

The impact of tourism promotion on shaping mental image: An analytical study of Karbala hotels

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Abstract: Tourism promotion has become one of the most influential strategic marketing tools for enhancing the attractiveness and competitiveness of tourist destinations. However, despite the increasing importance of tourism promotion, many destinations still face challenges in developing an effective promotional strategy capable of creating a positive mental image among tourists, which directly affects their destination selection and travel decisions. Accordingly, this study aimed to investigate the relationship between tourism promotion and mental image formation in hotels located in Karbala, Iraq.

The study adopted a descriptive-analytical approach. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire distributed to hotel guests in 20 hotels in Karbala. A total of 203 valid questionnaires were analyzed. Tourism promotion was measured through six dimensions: promotional campaigns, modern promotional methods, tourism advertising, promotional materials, social media information, and destination identity. Mental image formation was measured using eight indicators related to first impressions, destination confidence, service quality perception, tourists' shared experiences, destination preference, and visit intention.

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations), Cronbach's Alpha coefficient to assess reliability ($\alpha = 0.914$), and Pearson's correlation coefficient to test the research hypothesis.

The findings revealed a high level of perceived effectiveness of tourism promotion (Mean = 4.22), while the overall level of mental image formation was also positive (Mean = 3.81). Promotional content reflecting the distinctive identity of the destination achieved the highest evaluation among the tourism promotion dimensions (Mean = 4.57), whereas tourists' shared experiences through media represented the strongest contributor to mental image formation (Mean = 4.64). Furthermore, the results demonstrated a statistically significant positive relationship between tourism promotion and mental image formation ($r = 0.606$, $p = 0.002$), confirming that more effective tourism promotion contributes to building a stronger positive mental image of the destination.

The study provides practical implications for hotel managers and tourism authorities by emphasizing the importance of strengthening digital tourism promotion, developing destination

branding strategies, investing in social media marketing, encouraging user-generated content, collaborating with tourism influencers, and improving service quality to ensure consistency between promotional messages and tourists' actual experiences. These practices can enhance destination competitiveness and support sustainable tourism development.

Keywords: Tourism Promotion; Mental Image; Destination Image; Tourism Marketing; Hotels; Karbala.

1. Introduction:

Since ancient times, tourism has been associated with people's natural curiosity and desire to travel. People travel to discover new things, learn about other cultures, and take in the splendor of the natural world and human history. As societies have grown and globalization has intensified, tourism has emerged as a crucial economic sector that has a direct bearing on sustainable development. It helps to boost the local economy, generate employment opportunities, and promote cross-cultural interaction.

Due to changes in the global economy, tourism has become a major source of income for many nations, particularly those with natural, historical, and cultural resources that draw travelers. Tourism marketing has emerged as a key component in boosting the allure of travel destinations in order to optimize the advantages of this industry. Given the increasing rivalry among international tourist sites, effective promotion is crucial in forming the public's perception of the tourism product, which helps draw tourists and boost visitor numbers.

Although natural features like beauty and breathtaking landscapes are crucial for drawing tourists, they might not be enough to ensure that tourist sites will continue to be successful. Thus, building infrastructure, offering exceptional tourism services, and improving the visitor experience all help to bolster a destination's favorable reputation. When these components are combined, a competitive advantage can be obtained, elevating the tourist destination's reputation among travelers and facilitating both higher tourism and the accomplishment of intended development objectives.

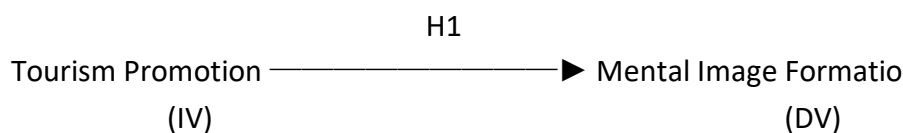


Figure 1. Hypothetical Research Model

1-2-1- Research Problem

Due to fierce competition among international tourist attractions, many tourist locations struggle to draw tourists and sustain a consistent flow of visitors, despite the fact that tourism is a crucial economic sector. A key element in increasing the destination's appeal is tourism marketing, especially creating a favorable perception of it. However, some tourist locations have poor marketing plans or a vague tourism identity, which has a detrimental effect on travelers' opinions of these locations and their capacity to select them. Consequently, the following primary question can be used to formulate the study problem:

"What is the nature and extent of the impact of tourism promotion on shaping the mental image of customers in Karbala city hotels?"

In order to achieve sustainable tourism development, this study intends to investigate the relationship between the mental image of tourist destinations and its influence on travelers' decisions. It focuses on the factors that contribute to the formation of this image and the role that promotion plays in enhancing travelers' perceptions of it.

1-2-2-Importance of the Research:

The significance of this study arises from the critical function that a tourist's image plays in forming their perceptions and affecting their choices of travel places. Effective marketing is now crucial to boosting tourism attractiveness and guaranteeing sustainability in this crucial industry, given the growing worldwide rivalry among tourist sites.

The following succinctly describes the significance of the study:

1. Aiding in the creation of tourism marketing strategies: By examining the formation of a destination's image, useful suggestions for enhancing advertising campaigns and drawing in more visitors can be developed.
2. Supporting tourist destinations' competitiveness: By identifying the elements that affect a destination's appeal, the research helps tourism authorities create strategic plans that strengthen their position in the worldwide market.
3. Improving the tourist experience: The quality of services offered to visitors can be enhanced by knowing their expectations and what they look for in tourist locations. This will raise their satisfaction levels and increase the possibility that they will return.
4. Encouraging sustainable tourism development: This study offers a thorough understanding of how to leverage a visitor's image to accomplish sustainable tourism development, resulting in higher profits and more employment prospects.
5. Enhancing the academic aspect: By offering a thorough examination of the connection between mental image and travel decisions, the study

contributes scientific value to the field of tourist marketing and may serve as a reference for further research in this area.

1-2-3-Research Objectives:

Given the significance of this study, it aims to accomplish the following goals:

First: To identify the current state and nature of tourism promotion strategies and methods (traditional and digital) employed in targeted hotels in Karbala.

Second: To identify the key factors and pillars that contribute to shaping the mental image of hotel guests and visitors in the city.

Third: To measure the nature and extent of the standard impact of tourism promotion on shaping and directing the positive mental image of Karbala hotel guests.

Fourth: To determine the degree to which the formed mental image (positive or negative) influences guests' confidence and their decision to choose and stay at their hotel in Karbala.

Fifth: To present a set of innovative proposals and mechanisms to decision-makers in the hotel and tourism sector in Karbala, aimed at developing promotional campaigns and enhancing competitiveness in a way that serves sustainable tourism development.

1-2-4- Research Hypotheses:

To answer the research problem and as a starting point, the following hypothesis was formulated:

There is a statistically significant correlation between the effect of tourism promotion and the formation of the mental image.

2- Section Two:

2-1- The Concept of Promotion:

The word "promotion" is derived from the Arabic word "rawwaja," meaning to make something known. This means that promotion is the process of communicating with others and introducing them to the types of goods and services offered by the seller. As an element of the marketing mix, promotion is influenced by decisions related to the product, price, and distribution. The promotional mix consists of specific elements: advertising, personal selling, sales promotion, public relations, and publicity(Fattah, 2025) .

2.2. Tourism Promotion:

Tourism promotion is defined as "the process of creating knowledge in tourists about a company and its programs, generating positive interaction between the tourist and the information

obtained through promotional efforts, encouraging and motivating them to engage in positive behavior centered on contracting for one of the company's tourism programs, or creating a latent demand that remains a source of tension and anxiety until it is satisfied" (Al-Mutairi, 2026) .

It is also defined as all direct and indirect efforts aimed at achieving the objectives specified in the overall tourism marketing strategy for a country, location, or even a hotel, using the most appropriate promotional mix. This mix is implemented according to priorities and preferences related to the promotional habits of tourism distribution channels, ultimately reaching consumers or users of tourism products (P Kotler, 2022a) . Cavalcante et al. added that promotion is a set of marketing activities and strategies aimed at enhancing the image of tourist destinations and attracting tourists through various means such as advertising, public relations, digital marketing, promotional campaigns, and partnerships with tourism institutions. Promoting tourism depends on emphasizing distinctive qualities. In order to increase awareness and persuade travelers to select a destination as their top choice, elements including sustainability, natural beauty, services provided, and the place's branding are essential (WQF Cavalcante et al., 2021) .

According to Bulchand et al., promoting tourism entails utilizing a variety of marketing techniques and artificial intelligence technology to improve the client experience. This includes offering interactive services like chatbots that provide quick answers, tailored suggestions, and exclusive deals, all of which increase client pleasure, loyalty, booking rates, and income. Tourism promotion also encompasses big data analytics to understand consumer behavior and anticipate their needs, which helps in designing effective marketing strategies to increase the appeal of hotels and tourist destinations (J Bulchand et al., 2024) .

2-3- The Importance of Tourism Promotion

The importance of tourism promotion can be summarized as follows: (Al-Mutairi, 2026) .

2-3-1- Achieving Tourism Quality: A low level of tourism awareness among the public is one of the factors that hinders tourism from fulfilling its role in community development and advancement. It is also a serious factor that causes the tourism product to lose its most important distinguishing features. Therefore, achieving tourism quality is very important.

2-3-2- Stimulating Demand for Tourism Content: The tourism content of a country or organization is the sum of the tourist attractions that draw tourists to that country or region and motivate them to visit and enjoy its attractions.

2-3-3- Spreading Tourism Knowledge: Promotion is one of the essential means of spreading tourism knowledge and culture among both domestic and international audiences. Through the information disseminated about historical sites, tourist attractions, various services and programs, and aspects of attraction and investment, it influences the opinions, attitudes, and stances of the public. **2-3-4- Achieving conviction among tourists:** Tourism promotion is achieved by using all promotional activities and persuasive methods that help increase the number of actual and prospective tourists from within the country or from abroad alike. In addition, these efforts aim to motivate those responsible for tourism companies, institutions and bodies to increase their efforts to attract the largest number of tourists.

2-4- Objectives of Tourism Promotion

Promotion aims to achieve three objectives:(VTC Middleton, 2012) .

- **Introductory objective:** This involves informing the consumer or customer about the availability of the service or product.
- **Persuasive objective:** This involves attempting to influence the consumer or customer by showcasing the advantages of the service or product.
- **Reminding objective:** This involves reminding the consumer or customer about the service or product so that they purchase or acquire it. The objectives of promotion vary from one organization to another and from one situation to another. Tourism promotion for a region or tourist resource achieves two interconnected objectives:

First: To inform potential tourists about the advantages, characteristics, and components of the region or resource and stimulate their desire to visit it.

Second: To take the necessary steps to facilitate that visit appropriately. The marketing plan for the region should include promotional messages prepared based on the results of market research and analysis that demonstrate the relationship between supply and demand (tourism and resources).

In addition to other objectives(Olszewski et al., 2022) :

- Providing tourists with information to clarify the overall picture of the tourist destination.
- Establishing a prominent position for the tourist destination.
- Increasing the number of tourists visiting the tourist destination.
- Maintaining a stable level of tourist demand and preventing a decline.
- Fostering a positive attitude towards the tourist destination.

2-5 - Elements of Tourism Promotion:

2-5-1- Tourism Advertising

Tourism advertising is one of the most important means of reaching tourists and informing them about the tourism programs offered by companies. It addresses a range of needs among tourists, most importantly the need to travel and the drive for knowledge, exploration, and discovery.

The writer Oxfeld defined advertising as: "A communication process aimed at influencing the buyer from the seller on an impersonal basis, where the advertiser reveals their identity and the communication takes place through public media" (GE Belch, 2016a)

2-5-2-Tourism Promotion:

Promotion is defined as the non-personal and free means of presenting goods, services, or ideas to the public by an identified entity.

2-5-3-Tourism Personal Selling

Personal selling is defined as "that promotional activity in which a salesperson meets with a consumer or industrial buyer to explain the characteristics and advantages of a product or service in order to persuade them to purchase it; that is, a direct means of achieving customer persuasion to buy" (Fattah, 2025).

2-5-4-Tourism Public Relations

The increasing interest of tourism institutions in public relations as a promotional method has emerged due to its effective role in understanding the trends and opinions of a large segment of clients and tourists who wish to obtain tourism services. The rapid development and flourishing of widely disseminated communication methods has contributed to activating the concept of public relations and its use (Lahcene, 2024) .

2-5-5-Sales Promotion

This encompasses all marketing activities that can add specific value to a product or service. The service produced by the institution for a specific period of time in order to attract the purchasing behavior of consumers and to increase the efficiency of distributors (P Kotler, 2022b).

2-6 - Factors that Enhance Marketing Effectiveness in Tourism Promotion (F Benghadbane, 2019).

- 1- Marketing Strategy
- 2- Creativity
- 3- Implementation

4- Infrastructure

5- External Factors

The selection and definition of promotional mix elements are influenced by several factors, including:

2-6-1- Product Lifecycle: Each stage of the product lifecycle has its own specific promotional mix, different from the other stages. For example, during the introduction stage, advertising and public relations should be intensified.

2-6-2- Promotion Budget: The size of the budget affects the selection of the appropriate promotional mix. If the budget is limited, it is difficult to resort to a widespread method due to its high costs. In this case, the organization resorts to personal selling. However, if the budget is large, advertising can be used as a widespread method, although it is also expensive. **2-6-3- Consumer type:** Consumers can be divided into two categories: end consumers and industrial buyers. If the marketer wants to reach the first type, then the best element of the promotional mix is advertising. If the marketer wants to reach the second type, then personal selling is preferred(Perreault, 2013).

2-6-4-Nature of the prevailing competition: The promotional mix varies depending on the type of competition. In monopolistic competition, the organization resorts to advertising or promotion due to the differentiation of its products from those of its competitors. However, if the competition is non-monopolistic, it is difficult to choose the appropriate promotional mix.

2-6-5-Nature of the product: The nature of the product to be promoted by the marketing department is a factor in determining the appropriate promotional mix. Consumer goods and industrial goods require different marketing strategies(Queenmary et al., 2019) .

2-7 - Tourism Promotion Strategies

2-7-1- The Pull Strategy: This strategy aims to attract tourists and persuade them to visit the destination, thereby generating effective tourist demand. It relies on widespread advertising directed at potential tourists. Adopting this strategy necessitates increased advertising spending, particularly through widely disseminated media such as satellite channels. Personal selling becomes less important in this approach.

2-7-2- The Push Strategy: This strategy relies heavily on personal messaging, such as personal selling and public relations. It focuses on persuading tour operators to partner with the

destination and obtaining confirmations of such partnerships. These operators, in turn, will promote the destination to their agents or other travel agencies. This tactic is especially important for travel destinations whose source markets don't have enough information (Morgan, 2010) .

2-7-3- Aggressive technique (Pressure): In this technique, the consumer (tourist) is subjected to a barrage of advertising messages that rely on continual repetition. It makes use of comparisons with rival products and services on all media platforms, using strategies like "Buy now, now and only now," or "You will pay more tomorrow." The concept that the purchase is essential and unavoidable is conveyed by all of these messages. This method is widely used on radio and television (GE Belch, 2016b).

2-7-4- Revival Strategy: This strategy relies on a simplified, fact-based persuasion approach, rather than focusing solely on the driving forces behind the product. It aims to attract consumers through extended dialogue, ultimately leading them to make a purchase decision with complete conviction (Amin, 2001).

2-8 - The Importance of Online Tourism Promotion

2-8-1- Importance for Tourism Establishments:

- Introducing the tourism establishment and improving its global image, as this promotional tool is widely available on the internet. This allows the name, image, and services of the tourism establishment to reach everyone interested in tourism, even those who currently have no desire to travel, thus motivating and inspiring them.
- Reducing costs. Traditional promotional methods are expensive, unlike online promotion, which does not cost such sums. It's worth noting that online promotion can last longer than traditional tourism promotion, as the latter is usually limited to a month, while online tourism promotion lasts for a longer period.
- Reaching the largest possible number of tourists of different nationalities and languages at the right time and place. Electronic media, especially the internet, provides daily and round-the-clock access to promotional media for the tourism establishment (V Khud et al., 2025).

2-8-2- Importance for the Tourist

- It gives the tourist the opportunity to choose by comparing the available tourism products. Electronic marketing allows the tourist to compare and select what suits their needs and

preferences. Through the advertising offers presented electronically by tourist establishments, including images and videos, the tourist is presented with several options.

- It reduces the time the tourist spends searching for a suitable tourist destination. In one or two hours, they can choose their destination.
- It relieves the tourist of the trouble and expense of searching for suitable tourist destinations, as well as programs and tours. They can choose the appropriate destination from wherever they are (P Kotler, 2022a) .

3- Third Section

3-1- Introduction to the Corporate Image

The concept of the **Corporate Image** emerged in the 1950s, particularly in the United States, to describe the status or position of an individual, party, or country in public life. The idea gained popularity after Lee Bristol's book **Developing an **Corporate Image**** was published in 1960. Although the concept is relatively recent, this does not mean it was unaffected by the interest of psychologists and schools of thought, especially in the 18th and 19th centuries. The associationist-analytical school was among the most interested in the topic of the **Corporate Image**, and Johann Atvanklesta was the first to provide a precise description of the visual **Corporate Image** 1819 (BE Eisenstadt, 2025) .

Mental image plays a significant role in highlighting our opinions, attitudes, values, and reactions towards all groups and events. Mental image also plays a prominent role in the lives of individuals, and it also plays a very important role in the lives of countries, companies, and institutions. This justifies the keenness of all these parties to ensure that their mental image among others is positive and serves their goals and interests, and to strive to remove any negative features or aspects that exist in this image or may occur to it (Hassan, 2021) .

The use of the concept of mental image encompasses several fields of knowledge and various scientific branches. Its use has become widespread in contemporary social research, particularly in communication and media studies in general, as well as its abundant use in the fields of philosophy, psychology, social psychology, and other fields of knowledge. If the term mental image is the perception of something in its form, reality, and attributes through intelligence and memory in the mind, as well as the perception of things and thinking about them to issue judgments and inferences, and if the use of this term enjoys an increasing presence in various social sciences, which has given it a cognitive breadth that has led to the absence of precise definition limits and clear and specific use of it, then the mental image is closest to the limits of

knowledge and perception that were formed in the human mind when it began the process of thinking about what surrounds it, especially since thinking is a mental process that includes all aspects of mental activity, meaning that it is based on previous mental perception without having negative repercussions on the interaction of individuals and groups(Hassan, 2021) .

3-2- The Concept of Mental Image

It is the rational image that forms in people's minds about organizations. This image may be formed from direct or indirect experience, and it may be rational or irrational. It may be based on evidence and documents or on rumors and undocumented statements, but it represents a true reality for those who hold it(Ajwa, 1983) .

The concept of mental image expresses the perceptions that members of society hold about the world around them and its various components. The image is a natural product of the sum of individuals' direct and indirect experiences, which they receive through their various communicative interactions. Undoubtedly, the ease or difficulty of change depends on how deeply ingrained the mental image is in the public consciousness. It can be said that the mental image is the map through which a person can understand, perceive, and interpret things. It is the idea that an individual forms about a particular subject, whether it is true or false, and the resulting negative or positive actions. Dr. Ali Ajwa stated that the mental image is the final result of the subjective impressions of individuals or groups towards an organization. These impressions are formed through direct or indirect experiences and presentations and are linked to the emotions, attitudes and beliefs of individuals(Gazzaz, 2025) .

Edelman defines it as the harmony between public relations activities and initiatives designed to reinforce or protect the most distinctive characteristics of an organization (Mahmoud, 2018).

The organization's image is a fundamental element of strategic management, and corporate communications are a crucial component in ensuring the implementation of strategy within any organization. This is achieved through communication activities aimed at building, modifying, or maintaining the organization's image among the public(Cornelissen.,2023) .

Kenneth Boulding defines it as a set of subjective impressions formed in people's minds. These impressions can be ideas about values or the personality of an individual or organization, and many of these impressions are formed through what is disseminated by the media (Kamoush, 2021). Mental images vary from one field of knowledge to another. For example, in political science, they are divided into (national mental images, inverted stereotypes, mental images of an election candidate, a political party, or a political event). In psychology, they are divided into (attitude-forming mental images and manipulative mental images)(Z Wang et al. , 2023) .

3-3- The Importance of Brand Image

If you don't work on building your brand image correctly, your audience will build it incorrectly. It is crucial for every organization to strive to build a desirable brand image for its internal and external audiences due to the numerous advantages this offers. Brand image is a key factor in achieving the primary goal of profit-driven organizations: generating revenue and profits. This is accomplished by gaining the trust and loyalty of current and potential customers, thereby cultivating their long-term desire to acquire and choose the organization's services or products over others. The same applies to all entities and individuals with whom the organization deals, whether investors, distributors, suppliers, or others. The organization's brand image plays a significant role in creating long-term relationships with these individuals and entities, resulting in increased profits and revenue. Naturally, as a consequence of gaining customer loyalty, the organization's services or products will be their first choice(U Abbas et al., 2021). Even if new competitors emerge offering additional features and promotions, it is difficult to break the established brand image of an organization in the public eye. Furthermore, brand image is known to be highly important in monitoring future expectations among customers and the public, thus guiding their behavior accordingly. It benefits both the organization and its clients simultaneously. As for non-profit organizations, the matter is similar, as building a positive image will give them a great opportunity to attract more funding, donors, and sympathizers with their causes. This is with regard to the external audience. As for the internal audience of both for-profit and non-profit organizations, the positive image contributes to retaining their competent Customers, increasing their loyalty, and encouraging others to join this organization, which naturally contributes to creating a good reputation for the organization(Keller, 2013) .

3-4- Types of Mental Image

The types of mental images can be understood as follows (Cornelissen ., 2023):

- 1- The Image of the Woman: This refers to the image reflected in the minds of the organization's own audience, especially its leaders. It forms the initial impression that the external audience later forms of the organization. When conducting mental image research, it's important to consider the differences and contradictions in the perception and awareness of the mental image among the audience.
- 2- The Current Image: This reflects how the external audience views the organization. It depends on their experience, the flow of information to the audience, and the quality of that information—whether it's lacking, incomplete, or capable of achieving understanding. A correct mental image results from a correct impression.

3- The Ideal Image: This refers to the image that results from the integration of the services and products the organization offers with the information it provides to its audience, provided there is consistency between the organization's words and actions.

4- The Desired Image: This is the image the organization aims to achieve. This image is usually associated with a new topic about which the external audience has not yet received complete information.

5. Integrated Image: This refers to the organization's self-image, regardless of the goods or services it produces. The image is composed of several elements, including the organization's history, economic standing, reputation, and relationships with its internal and external stakeholders.

6. Multi-Part Image: This encompasses the organization's tangible and intangible symbols.

7. Product or Service Image: This image is generated through the organization's media efforts and focuses on the qualitative characteristics of its product or service, highlighting its level and quality(JE Grunig, 2003).

3-5: Components and Dimensions of a Public Image

The overall image of any organization, regardless of its type, is formed from the combination of several constituent elements. These elements ultimately create a specific impression of the organization. These components can be divided into two groups(Cornelissen, 2023) .

3-5-1. Tangible Elements:

1. Goods and services.
2. Retail outlets distributing the product.
3. Factories producing the goods.
4. Advertising and other promotional methods.
5. The organization's name and logo.

3-5-2. Intangible Elements:

1. Organizational policies.
2. Prevailing ideals and beliefs.
3. Organizational culture.

3-6- Sources of Mental Image Formation

3-6-1- Direct Experience: Some believe that an individual's daily interaction with other individuals, institutions, systems, and laws is a direct and influential source for forming subjective

impressions of a person, organization, idea, or country, and thus shaping a mental image. This direct experience has a stronger impact on an individual's mind and emotions. The responsibility for influencing public perceptions falls on public relations professionals in ministries, official and unofficial bodies, and organizations through direct interaction.

3-6-2- Indirect Experience: This encompasses all the messages an individual receives through friends or the media. Its primary content consists of events, people, and countries that they have not seen or heard about directly. In this type of experience, audio-visual media play a fundamental role in forming impressions, which ultimately constitute the mental image(Y Li et al., 2023) .

3-7- Stages of Image Formation According to the Target Audience

Image Formation with Internal and External Audiences

1- Government and Regulatory Agencies: Internal audience, Customers, management, and potential recruits

2- Financial Agencies and Economic Media: Public opinion shapers, lobbying groups, and media outlets

3- Environmental Associations and the rest of society

External audience: Customers, governments, banks, international agencies, and business partners

4- Various Audiences: Commercial audiences, suppliers, retailers, competitors, and service providers(Cornelissen .,2023)

3-7-1- Forming the mental image among the internal public (Customers)

Building and developing the image that the organization desires for itself to be a strategic asset for it starts from the inside out. Companies that are based on this foundation find it easier to build their mental image. But before starting to form the image, we start by identifying the things that the public thinks about the organization. This requires studies and research. Building the strategy followed and forming the image among the public requires the integration of the official policies followed in it, from the chief executive officer to the public relations department to the human resources department, all of which set the elements of the desired image and the methods of implementing it. The success of this depends on the integration of the efforts of all administrative departments to achieve that image. When these departments unite on one common culture in dealing with Customers, there is no doubt that they will find the result of that good and desired image(Taher, 2022) .

3-7-2- Shaping the Public Image

After creating a suitable internal environment for the organization to project its true image to customers and other external stakeholders, it will have implemented the principle of "start from the inside out." Consequently, the organization will be prepared to present itself to the external public as a genuine, honest, unique, trustworthy, and reliable company. However, several factors must be considered (service image/brand image/publicity/competitor image/official policy of the organization/advertising).

Therefore, we reiterate the necessity of integrating all efforts and activities related to image. For example, the presence of services and their image among the external public results in customer satisfaction, and satisfied customers have a positive view of the organization and form a favorable impression of it. The same applies to all other factors(Taher, 2022) .

4- Section Four

4-1- The Relationship Between Variables

Tourism promotion is a vital element in strengthening the tourism sector, as it contributes to attracting tourists and increasing awareness of tourist destinations. Its role is not limited to introducing services and landmarks, but extends to shaping the mental image that individuals hold of the tourist destination. This image plays a pivotal role in tourism decision-making, as preconceived notions influence tourists' desire to visit a particular destination.

With the development of modern communication methods, tourism promotion has become more influential on mental image, whether through traditional advertising campaigns or through digital media and social media platforms. As a result, there is a complementary link between tourism promotion and mental image since promotion helps to create a favorable perception, while mental image influences the efficacy of promotion and its capacity to accomplish its goals. By examining their ideas, the variables that affect them, and their reciprocal effects, this section seeks to shed light on the relationship between tourism promotion and mental image. This advances our knowledge of the significance of marketing tactics in enhancing travelers' perceptions of travel destinations(Y Li et al., 2023b).

4-2- The Concept of Tourism

Nowadays, tourism is more than just people traveling from one nation to another, as it used to be. It is no more the result of ephemeral circumstances and aspirations. Contrary to popular belief, it is now a human reality, a basic societal necessity, and a priority given the complexity of contemporary life. Furthermore, it can be a primary resource upon which countries rely to build

their economies through its active role in achieving the desired goals of their development plans. Therefore, most countries in the world are competing to focus on tourism and are working diligently to build a solid foundation for it. For this reason, those interested in this field have begun to refer to it as the tourism industry, given its requirement to provide material and intangible resources and the resulting service production, all within the framework of scientific, social, humanistic, and other theories. Due to the increasing number of tourists and the development of tourism movements worldwide, particularly in industrialized countries, driven by rising per capita income, the development of transportation methods and routes, the evolving nature of work and leisure time, the spread of urbanization, and the increased cultural and scientific awareness of the majority of the world's populations. From this, the scope of tourism expanded and flourished greatly in all countries of the world(S Saraniemi, 2011) .

4-3 - The Relationship Between Tourism Promotion and Mental Image

Tourism promotion is defined as a set of communication and marketing activities aimed at introducing the target audience to tourism products and services and persuading them to visit a specific destination by highlighting its unique advantages and features. Promotion is considered an essential part of the tourism marketing mix, as it contributes to creating demand, increasing the number of visitors, and enhancing the image of the tourist destination(N Khan et al., 2020) .

Tourism promotion plays a significant role in revitalizing a country's economy, as it helps bring in foreign currency through tourist traffic. It necessitates development in various economic, social, and cultural fields. Tourism promotion is of paramount importance in the development of cities, including religious and archaeological sites, by introducing the city as a tourist destination. This helps attract a larger number of tourists and drives development, especially when the country is open to neighboring countries and can utilize more modern tourism promotion methods that effectively attract tourists and contribute to the development of the city's tourism sector (CR Goeldner, 2012).

Tourism promotion is defined as a set of communication and marketing activities that aim to attract tourists and contribute to the development of the city's tourism sector. Moreover, tourism promotion helps provide job opportunities for individuals, and this is not limited to work in restaurants, hotels and tourist services, but also includes other sectors that supply tourism with goods and materials such as agriculture, industry and handicrafts. This helps prevent migration from the city to another city or outside the country, as it encourages local investors to establish tourism projects. This is reflected positively in increasing job opportunities and increasing income, which leads to improving the standard of living for individuals(Y Li et al., 2023). Religious and archaeological tourism also secures local tax revenues that can be used to

develop public infrastructure such as transportation roads, electricity, water and sewage networks, parks, medical clinics, schools, libraries and recreational and tourist sites. The benefit is in attracting tourists, and on the other hand, the city's residents will benefit from these facilities. Tourism promotion helps in using technology, which leads to community development, opens new markets for local agricultural and industrial products, encourages professions of all kinds, and ensures the development of cultural, archaeological and religious sites and commercial activities such as markets, parks, theaters and others, and contributes to their operation and financing(Vellas ., 2011)

Hospitality organizations cannot grow haphazardly, in any direction, simply for their own sake. They must grow in accordance with the objectives desired by stakeholders, objectives originally defined for the organization and for which it was established. Therefore, the strategic goals of adaptation, survival, and growth, which cannot be achieved without this alignment, are fundamental to the organization's survival. The hospitality organization must fulfill its aims and objectives; otherwise, after a period of time, senior management will find itself significantly deviating from its core activities(JR Walker, 2014)

Every organization is obligated to study the factors influencing the formation of its brand image. This study aims to understand the nature of these factors and the extent of their impact on the core outputs of the tourism service. The goal is to define brand image strategies that align with the organization's current reality and future aspirations. Undoubtedly, analyzing the market environment is a continuous process for the organization to adapt its plans and programs related to brand image management and to study and analyze the influencing factors.

A mental image is a subjective mental impression formed in the minds of individuals and groups regarding a particular subject. This image shapes their attitudes, stances, and judgments about that subject(Al-Maliki,. 2022) .Therefore, many researchers have concluded that mental images are often inaccurate, as they are merely impressions that may not necessarily be formulated on an objective scientific basis. They help individuals present simplified information about subjects they cannot directly perceive through their senses due to their limited ability to grasp reality as a whole .Thus, a mental image is a simplification of reality. It is clear that images play a role in conveying information about reality to the mind. Therefore, individuals deal with reality in general, and social reality in particular, through images firmly established in their minds, which then become substitutes for reality(Keller, 2013) .It can be said that a mental image is not necessarily a true representation of social reality. This is due to its influence by the individual's semantic framework. However, the reality reflected by the learner's mental image is indirect, characterized in this case by fragmentation or division of the mental image.

Described as perception, this perception expands with age to encompass everything that exists or is even imagined. The term "concept" refers to an opinion, logic, or set of beliefs about something specific, and it can be defined as the name given to things of the same category or to the category itself. Defining the concept of mental image has presented many difficulties for researchers and experts, given the diversity of the disciplines in which it is involved, as well as the variety of its usage in language, which is not static; everything within it is in flux. Speech is the element that shapes ideas. Language is a creative tool that shapes and forms ideas, enabling them to emerge in society(F Benghadbane, 2019) .

Therefore, efficient promotional techniques that go beyond simple advertising are necessary to create a powerful and long-lasting mental image of a tourist site. Enhancing the visitor experience, building infrastructure, and improving services should all be part of these tactics. According to this viewpoint, tourism promotion is a strategic component that helps shape people's perceptions of the tourist destination, which directly affects demand for travel and economic growth, rather than just a means of drawing tourists.

Section Five: The Applied Aspect of the Research

5- Study Population and Sample

The researcher used random sampling to select the study sample from among hotel guests, distributing 203 questionnaires. Random sampling is considered the best and most accurate method for representing the study sample. The study targeted twenty hotels in the city of Karbala, the study site.

5-1- Field Research Instrument

A questionnaire was designed, including the personal data of Customers. It comprised two sections. The first section contained six elements to study the dimensions of the effectiveness of tourism promotion in introducing the tourist destination and highlighting its identity. The second section contained eight elements to study the dimensions of forming a mental image of the tourist destination and its impact on the decision to visit. The questionnaire used a five-point Likert scale with levels of agreement ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Table (1) shows the levels of agreement and the range for each level.

Table No. (1): Survey item response scale.

Degrees of	Strongly	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly
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Agreement	Disagree				Agree
Degree	1	2	3	4	5
Range	1.80 :1	2.60 :1.81	3.40 :2.61	4.20 :3.41	5 :4.21

- Range (class length) = $(5 - 1) / 5 = 0.80$

2-5 - Survey Reliability

Table (2) shows Cronbach's alpha coefficient used to measure survey reliability. The results show an alpha value of 0.914, indicating the survey's reliability and its suitability for reliance in the study, as well as the consistency of its results if used again under the same conditions.

Table No. (2): Cronbach's alpha coefficient for measuring survey reliability.

Number of statements	Alpha coefficient
14	9140.

5-3-Results and Discussion

5-3-1- Demographic Data:

Table No. (3) Analysis of Customers ' Personal Data

The variable		Frequencies and percentages		Arrangement
		T	%	
Sex	Male	152	74.9	1
	Female	51	25.1	2
the total		203	%100	
Age	Less than 30	61	30.0	2
	30 - 40	96	47.3	1
	41 - 50	32	15.8	3
	More than 50	14	6.9	4
the total		203	%100	
Academic qualification	Average/Above Average	54	26.6	2
	Higher (Bachelor's/Licentiate)	112	55,2	1
	Postgraduate studies	37	18,2	3

the total	203	%100
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Table (3) shows the distribution of the study sample according to gender. It reveals that (152) hotel Customers, representing (74.9%) of the total male sample, were included, while (51) female Customers, representing (25.1%), were included. The table also shows that the largest group, (96) hotel Customers, representing (47.3%) of the total sample, were aged (30-40 years), while (61) Customers, representing (30.0%), were under 30 years old. The sample included (32) Customers, representing (15.8%), aged (41-50 years), and (14) Customers, representing (6.9%), were over 50 years old. These results indicate the diversity of the age groups within the hotel employee sample. As shown in the table above, the study sample is distributed according to educational qualifications. The majority of the sample (55.2%) holds a higher education degree, while 26.6% hold a secondary education degree, and 18.2% hold a postgraduate degree.

5-3-2-Descriptive Analysis of Research Themes:

Table No. (4): Dimensions of the Effectiveness of Tourism Promotion in Introducing the Tourist Destination and Highlighting its Identity

The statement		Frequency rate and percentage					Statistical indicators		Order
		1	2	3	4	5	arithmetic mean	Standard deviation	
Tourism promotion campaigns contribute to introducing tourists to the tourist attractions of the destination.	repetitions	0	3	12	83	105	4.43	.674	3
	%	0	1.5	5.9	40.9	51.7			
Tourism authorities rely on modern promotional methods (digital and media) to reach tourists.	repetitions	3	6	39	124	31	3.86	.761	5
	%	1.5	3	19.2	61.1	15.3			
Tourist advertisements help to form a first impression of the tourist destination.	repetitions	0	0	40	77	86	4.23	.756	4
	%	0	0	19.7	37.9	42.4			
Promotional materials convey a clear picture of the available tourist services and facilities.	repetitions	3	3	0	89	108	4.46	.719	2
	%	1.5	1.5	0	43.8	53.2			
Information published on	repetitions	7	10	35	105	46	3.85	.943	6

social media influences my interest in the tourist destination.	%	3.4	4.9	17.2	51.7	22.7			
Promotional content reflects a distinctive identity for the tourist destination compared to other destinations.	repetitions	6	0	0	70	127	4.57	.652	1
	%	3	0	0	34.5	62.6			
General arithmetic mean							4.22	-	-

The results in Table (4) show that the study participants strongly agree with four statements from the first axis (Dimensions of the Effectiveness of Tourism Promotion in Introducing the Tourist Destination and Highlighting its Identity). These statements are ranked in descending order of agreement among the study participants, based on the highest mean values and the lowest standard deviation values when the mean values are equal, as follows:

- "Promotional content reflects a distinctive identity of the tourist destination compared to other destinations." (Mean 4.57, Standard Deviation 0.652)
- "Promotional materials convey a clear picture of the available tourist services and facilities." (Mean 4.46, Standard Deviation 0.719)
- "Tourism promotional campaigns contribute to introducing tourists to the tourist attractions of the destination." (Mean 4.43, Standard Deviation 0.654)
- "Tourist advertisements help form a first impression of the tourist destination..." with a mean of (4.23) and a standard deviation of (0.756), which is a very high mean (4.21-5).

The results show that the study participants agree with two statements from the first axis (Dimensions of the Effectiveness of Tourism Promotion in Introducing the Tourist Destination and Highlighting its Identity), namely:

- "Tourist agencies rely on modern promotional methods (digital and media) to reach tourists." with a mean of (3.86) and a standard deviation of (0.761).
- "Information published through social media affects my interest in the tourist destination." with a mean of (3.85) and a standard deviation of (0.943).

Table No. (5): Dimensions of forming a mental image of a tourist destination and its impact on the visit decision

The statement		Frequency rate and percentage					Statistical indicators		Order
		1	2	3	4	5	arithmetic mean	Standard deviation	
I form a positive mental image of the tourist destination through what I see being promoted about it.	repetitions	3	3	2	102	93	4.37	.723	2
	%	1.5	1.5	1	50.2	45.8			
The mental image of a tourist destination influences my decision to visit it.	repetitions	3	4	54	132	10	3.70	.663	5
	%	1.5	2	26.6	65	4.9			
The mental image formed reflects the quality of tourist services in the destination.	repetitions	7	31	85	51	29	3.32	1.009	6
	%	3.4	15.3	41.9	25.1	14.3			
I feel confident in choosing a tourist destination that has a good mental image.	repetitions	3	7	0	95	98	4.37	.788	3
	%	1.5	3.4	0	46.8	48.3			
My mental image is linked to the experiences of other tourists that have been shared through the media.	repetitions	3	3	2	48	147	4.64	.720	1
	%	1.5	1.5	1	23.6	72.4			
A clear mental image of the destination helps in preferring it over other destinations.	repetitions	35	68	34	59	7	2.68	1.165	8
	%	17.2	33.5	16.7	29.1	3.4			
The tourist reputation of a destination influences and enhances my mental image of it.	repetitions	14	113	14	38	24	2.73	1.194	7
	%	6.9	55.7	6.9	18.7	11.8			
The more positive the mental image, the more I want to visit the tourist destination.	repetitions	3	3	0	114	83	4.35	.661	4
	%	1.5	1.5	0	56.2	40.9			
General arithmetic mean							3.81	-	-

The results in Table 5 show that the study participants strongly agree with four statements from the second axis (Dimensions of Forming a Mental Image of a Tourist Destination and its Impact on the Visit Decision). These statements are ranked in descending order of agreement based on the highest mean values and the lowest standard deviation values when the mean values are equal, as follows:

- "My mental image is linked to the experiences of other tourists shared through the media." (Mean 4.64, Standard Deviation 0.720)
- "I form a positive mental image of a tourist destination based on the advertising I see." (Mean 4.37, Standard Deviation 0.723)
- "I feel confident in choosing a tourist destination that has a good mental image." (Mean 4.37, Standard Deviation 0.788)
- "The more positive the mental image, the greater my desire to visit the tourist destination." With an arithmetic mean of (4.35) and a standard deviation of (0.661).

The results show that the study participants agreed with one statement from the second axis (Dimensions of Forming a Mental Image of a Tourist Destination and its Impact on the Visit Decision), namely, "The mental image of a tourist destination influences my decision to visit it," with a mean score of 3.70.

The results also show that the study participants gave neutral responses to three statements from the second axis (Dimensions of Forming a Mental Image of a Tourist Destination and its Impact on the Visit Decision). These statements were ranked in descending order of agreement among the study participants, based on the highest mean values and the lowest standard deviation values when the mean values were equal, as follows:

- "The mental image I have of the destination reflects the quality of tourist services..." with a mean score of 3.32 and a standard deviation of 1.009.
- "The tourist reputation of the destination influences my mental image of it." with a mean score of 2.73 and a standard deviation of 1.194.
- "A clear mental image of the destination helps in preferring it over other destinations.." with an arithmetic mean of (2.68) and a standard deviation of (1.156).

5-4- Testing the Research Hypothesis:

☐ There is a statistically significant correlation at the 0.05 level between the impact of tourism promotion on the formation of the mental image.

Table No. (6): Pearson's correlation coefficient between the impact of tourism promotion on the formation of the mental image.

Dimension	Statistics	Forming a mental image
Tourism Promotion	Correlation Coefficient	*0,606
	Significance Level	0,002
	Sample Size	203

The results in Table No. (6) indicate that the value of the correlation coefficient between the impact of tourism promotion on the formation of the mental image is 0.606** and the level of significance is 0.002, which is less than 0.05, which confirms the acceptance of the hypothesis that there is a statistically significant positive correlation between the impact of tourism promotion on the formation of the Iraqi mental image.

Conclusions

By examining the theoretical aspects and reviewing previous studies and the relationship between the study variables, the researcher arrived at a number of conclusions, including:

1. The study results showed a high level of effectiveness in tourism promotion in introducing the destination and highlighting its identity, with an overall arithmetic mean of 4.22. This reflects a high level of agreement among the sample group on the importance of tourism promotion in enhancing the destination's attractiveness.
2. The promotional content was found to reflect a distinctive identity for the tourist destination compared to others, achieving the highest arithmetic mean of 4.57. This confirms the role of promotion in highlighting the competitive advantages of the tourist destination.
3. The results showed that promotional materials contribute to providing a clear picture of the available tourism services and facilities, with an arithmetic mean of 4.46. This enhances the tourist's ability to form a positive impression of the destination before visiting.
4. The study confirmed that promotional campaigns play an important role in introducing tourists to the destination's tourism assets, with an arithmetic mean of 4.43. This reflects the effectiveness of promotional activities in disseminating tourism information.
5. The results for the mental image axis showed an overall mean score of 3.81, indicating a relatively positive mental image of the tourist destination among the sample group.
6. Tourist experiences and opinions published in media outlets and digital platforms were found to be among the most influential factors in shaping the mental image, achieving the highest mean score in this axis at 4.64.
7. The results showed that tourism promotion contributes to creating a positive mental image of the tourist destination, with a mean score of 4.37 for the relevant item, demonstrating the active role of promotional activities in building positive impressions.

8. The study showed that a positive mental image enhances individuals' confidence in choosing a tourist destination and increases their desire to visit it, with mean scores of 4.37 for the confidence and desire to visit items and 4.35 for the visit items.
9. The results revealed a discrepancy in respondents' evaluations of some dimensions of the mental image. The average score for the item reflecting the mental image on service quality was 3.32, while the average score for the item concerning the impact of the tourist destination's reputation was 2.73. This indicates that the mental image is not formed solely based on reputation.
10. The correlation test demonstrated a positive and significant relationship between tourism promotion and the mental image. The correlation coefficient was 0.606 at a significance level of 0.002, which confirms the study's main hypothesis: that tourism promotion has a positive impact on shaping the mental image of a tourist destination.

Recommendations

A set of recommendations was created for implementation based on the findings. The following are these suggestions:

1. Conduct recurring research to evaluate the destination's reputation. In order to identify strengths and weaknesses and to continuously develop promotional techniques, it is crucial to measure the effect of promotion on the perception of the target audience.
2. Use promotion that is emotionally engaging. Instead than depending only on conventional, information-based promotion, campaigns should emphasize sharing the first-hand accounts and experiences of past travelers in order to create an emotional bond between travelers and the location.
3. Strengthen the marketing of digital tourism. Investing in technology like artificial intelligence and virtual reality increases engagement and booking rates by assisting travelers in exploring the destination prior to their visit.
- 4- Promote cooperation with influencers in social media .Partnerships should be strengthened with travel bloggers and content creators who have a direct influence on tourists' decisions and enjoy high credibility with their audiences.
5. Design targeted promotional campaigns for different tourist segments. Tourists differ in their interests and expectations, so campaigns should be tailored to the target audience, whether for leisure, religious, intercultural, or cultural tourism.
6. Utilize data analytics to personalize promotion. It is essential to leverage big data analytics tools to understand tourist behavior, allowing for the design of customized marketing messages that align with their expectations and preferences.

7. Enhance crisis management to maintain a positive image. Proactive plans should be in place to address any crises that might affect the destination's reputation, such as disseminating counter-narratives and providing swift responses to any negative news that could impact tourism.
8. Improve the quality of services offered to visitors in line with promotional campaigns. Good promotion is insufficient if the level of service is not exceptional. To prevent harming the tourist's reputation, the real experience must live up to the advertised promises.
9. Encourage and provide training initiatives for workers in the tourism industry. Developing the abilities of tourism Customers should be prioritized because the caliber of interactions and services rendered directly affects visitors' perceptions.
10. Starting sustainable promotion initiatives: By emphasizing sustainable practices and encouraging responsible travel that protects natural and cultural resources, tourist promotion must be in line with environmental and social principles.

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