to investigate the status of tourism promotion in the Kurdistan region of Iraq taken Halabja as a case study. The main findings of the study show that the main reason of the visitors is looking at the natural place and spends their leisure time. Moreover, it seems that the Word of Mouth(WOM) is the most effective marketing method. Regarding the satisfaction level our results suggest that around 77% of participants indicate that their satisfaction level is above the average. Our results suggest that a favorable culture should be created for foreign tourists. In addition, there is a need for highly qualified employees to work in this sector.

Keywords: Tourist motivations, Economic impact, Tourism Development, Kurdistan tourists.

1. Introduction

Tourism is one of the world's largest and fastest growing economic industries. In 2015, for the first time, the number of international tourists reached 1,184 million, a rise of 4.4 percent compared to 2014 figures (UNWTO 2016). Some 50 million more tourists (overnight visitors) travelled to international destinations around the world last year as compared to 2014. In addition, in 2014 the total impact of the travel and tourist industry contributed US\$7.6 trillion to the world's GDP and generated over 277 million jobs which equates to 1 in 11 of all jobs worldwide (WTTC, 2015). Nowadays, business volume of tourism equals or even surpasses that of oil exports, automobile industry or food products. Tourism has become one of the key players in international trade, and represents at the same time one of the main income sources for many developing countries (UNWTO, 2015). Modern tourism is closely linked to socio-economic progress. Attention to this industry, especially in the countries those rich in historical, cultural resources and natural attraction are more considerable. Tourism provides social benefits and stimulates employment, earnings, attracts additional foreign investment, providing job opportunities, amelioration of infrastructure and increases tax revenues and export. Tourism in many developing and least developed countries is the most viable and sustainable economic development possibility, and in some countries, tourism has become one of the key players in international trade and represents at the same time one of the main income sources earnings.

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As figure 1 show, around 20 % of Jordan's GDP was generated by travel and tourism sector, while in Lebanon the share of tourism in GDP amounted to 10%.



Source: World Development Indicators 2015. <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/ST.INT.XPND.CD>, And Invest in Group, 2013, Opening up to the World: Tourism, <http://investinggroup.org/review/243/opening-up-to-the-world-tourism-kurdistan/>

Moreover, according to Nazrul, (2009) and Zaei&Zaei (2013), Tourism is an economic sector, which is able to create additional employment opportunities directly and indirectly through the supply of goods and the necessary services for tourist activities. It is clearly understood that tourism is one of the elements of community enrichment; this is attributed to the meeting of different cultures. Also, tourism can positively impact the preservation of natural environment by protecting green and natural areas. The list of externalities related to tourism is long. Tourism can have beneficial impacts, that is, tourism can be friendly (Figini, 2007), enhancing residents' living. Examples for such positive externalities are: increasing wealth of inhabitants, development of infrastructure respectively better infrastructure, pollution control, more and better leisure facilities, greater recognition of the importance of saving historical buildings, cultural exchange, giving residents a better understanding about the world, better public health system, and so on.

On the other hand, According to Zolfani, et al., (2015), externalities which negatively impose on residents' welfare, that is, degrading effects: are, for example: overcrowding of roads, CO2 emissions, noise, litter public transportation and cities, and thus clashes between tourists and citizens in using infrastructure, pollution, property damage, increased water consumption per head, changes in community appearance, overbuilding, changes in the landscape and views, degradation of nature, e. g. caused by saturation of construction and development projects, depletion of wildlife, destruction to cultural resources, land use loss, increased urbanization, and increased crime rate (Schubert, 2009).

The Kurdish government is planning to promote tourism, in its four provinces, in order to sustain local economies, and to enhance employment and growth. Although Halabja area tourism is regarded as a new feature of the Kurdistan supply of tourism opportunities, in recent years demands for holidays in small villages and the countryside has increased significantly in many tourism regions of the world. There are a number of aspects that have contributed to the successful revival of the tourism sector in KRI. First and foremost, the government has exposed a clear commitment to the development of the tourism industry and has established itself as an attractive destination in the region. The timely development of a strategy and policies demonstrated this commitment. Furthermore, the government has built two international airports which can run direct flights to and from Kurdistan.

In addition Kurdistan has a virginal natural area that has an abundance of beautiful natural attractions, In addition, there are around 3,500 historical and religious landmarks located within the three governorates, providing it has a moderate climate. Stability, security and safety prevail in Kurdistan are another contributor. Moreover, the availability of great investment opportunities and law wages. Beside all of the above, Kurdistan Regional Government offers great facilities for investors such as allocating suitable lands for their projects, tax exemptions, banking facilities, facilities that are not offered in other countries around the region.

The overall objectives of this research are to identify the issues and challenges in tourism marketing facing Kurdistan especially Halabjaprovince. This study contributes to the overall understanding of what motivates tourists from different regions to travel to this destination. This is also a recognition that research study the status of tourism promotion is limited in the KRI and this study strives for addressing this research gap. The remaining of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 gives an overview of the tourism industry of Kurdistan. A review of literature is presented in Section 3. Section 4 discusses the different sources of data and methodology that has been used for the study. Section 5 contains a discussion on the empirical results obtained from the estimation. Finally, Section 6 concludes the paper by suggesting some policy implications.

2. An Overview of the Tourism Industry in Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

Kurdistan is a developing Region in Iraq, which draws interest in the tourism because of its potentials. The budgetary crisis facing the KRI has highlighted the importance of moving away from an oil-dependent economic model. For tourism to become a viable alternative pillar of the economy, the previously mentioned challenges to future growth must first be addressed (Rasaiah, 2016). Moreover, Kurdistan has been an attractive destination for tourists. But at present, its position is not significant in terms of the international tourism market. KRI, like other part of Iraq has long been regarded as the nation with more archeological and historical sites than any other country in the world. It is easy to conceive this, as it was the cradle of civilization (Kurdistan Tour Guide, 2015). In addition, The Kurdistan region has always been known from its safety and security because of its relative political stability and the regions separation from the rest of Iraq. Kurdistan rests along a series of mountain ranges and encompasses a significant portion of what has traditionally been called "The land between the rivers" and "The birthplace of civilization". Country to well over one thousand known archeological sites (Kurdistan Tour Guide, 2015).

The KRI like other Middle East countries has succeeded in the field of tourism for many reasons. One is the landscape, locations and sites, which have attracted international tourists during the decades. Also the incidence of regionalized or domestic tourism in the Middle East has been important. Domestic tourism has increased due to the catastrophe in the southern and the middle part of the country, the strict visa regulations to other neighbor countries, also the high temperature during summer in the other parts of the country and some of its neighbor countries. And one of the main reasons is the organization of tourism. In addition, the Large number of infrastructure improvements, for example, airport, road and travel accommodation investments are planned in the Kurdistan region, more specifically in the capital city.

3. Literature Review

The literature on tourism industry diverges in its focus. While the majority of literature analyzes the impact of this sector on the growth of the economy, others have analyzed the most efficient marketing methods. Some authors have examined the level of the customer's satisfaction. Tulim (2014) in his research aims to explore the causes of management problems facing the tourism business in Bangladesh. This article also attempts to provide the remedial measures to overcoming the existing management problems facing the tourism business in Bangladesh. Parveen, (2013) examines the current growth and development of tourism industry and also examines some limitations and challenges of the said industry. Finally, some policy measures have been included as opined by the respondents (service providing organizations and tourists) to resolve its existing barriers as claimed by the aforesaid respondents. Gursharan&Johari, (2010), attempted to highlight the present scenario of Tourism in India and hurdles that comes in the way for the development of Sustainable Tourism and its related infrastructure. It further highlights the initiatives taken by the Government itself, for attracting foreign incentives and to encourage private sector as well to act as a facilitator by providing supportive infrastructure facilities

Another area of research similar to what this research cover is to obtain information on attraction visitors, and benefits gained from visiting attractions. Studies are many as an example of this type of studies are: Dunn and Iso-Ahola (1991) studied the motivation and satisfaction dimensions of sightseeing tourists. The results showed a considerable similarity between motivation and satisfaction dimensions, with "knowledge seeking", "social interaction", and "escape" emerging as important motives and satisfactions. This similarity led to a very high overall satisfaction with the tour.

With regard to the level of satisfaction, there are large balks of studies among which: Mohdet.al. (2013). The aim of their study is to measure tourist's satisfaction among international and domestic visitors while embarking for holiday in Pahang, Malaysia. Holiday Satisfaction model (HOLSAT) was utilized in this study in order to determine the gap between tourist's expectations and experiences based on 47 positive and negative attributes that were grouped into six categories namely; accessibility, accommodation, tourist amenities, tourist activities, food/meal and tourism attractions Janet and Gursoy, (2008) attempted to provide empirical evidence that satisfaction with travel and tourism services is the outcome of satisfaction during different stages of the tourism experience. The Leiper model of the tourism system was used as the theoretical underpinning from which a structural model was generated and analyzed. Data were collected via self-reported measure from Virginians who had recently traveled. LISREL-8 was employed with the Maximum Likelihood Method of Estimation. The findings showed that tourists' level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction during various stages of travel affect their overall satisfaction with travel and tourism services.

Studies focus on the most efficient method of marketing are many, among those studies is that of Xiang and Gretzel(2010)in their research state that large proportion of travelers use search engines, on-line sources, and social media when evaluating a destination. Several researchers indicate that information from strong-tie (personal) referral sources is perceived as more influential on the receiver's decision-making than the information obtained from weak-tie (commercial) referral sources.Koji and Siamionava (2016). The study aims to assess the effects of and differences between traditional WOM and electronic WOM, between personal WOM and commercial WOM,and between positive and negative WOM on a destination image. Results of the study indicate that traditionalWOMhad a greater influence on destination image compared to electronic WOM. Personal traditional WOM had a greater influence on destination image compared to electronic personal WOMand commercial WOM. However, negative WOM exerted less influence on the destination's image compared to positive WOM while negative electronicWOM had a greater influence on destination image compared to negative traditional WOM.

4. Data Analysis and Results

This research paper belongs to the exploratory, analytical studies, and it follows the approach of collecting and analyzing data to draw conclusions. Thecollected data were analyzed by employing the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS). A series of cross-tabulations were conducted in order to analyze the findings of open-ended questions.The results and responses collected from the survey were then succumbed for investigation and interpretation. In this section presentation of the results obtained for each question of the survey was done.This analysis is based on 196 responses (figure 2).The majority of the respondents are female (n= 118, 60%), while the male comprise (40%, n= 78).

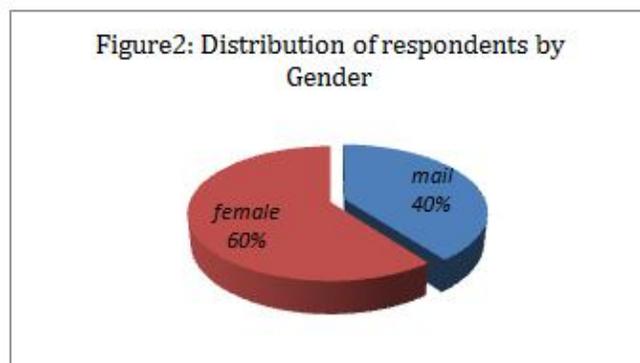
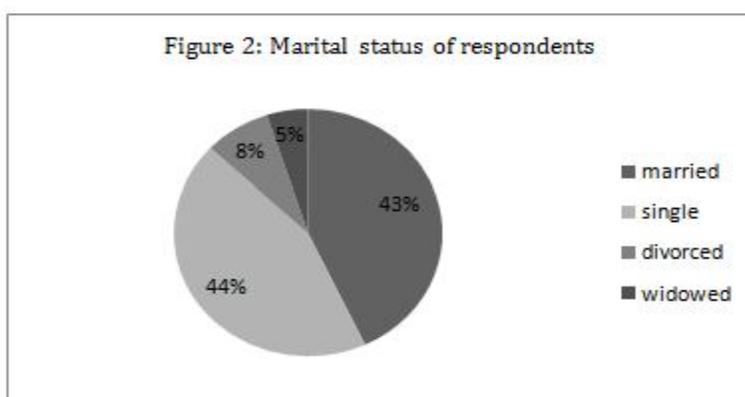


Table 1 shows the attributes of the respondents. The respondents aged fewer than 20 comprise 19.4% of the total, those 20 to 29 years, 31.1%, those 30 to 39 years 19.9% and 65 and over group 13%(Table 1). The data imply that majority of the respondents are in the age range of 20-29 years old, thus belonging to the young adult age group.

Table 1: Distribution of Respondents by Age.

<i>College</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Valid Percent</i>	<i>Cumulative Percent</i>
UNDER 20	38	19.4	19.4	19.4
<i>20 -29</i>	61	31.1	31.1	50.5
<i>30-39</i>	39	19.9	19.9	70.4
<i>40-49</i>	45	23.0	23.0	93.4
50 and up	13	6.6	6.6	100.0
Total	196	100.0	100.0	

(43.9 percent) were married, while the percentage of divorced around 8.2 percent of the total, whereas 4.6 per cent of the respondents were found to be widows. The respondents under the category separated or widower were low.

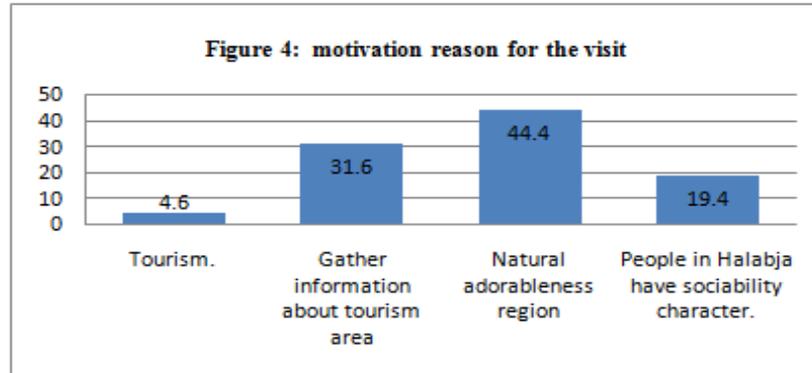
Figure2 Shows That Number of the Respondents (43.3 Percent) Were Single and Remaining

With respect to education level, nearly 40 percent of the respondents have a college degree (n= 75, 38.3%), followed by nearly one fourth with a high school degree (n= 43, 21.9).

Table 3: Distribution of Respondents by level of Education

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Cumulative Percent</i>
<i>Illiteracy</i>	20	10.2	10.2
<i>Reads and writes only</i>	9	4.6	14.8
<i>Certificate of first instance</i>	17	8.7	23.5
<i>Preparatory Certificate</i>	16	8.2	31.6
<i>Secondary School Certificate</i>	43	21.9	53.6
<i>University degree</i>	75	38.3	91.8
<i>MSc</i>	12	6.1	98.0
<i>PhD</i>	4	2	100.0
Total	196	100.0	

Thus, the number of people who have an Educated more than participates who they do not have degree. Studying tourist motivation has always been an important factor for tourism management and promotion. For this reason a question was addressed about what motivate the tourists most. The resultsshow that the majority of participates (44.4% of the total) who think that the natural adorableness region attract them to came to Halabja. However, the low number of participates (9.6% of the total) who believed that they are coming for tourism (figure 4).

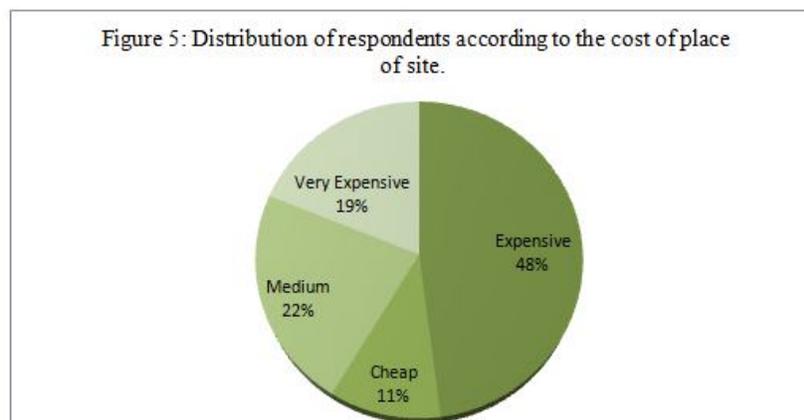


Thus, a growing number of tourists have been to Halabja region to knowing more about the natural tourism area and gathering information about tourism and region. Regarding the means of knowing about Halabja. It is clearly believed that Word of Mouth,(WoM), the best way to attract and attend people for tourism. In fact 39.8 % of participants who hear about Halabja tourism place before they visited by Word Of Mouth and (25% of the total) who hear about tourism area by their friend or relative, also a low number of participants who hear by Brochure.

Table 4:Distribution of Respondents According To the Means of Knowing About Halabja

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Valid %</i>	<i>Cumulative %</i>
<i>Brochure</i>	5	2.6	2.6	2.6
<i>Recommendation</i>	12	6.1	6.1	8.7
<i>Word Of Mouth</i>	78	39.8	39.8	48.5
<i>Tourist Information Center</i>	19	9.7	9.7	58.2
<i>Travel Exhibition</i>	6	3.1	3.1	61.2
<i>Newspaper or Magazine</i>	27	13.8	13.8	75.0
<i>Friendsor Relative</i>	49	25.0	25.0	100.0
Total	196	100.0	100.0	

Recommendation and Tourism Information Centre, Travel Exhibition. However, (13.8 of the total) of participants who heard about tourism place by newspaper or magazine. Thus, in Kurdistan they have to improve promotion to help increase and growing tourism sector through using the online word of mouth marketing, which can be monitored in many cases. Furthermore, there are different ways people can spread the word about your destination online, such as by tweeting about a great experience, sharing it with their Facebook connections, or posting photos on Instagram or Pinterest. Tourists’ impression about the price of the place of site is reported in figure 5. The results reveal that the main part of the respondents think that the price is expensive 48% of the

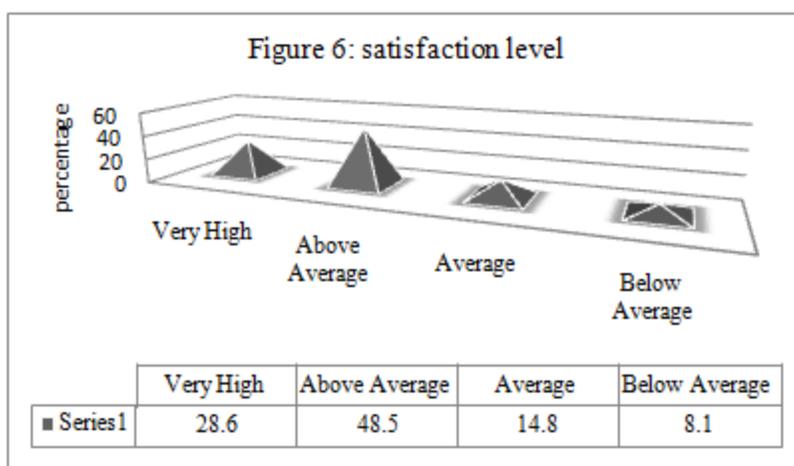


Participants. Then 22.4% of the total participants who votes, the price of place of site are medium. Thus, the majority of participants think that the overall price level is high. The top travel problems that tourists faced when visiting Halabja have just been revealed by the results of our survey. As the figures in table 6 shows, 21% of participants were confronted accommodation problem. 18.4 % of the participants think that restaurant is second problem. Moving into analyses on tourists' satisfaction, it was discovered that most tourists were generally satisfied with their visit, (Figure 6), Results show that number of respondents

Table6: Distribution of Respondents According to Problems they Faced

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Valid Percent</i>	<i>Cumulative Percent</i>
<i>Accommodation</i>	42	21.4	21.4	21.4
<i>Information Center</i>	24	12.2	12.2	33.7
<i>Retail Shops</i>	29	14.8	14.8	48.5
<i>Restaurant</i>	36	18.4	18.4	66.8
<i>Toilets</i>	18	9.2	9.2	76.0
<i>Public Transport</i>	14	7.1	7.1	83.2
<i>Other</i>	33	16.8	16.8	100.0
Total	196	100.0	100.0	

Whom their satisfaction levels were higher than the average is amounted to 77.1 % while tourists whom they think that their satisfaction level is below the average were as low as 8.1%.



With respect to the participants impression on whether the authorities in KRI have done enough for this industry. It can be noticed from the results in table7 that most of the participants think that the authorities have not done enough (43.9% of the participants) and only 20% of the participants think that governmental bodies have done reasonably.

Table 7: Have Authorities Done Enough for this Industry

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percents</i>	<i>Valid %</i>	<i>Cumulative %</i>
<i>Yes Good</i>	33	16.8	16.8	16.8
<i>Reasonably</i>	45	23.0	23.0	39.8
<i>Not Really</i>	86	43.9	43.9	83.7
<i>Do Not Know</i>	32	16.3	16.3	100.0
Total	196	100.0	100.0	

The final question in the survey focused on the adequacy of labor in this sector, and whether they can attract tourists or not. Unfortunately 43.9% of the respondents' votes that human resources of this sector are not able to attract tourism (table 8). This message is of high importance to evaluate people who are working in this industry.

Table 8: Qualification of Labor Force of Tourism Sector

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Valid Percent</i>	<i>Cumulative Percent</i>
<i>Yes, Excellent</i>	9	4.6	4.6	4.6
<i>Yes Good</i>	31	15.8	15.8	20.4
<i>Reasonably</i>	38	19.4	19.4	39.8
<i>Not really</i>	86	43.9	43.9	83.7
<i>Do Not Know</i>	32	16.3	16.3	100.0
Total	196	100.0	100.0	

Thus, it seems clear that majority of the tourists whom they participated in this questioner they dislike the behavior of people working in this industry.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study entitled aimed to promote Kurdistan Region of Iraq as a tourist destination taken Halabja province as a case study. A 196 participant's survey has been taken. The research paper drew the following conclusion:

1. The most effective mean of marketing is the Word of Mouth method.
2. The satisfaction level of tourists is not encouraging.
3. Qualification of the labor force in this industry is not pleasing.
4. Authorities should do more for this industry.
5. Accommodation is the biggest problem faced by tourists.

Based on our study, we have reached the following suggestions:

- More attention should be paid to the Word of Mouth, as marketing methods, although, it is undeniably complex and has a multitude of potential origins and motivations, but fortunately it associated with lowest cost among other marketing methods.
- Special attention should be given to draw visitors from southern Iraq, the Gulf States countries (GCC), and other areas of the Middle East. In particular, they are attracted by authorities done enough for this industry
- The easy and simple visa & travel formalities should be formulated immediately by the authority.
- The road system in the region which directly supports tourism expansion should be improved, since the passengers in KRI travel by roads.
- A favorable culture should create for the foreign tourists so that they are feeling comfortable to come in KRI for their enjoyment.
- There is a need for employees of high qualifications to work in this sector in order to attract more visitors. Thus, public and private authority should establish different training and education institutes to produce trained, skilled, and efficient manpower for the tourism industry.

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