

American Journal of Economics and Business Management

Vol. 9 Issue 11 | **pp.** 354-371 | **ISSN:** 2576-5973

Available online @ https://www.globalresearchnetwork.us/index.php/ajebm

Article

The Impact of Digital Marketing on Tourism Promotion in Iraq An Applied Study on the General Authority for Tourism and Antiquities and a Number of Tourism Companies in Iraq

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Abstract: The current research examines the importance of digital marketing in the promotion of tourism in Iraq through an applied study of the Iraqi Tourism Authority and four tourism companies. Although Iraq is blessed with abundant nature, religion, history, and culture-related resources, this sector suffers from lack of investments and low number of visitors. Digital marketing tools like social networks, websites, mobile applications, and advertisements offer a cheap way to connect with the local and international audiences, raise their awareness about Iraqi tourism attractions and attract tourists and investors. Descriptive-analytical approach was used in the current study through a survey composed of 15 questions distributed among 140 employees and managers. Data collected were analyzed through SPSS software version 26 in order to determine frequencies, percentages, means and relative weights. There were ten items falling in the Agree category and five items falling in the Neutral category. The most agreed item concerns the fact that Iraq is now better represented in its tourism contents on the Internet (mean = 4.00), while the least agreed items are concerned with the utilization of paid advertisement (mean = 2.96) and digital contents as the primary tool for tourists' planning (mean = 2.84).

Keywords: digital marketing, tourism promotion, Iraq, Iraqi Tourism Authority, tourism companies.

Citation: Hassan, O. B. The Impact of Digital Marketing on Tourism Promotion in Iraq An Applied Study on the General Authority for Tourism and Antiquities and a Number of Tourism Companies in Iraq. American Journal of Economics and Business Management 2026, 9(11), 354-371

Received: 13th Aug 2026
Revised: 28th Sep 2026
Accepted: 15th Oct 2026
Published: 09th Nov 2026

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1. Introduction

Technological advances in digital technologies have revolutionized the approach towards promotion of destinations. Nowadays, destinations vie with each other for the guests' attention via social media and online resources, which depends on proper utilization of such media. Iraq boasts of its religious, historical, and natural sights and lures both regional and international tourists, but, overall, it still attracts fewer tourists than it can do [1]. Thus, the possible influence of digital marketing on tourism development deserves scientific study.

This paper aims at investigating the influence of digital marketing on tourism promotion in Iraq by means of studying the Iraqi Tourism Authority and several tourism companies as cases. The focus will be made on the application of digital technologies by these organizations, how far these technologies encourage tourism development, and how their application can be improved [2], [3], [4], [5]. The paper consists of three parts: the first one touches upon methodology and previous studies, the second one – theoretical framework, and the third one – field analysis and conclusions

2. Materials and Methods

The methodology includes the following parts:

First: Problem Statement

There is an obvious gap between tourism resources of Iraq and the amount of promotion achieved, raising a question about how well the Iraqi Tourism Authority and Iraqi tourism companies make use of digital marketing tools. The main research questions include:

How does digital marketing affect tourism promotion in Iraq?

It gives rise to the following sub-questions:

1. To what extent are the Iraqi Tourism Authority and Iraqi tourism companies using digital marketing tools?
2. What is the current level of tourism promotion in terms of awareness, demand and tourists' decision-making?
3. Is there a statistically significant relationship between digital marketing and tourism promotion in Iraq?
4. Do the dimensions of digital marketing, individually or together, affect tourism promotion in Iraq?

Second: Research Significance

The significance of the study is twofold:

Theoretical significance: the study adds to the Arabic and Iraqi literature on digital tourism marketing, a relatively new approach in the Iraqi context, and offers a conceptual framework linking the study variables.

Practical significance: the findings and recommendations can help the Iraqi Tourism Authority and tourism companies build digital marketing strategies that support the development of the sector.

Third: Research Objectives

The study aims to:

1. Identify how the organisations studied currently use digital marketing tools.
2. Assess the current level of tourism promotion from the perspective of employees in these organisations.
3. Measure the nature and strength of the relationship between digital marketing and tourism promotion in Iraq.
4. Examine the effect of digital marketing dimensions, individually and together, on promoting domestic and international tourism.
5. Propose practical recommendations to improve the digital marketing performance of the organisations studied.

Fourth: Hypothetical Research Model

Figure (1) shows the hypothetical model of the study, which links digital marketing (the independent variable) to tourism promotion (the dependent variable) through relationships of correlation and effect.

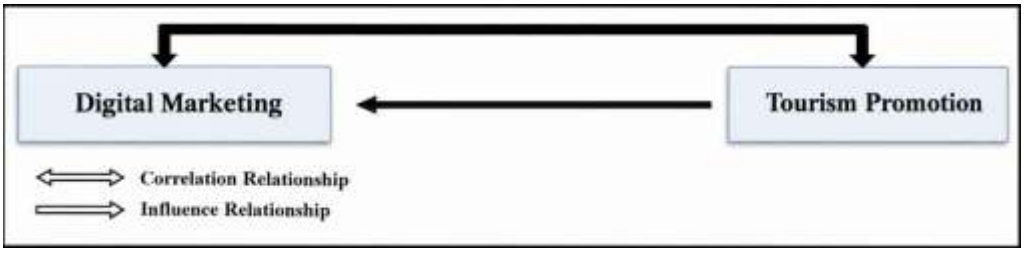


Figure 1. Hypothetical research model (source: the researcher)

Fifth: Hypotheses

The research rests on two main hypotheses:

First main hypothesis: there is a statistically significant correlation between digital marketing and tourism promotion.

Second main hypothesis: digital marketing has a statistically significant effect on tourism promotion.

Sixth: Research Approach

The study follows a descriptive-analytical approach: the descriptive part summarises the sample's responses on the study variables, and the analytical part interprets the relationship between them.

Seventh: Study Limitations

The study was conducted within the following limits:

1. **Spatial limits:** the Iraqi Tourism Authority and four tourism companies in Iraq.
2. **Temporal limits:** 20 July to 21 September 2026.
3. **Human limits:** employees and managers at the selected organisations.

Eighth: Study Population and Sample: the population comprises employees and managers at the Iraqi Tourism Authority and a number of Iraqi tourism companies; the sample consisted of 140 respondents.

Previous Studies

The following studies informed the present research:

1. **Al-Zamili et al:** this study examined the effect of tourism marketing on tourism activity in Karbala and Iraq, hypothesising a significant relationship between applying tourism marketing and activating tourism. It shares the Iraqi context and a similar dependent variable with the present study, but deals with tourism marketing in general rather than with digital tools.
2. **Abu Ghunaim et al:** entitled "E-Marketing as an Introduction to the Digital Transformation of Tourism in Iraq", this study identified the digital transformation requirements needed to support e-marketing systems and showed, through a field survey of experts and academics, that such systems improve the performance of tourism and travel companies. It shares the Iraqi setting and the focus on tourism companies, but its sample was limited to experts and academics, whereas the present study surveys employees of the Tourism Authority and of tourism companies.
3. **Zayed and Zamouri:** this study of digital tourism marketing and domestic tourism after the pandemic in Jijel Province, Algeria, surveyed 71 domestic tourists using SPSS. It found limited use of digital marketing, linked to weak attention to digitalisation and a shortage of skilled staff. Its method and tools resemble those of the present study, but its context and its sample of tourists differ.
4. **Hays, Page and Buhalis:** using content analysis and semi-structured interviews, this study examined how the national tourism organisations of the ten most visited countries use social media and proposed a best-practice framework. Indeed, the current study reveals that the application of digital marketing in tourism remains to be an experimental one and involves the strategic unevenness. In this respect, the study follows the previous studies which focused on the official tourism agencies and social media while it diverges in terms of qualitative analyses of popular destinations instead of surveying developing countries.

3. Results

Unlike these studies, the current study takes into account the viewpoints of both official regulator in the form of Iraqi Tourism Authority and private tourism businesses, and does not focus only on experts or tourists. Promotion of tourism is considered the dependent variable and is operationalized through awareness, demand, and decision-making indicators [6].

In turn, the customer satisfaction and booking levels are not the key concerns of the current study. The questionnaire covers numerous digital marketing activities, ranging from online presence and content to influencers and benchmarking against regional competition. Thus, the recommendations are formed based on the hierarchy of agreement.

This section reviews the main concepts of digital marketing and of tourism and its promotion in Iraq, drawing on the relevant literature [7], [8].

First: Digital Marketing (Concept, Importance, Characteristics and Tools)

1. The Concept of Digital Marketing

Digital marketing is the set of marketing activities that use digital media, technology and the internet to promote products, services and destinations and to keep continuous, interactive relationships with target audiences. Through it, organisations pursue brand awareness, demand generation and customer loyalty [9].

The concept is wider than electronic marketing. Digital marketing covers all digital channels, including those that do not depend on the internet, such as SMS and digital signage, whereas electronic marketing is limited to internet-based channels [10].

With the spread of social networks, search engines and smartphones, digital marketing has moved from a supplement to traditional marketing to a full strategic approach that tourism and other organisations use to plan and evaluate their campaigns [11].

2. The Importance of Digital Marketing for Tourism Organisations

Digital marketing helps tourism organisations, particularly in developing countries such as Iraq, overcome the cost limits of traditional advertising and reach potential tourists directly, at any time and from anywhere. It also lets them build a positive and lasting destination image and counter negative stereotypes by publishing reliable, up-to-date content on security conditions and on the variety of tourism on offer [12].

3. Characteristics of Digital Marketing

a. **Interactivity:** two-way communication between the organisation and its audience, unlike the one-way flow of traditional media [13].
b. **Precise targeting:** audiences can be defined by demographics, behaviour and interests.
c. **Measurability:** Measurability: Analytical methods keep track of the performance of campaigns and the rate of return on investment [14].
d. **Cost-effectiveness:** Economical: Costs are less compared to television and print media while having a wider reach [15].
e. **Geographical reach:** International market can be reached irrespective of geography and time constraints [16].
f. **Flexibility:** content and campaigns can be changed at once in response to audience feedback.

4. Digital Marketing Tools in the Tourism Sector

The main tools available to tourism organisations are:

a. **Social media marketing:** visual content and interactive follower communities on Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and YouTube.
b. **SEO and SEM:** improving websites' search rankings and using paid search advertising.
c. **Content marketing:** articles, photographs, videos and virtual tours that present destinations and their culture.
d. **Email marketing:** regular newsletters and offers sent to subscribers interested in travel.
e. **Influencer marketing:** working with content creators who share authentic travel experiences with their followers.
f. **Mobile applications and VR/AR:** interactive experiences that let visitors explore attractions before they arrive.

Second: Tourism in Iraq (Concept, Types and Current State)

1. The Concept of Tourism

Definitions of tourism vary with perspective. Hunziker and Krapf (1942) saw it as the sum of the phenomena and relationships arising from the travel and stay of non-residents, provided the stay does not lead to permanent residence or paid activity. Mathieson and Wall (1982) described it as the temporary movement of people to destinations outside their normal places of work and residence, together with what they do there and the facilities provided for them.

The World Tourism Organization adopted a statistical definition: the activities of people travelling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for no more than one consecutive year for leisure, business or other purposes. Common to these definitions are movement and a temporary stay outside the usual environment, for purposes that go beyond leisure, which fits the religious, cultural and recreational forms of tourism in Iraq.

2. Types of Tourism in Iraq

The main types are:

a. **Religious tourism:** the most important type, centred on the shrines of Najaf, Karbala, Samarra and Al-Kadhimiya and on pilgrimage seasons that draw millions of visitors each year.
b. **Archaeological and historical tourism:** the legacy of Sumer, Akkad, Babylon and Assyria, including World Heritage sites such as Babylon and Ashur.
c. **Natural and ecotourism:** the mountains of the Kurdistan Region and the marshes of southern Iraq, which are also on the World Heritage List.
d. **Urban, recreational and heritage tourism:** traditional markets and the cultural events held during religious and cultural festivals.

e. The State of the Tourism Sector in Iraq

Despite its rich resources, the sector faces obstacles to sustainable growth, chief among them weak infrastructure, especially hotels and transport, and a negative image shaped by security fears after years of conflict.

Iraq also lags behind its regional competitors in organised digital marketing, and coordination between the Iraqi Tourism Authority and travel agencies and tourism companies in running joint campaigns remains weak [17].

Third: Tourism Promotion and Its Relationship with Digital Marketing

Tourism promotion is the set of policies, measures and marketing activities that aim to raise demand for a destination, improve its image and influence the travel decisions of domestic, Arab and foreign visitors, with positive effects on the sector's economic indicators. The major measures of it include:

Awareness measures: how informed the audience is about the destination resources, and how the image of the destination has been improved.

Demand metrics refer to arrivals, bookings, and inquiries, as well as hotel occupancy rates.

Decision-making and loyalty metrics refer to decision-making speed, repeat trips, and willingness to make recommendations about the destination.

Tourism marketing literature notes that digital devices diminish the information gap between destinations and potential travelers. Detailed and current information about safety, services, and attractions increases awareness and creates a good image for the destination, and consequently impacts travel decision-making and demand.

Part of the difference between tourism potential in Iraq and its real visitor volume is the result of inadequate systematic investments in digital marketing made by official

authorities and tourism organizations in Iraq, which is going to be measured through field study.

Section Three: The Practical Side

First: The Role of Digital Marketing in Promoting Tourism in Iraq

1. Statistical Analysis (Frequencies, Percentages, Means and Relative Weights)

The questionnaire covered 15 questions relating to the digital presence of the institution, the quality of the content, follower involvement, paid promotion, and influencer marketing, along with participants' views regarding their effect on tourists. The questionnaire was answered by 140 employees and managers [18].

Answers were recorded on a five-point Likert scale (strongly agree = 5, agree = 4, neutral = 3, disagree = 2, strongly disagree = 1). For each item, frequencies, percentages, the mean and the relative weight were calculated and interpreted using the following ranges:

Table 1. Statistical Analysis (Frequencies, Percentages, Means and Relative Weights)

Range	**1.00-1.79**	**1.80-2.59**	**2.60-3.39**	**3.40-4.19**	**4.20-5.00**
Level	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

Table 2. Summary of All Items Ranked by Level of Agreement

The following table ranks the 15 items by mean, from the highest level of agreement to the lowest.

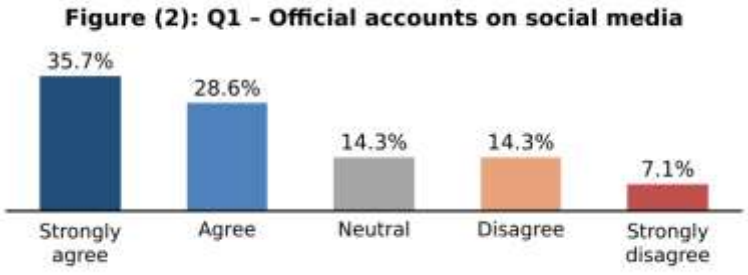
Rank	**Item**	**Mean**	**Relative Weight %**	**Level**
1	Q11: Iraq's name has been associated digitally with positive and effective tourism content more than before.	**4**	**80**	**Agree**
2	Q1: The Authority/Company has active official accounts on social media platforms – Second Sample	**3.71**	**74.3**	**Agree**
3	Q2: Digital content has contributed to accelerating tourists' decision to visit.	**3.71**	**74.1**	**Agree**
4	Q13: Digital campaigns have increased attendance at tourist seasons and festivals.	**3.67**	**73.4**	**Agree**
5	Q14: Tourists who have engaged with digital content encourage their friends to visit Iraq.	**3.66**	**73.1**	**Agree**
6	Q12: An increase in the number of inquiries and bookings has been observed following the implementation of digital marketing campaigns.	**3.55**	**71**	**Agree**
7	Q3: Visual content (photos and videos) about tourist and archaeological sites is regularly published in a professional manner.	**3.54**	**70.7**	**Agree**
8	Q4: The organization responds to and engages with all followers' inquiries and comments promptly and effectively.	**3.5**	**70**	**Agree**
9	Q6: Communication with influencers and tourism content creators contributes to increasing awareness of tourist destinations.	**3.5**	**70**	**Agree**

Rank	Item	Mean	Relative Weight %	Level
10	Q15: Digital marketing helps promote domestic tourism among the Iraqi governorates.	**3.50**	**70.0**	**Agree**
11	Q7: The organization compares the results of its digital advertisements with those of its competitors in neighboring countries to improve performance methods.	**3.36**	**67.1**	**Neutral**
12	Q9: Digital platforms have contributed to showcasing the diversity of religious, archaeological, natural, and recreational tourism in Iraq.	**3.2**	**64**	**Neutral**
13	Q8: Thanks to its digital presence, Iraq's image as a safe and attractive tourist destination has improved.	**3.11**	**62.1**	**Neutral**
14	Q5: Paid advertising campaigns are used on social media to promote Iraqi tourist destinations.	**2.96**	**59.3**	**Neutral**
15	Q10: Digital content has become one of the main sources that tourists rely on when planning a visit to Iraq.	**2.84**	**56.7**	**Neutral**

Detailed Analysis of Each Item

Table 3. The Authority and the companies have active official accounts on social media platforms**.**

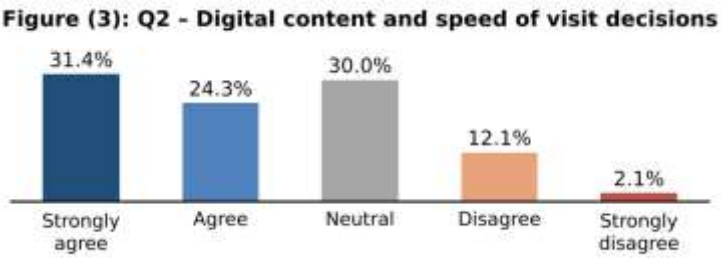
Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	50	35.7	50	35.7
Agree	40	28.6	90	64.3
Neutral	20	14.3	110	78.6
Disagree	20	14.3	130	92.9
Strongly Disagree	10	7.1	140	100
Total	140	100.0		



Interpretation: the mean of 3.71 (relative weight 74.3%) places this item in the Agree range. "Strongly agree" was the most frequent answer (35.7%); 64.3% agreed overall and 21.4% disagreed [19].

Table 4. Digital content has helped speed up tourists' decisions to visit.

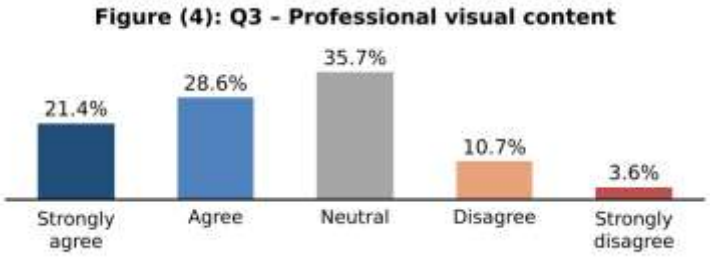
Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	**44**	**31.4**	**44**	**31.4**
Agree	**34**	**24.3**	**78**	**55.7**
Neutral	**42**	**30**	**120**	**85.7**
Disagree	**17**	**12.1**	**137**	**97.9**
Strongly Disagree	**3**	**2.1**	**140**	**100**
Total	**140**	**100.0**		



Interpretation: with a mean of 3.71 and a relative weight of 74.1%, respondents agreed with this item. The largest group chose "strongly agree" (31.4%), 55.7% agreed in total and only 14.3% disagreed.

Table 5. Visual content (photos and videos) of tourist and archaeological sites is published regularly and professionally.

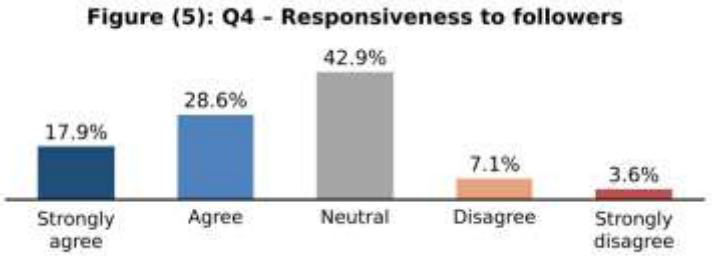
Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	**30**	**21.4**	**30**	**21.4**
Agree	**40**	**28.6**	**70**	**50**
Neutral	**50**	**35.7**	**120**	**85.7**
Disagree	**15**	**10.7**	**135**	**96.4**
Strongly Disagree	**5**	**3.6**	**140**	**100**
Total	**140**	**100.0**		



Interpretation: the item scored 3.54 (70.7%), within the Agree range, although "neutral" was the single most common answer (35.7%). Half of the sample agreed, against 14.3% who disagreed.

Table 6. The organisation responds to followers' inquiries and comments quickly and effectively.

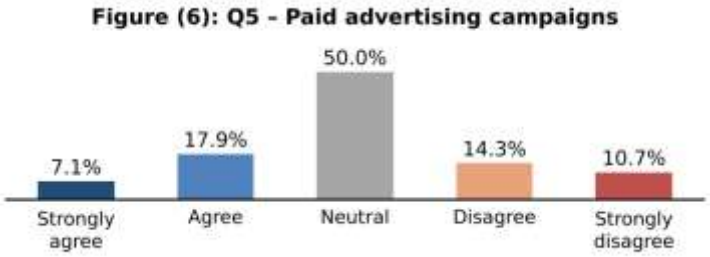
Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	**25**	**17.9**	**25**	**17.9**
Agree	**40**	**28.6**	**65**	**46.4**
Neutral	**60**	**42.9**	**125**	**89.3**
Disagree	**10**	**7.1**	**135**	**96.4**
Strongly Disagree	**5**	**3.6**	**140**	**100**
Total	**140**	**100.0**		



Interpretation: responsiveness scored 3.50 (70.0%), at the lower edge of the Agree range. The large neutral share (42.9%) suggests that many employees are unsure how well their organisation handles online inquiries; 46.4% agreed and 10.7% disagreed [20].

Table 7. Social Media paid advertisements are used for Iraqi destinations.

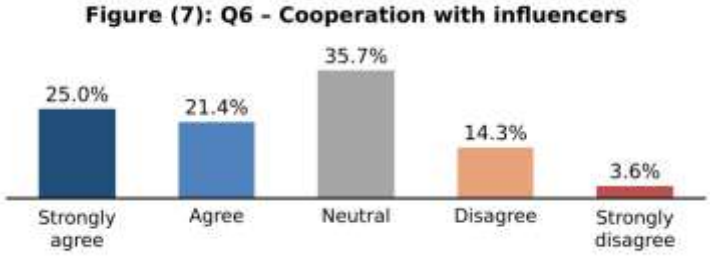
Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	**10**	**7.1**	**10**	**7.1**
Agree	**25**	**17.9**	**35**	**25**
Neutral	**70**	**50**	**105**	**75**
Disagree	**20**	**14.3**	**125**	**89.3**
Strongly Disagree	**15**	**10.7**	**140**	**100**
Total	**140**	**100.0**		



Interpretation: paid advertising recorded one of the lowest means (2.96, 59.3%), in the Neutral range. Half of the respondents chose "neutral", and agreement and disagreement were equal at 25% each, which points to limited and irregular use of paid campaigns [21].

Table 8. The organisation works with influencers to create content that raises awareness of tourist destinations.

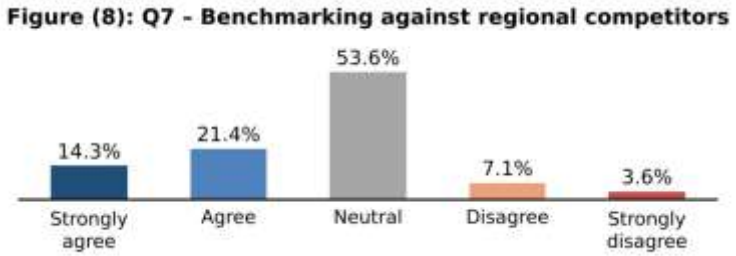
Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	**35**	**25**	**35**	**25**
Agree	**30**	**21.4**	**65**	**46.4**
Neutral	**50**	**35.7**	**115**	**82.1**
Disagree	**20**	**14.3**	**135**	**96.4**
Strongly Disagree	**5**	**3.6**	**140**	**100**
Total	**140**	**100.0**		



Interpretation: cooperation with influencers scored 3.50 (70.0%), in the Agree range. Neutral answers were the most common (35.7%), with 46.4% agreeing and 17.9% disagreeing.

Table 9. The firm evaluates its performance in online advertisement in comparison with other companies from neighboring countries.

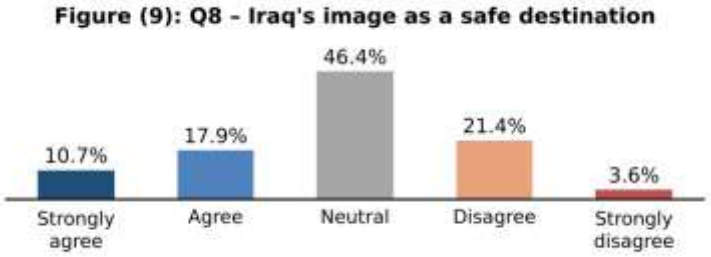
Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	**20**	**14.29**	**20**	**14.29**
Agree	**30**	**21.43**	**50**	**35.71**
Neutral	**75**	**53.57**	**125**	**89.29**
Disagree	**10**	**7.14**	**135**	**96.43**
Strongly Disagree	**5**	**3.57**	**140**	**100**
Total	**140**	**100.0**		



Interpretation: Explanation: The benchmarking score is 3.36 (67.1%), putting the score on the Neutral scale. A majority (53.6%) of respondents marked "neutral," and only 35.7% answered in the affirmative. This implies that benchmarking relative to competition is not a common practice.

Table 10. Digital presence has improved Iraq's image as a safe and attractive destination.

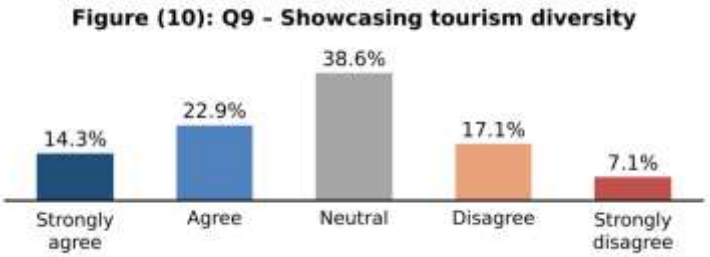
Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	15	10.7	15	10.7
Agree	25	17.9	40	28.6
Neutral	65	46.4	105	75
Disagree	30	21.4	135	96.4
Strongly Disagree	5	3.6	140	100
Total	140	100.0		



Interpretation: This question scored 3.11 (62.1%) and thus falls under the category of Neutral responses. The majority of responses fall under the category of Neutral (46.4%), while 28.6% responded agreeing and 25% disagreed.

Table 11. Digital platforms have helped showcase the diversity of religious, archaeological, natural and recreational tourism in Iraq.

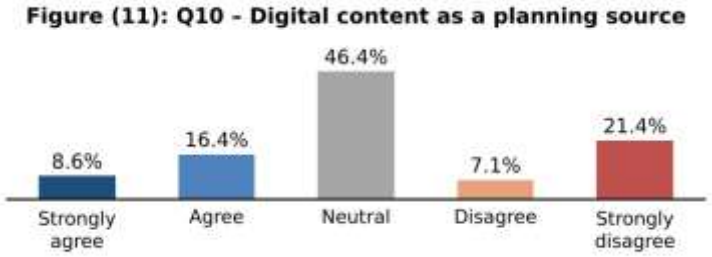
Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	20	14.3	20	14.3
Agree	32	22.9	52	37.1
Neutral	54	38.6	106	75.7
Disagree	24	17.1	130	92.9
Strongly Disagree	10	7.1	140	100
Total	140	100.0		



Interpretation: the item scored 3.20 (64.0%), in the Neutral range. The most common answer was "neutral" (38.6%); 37.1% agreed and 24.3% disagreed.

Table 12. Digital content has become one of the main sources tourists use when planning a visit to Iraq.

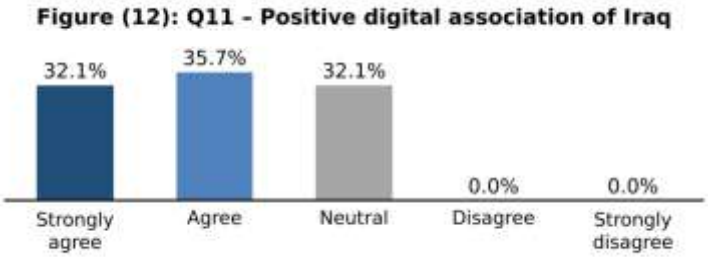
Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	**12**	**8.6**	**12**	**8.6**
Agree	**23**	**16.4**	**35**	**25**
Neutral	**65**	**46.4**	**100**	**71.4**
Disagree	**10**	**7.1**	**110**	**78.6**
Strongly Disagree	**30**	**21.4**	**140**	**100**
Total	**140**	**100.0**		



Interpretation: this item had the lowest mean in the questionnaire (2.84, 56.7%). Neutral answers reached 46.4% and agreement only 25%, while 28.6% disagreed, including 21.4% who strongly disagreed. Respondents do not see digital content as a main planning source for tourists [22].

Table 13. Iraq is now more associated online with positive, engaging tourism content than in the past.

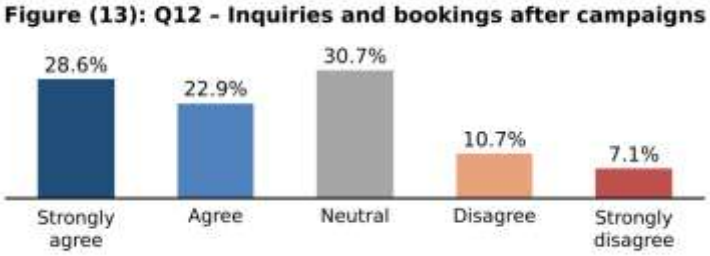
Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	**45**	**32.1**	**45**	**32.1**
Agree	**50**	**35.7**	**95**	**67.9**
Neutral	**45**	**32.1**	**140**	**100**
Disagree	**0**	**0**	**140**	**100**
Strongly Disagree	**0**	**0**	**140**	**100**
Total	**140**	**100.0**		



Interpretation: this item recorded the highest mean (4.00, 80.0%). "Agree" was the most common answer (35.7%), total agreement reached 67.9%, and no respondent disagreed.

Table 14. Inquiries and bookings increase after digital marketing campaigns.

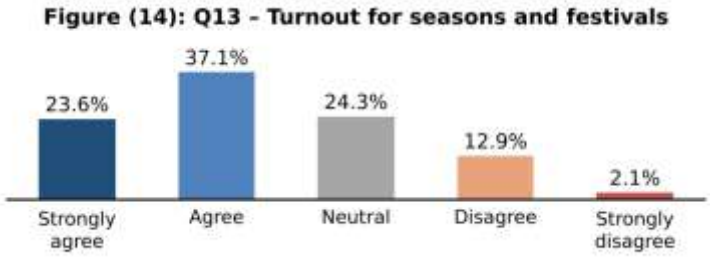
Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	40	28.6	40	28.6
Agree	32	22.9	72	51.4
Neutral	43	30.7	115	82.1
Disagree	15	10.7	130	92.9
Strongly Disagree	10	7.1	140	100
Total	140	100.0		



Interpretation: the item scored 3.55 (71.0%), in the Agree range. "Neutral" was the most frequent answer (30.7%), while 51.4% agreed and 17.9% disagreed.

Table 15. Digital campaigns have increased turnout for tourism seasons and festivals.

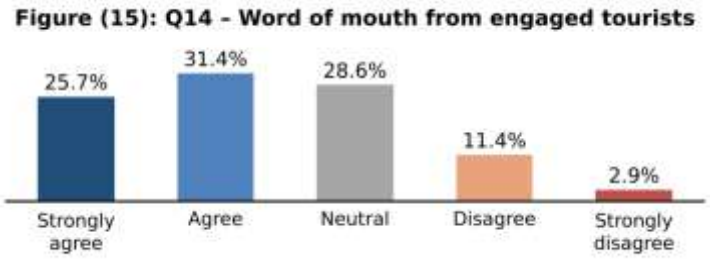
Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	33	23.6	33	23.6
Agree	52	37.1	85	60.7
Neutral	34	24.3	119	85
Disagree	18	12.9	137	97.9
Strongly Disagree	3	2.1	140	100
Total	140	100.0		



Interpretation: with a mean of 3.67 (73.4%), respondents agreed with this item. "Agree" was the most common answer (37.1%); total agreement was 60.7% and disagreement 15%.

Table 16. Tourists who engage with digital content encourage their friends to visit Iraq.

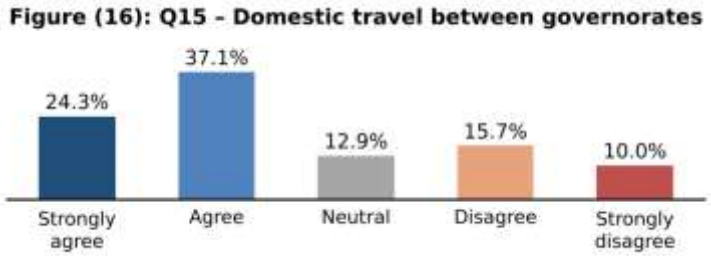
Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	36	25.7	36	25.7
Agree	44	31.4	80	57.1
Neutral	40	28.6	120	85.7
Disagree	16	11.4	136	97.1
Strongly Disagree	4	2.9	140	100
Total	140	100.0		



Interpretation: the item scored 3.66 (73.1%), in the Agree range. The largest group chose "agree" (31.4%); 57.1% agreed overall and 14.3% disagreed.

Table 17. Digital marketing encourages Iraqis to travel between governorates for tourism.

Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	**34**	**24.3**	**34**	**24.3**
Agree	**52**	**37.1**	**86**	**61.4**
Neutral	**18**	**12.9**	**104**	**74.3**
Disagree	**22**	**15.7**	**126**	**90.0**
Strongly Disagree	**14**	**10.0**	**140**	**100**
Total	**140**	**100.0**		



Interpretation: the item scored 3.50 (70.0%), in the Agree range. "Agree" was the most common answer (37.1%) and total agreement reached 61.4%, although disagreement was relatively high (25.7%).

4. Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that digital marketing plays an important role in supporting tourism promotion in Iraq, particularly through improving online visibility, strengthening destination awareness, and encouraging potential tourists to consider visiting the country. Based on responses from 140 employees and managers of the Iraqi Tourism Authority and four tourism companies, ten of the fifteen questionnaire items were classified within the Agree category, while the remaining five were classified as Neutral. The highest mean score was recorded for the positive representation of Iraqi tourism through digital content (mean = 4.00; relative weight = 80.0%), suggesting that digital platforms have contributed to improving the online visibility of Iraqi destinations. This finding is consistent with Hays et al. [12], who emphasized the importance of social media in destination marketing and communication strategies. Furthermore, the results support the argument that digital marketing facilitates interaction between tourism organizations and prospective visitors while expanding promotional opportunities beyond conventional geographical limitations [9]. Nevertheless, the findings suggest that improvements in digital visibility do not necessarily indicate that digital marketing has reached its full potential in influencing actual tourism decisions.

The results also demonstrate that respondents perceived digital marketing as contributing to tourism-related behavioral outcomes, including increased attendance at

tourism seasons and festivals (mean = 3.67), word-of-mouth recommendations (mean = 3.66), and increased inquiries and bookings following digital campaigns (mean = 3.55). These findings suggest that digital communication may help connect destination awareness with potential visitor engagement and travel intentions. The positive assessment of digital content in accelerating tourists' decisions to visit Iraq (mean = 3.71) further indicates the perceived importance of accessible tourism information in supporting travel planning. This interpretation is consistent with the findings of Abu Ghunaim et al. [2], who highlighted the contribution of electronic marketing to digital transformation within the Iraqi tourism sector. Similarly, Al-Zamili et al. [8] emphasized the importance of tourism marketing in stimulating tourism activities, particularly within the Iraqi context. However, because the present study primarily employed descriptive statistics based on employees' perceptions, these findings should be interpreted as perceived promotional benefits rather than direct evidence of increased tourist arrivals or statistically established causal relationships.

Despite these positive findings, several weaknesses were identified in the strategic implementation of digital marketing. Paid advertising received a relatively low mean score (2.96; relative weight = 59.3%), indicating that respondents did not consistently perceive paid digital campaigns as an established promotional practice. Competitive benchmarking also remained within the Neutral category (mean = 3.36), suggesting limited systematic evaluation of digital marketing performance against neighboring tourism destinations. These findings indicate that the digital marketing practices of the organizations studied may remain concentrated on maintaining an online presence and publishing content rather than implementing comprehensive, data-driven promotional strategies. According to Kingsnorth [14], effective digital marketing requires the integration of strategic planning, audience targeting, performance measurement, and continuous optimization. Therefore, Iraqi tourism organizations could strengthen their promotional effectiveness by adopting structured advertising budgets, audience segmentation, campaign analytics, and systematic comparisons with regional competitors. Such improvements may help transform digital marketing from a primarily informational activity into a more coordinated approach to tourism promotion.

Another important finding concerns the limited perceived contribution of digital marketing to improving Iraq's image as a safe and attractive tourism destination. This indicator recorded a mean score of 3.11, with 46.4% of respondents selecting the Neutral category. Similarly, the ability of digital platforms to showcase Iraq's diverse religious, archaeological, natural, and recreational tourism attractions received a mean score of 3.20. These results suggest that increasing the quantity of online tourism content may be insufficient to address longstanding destination-image challenges or communicate the full diversity of available attractions. Hays et al. [12] emphasized that effective destination marketing requires coordinated communication strategies capable of presenting distinctive destination characteristics and strengthening engagement with target audiences. In the Iraqi context, this suggests the importance of developing credible, high-quality, and consistently updated promotional materials that highlight historical heritage, religious tourism, natural landscapes, and visitor experiences. Collaboration between the Iraqi Tourism Authority, tourism companies, and content creators could further support a more coherent and recognizable destination identity.

The study additionally reveals a notable gap between the perceived improvement in online tourism representation and the use of digital content as a primary source of travel-planning information. Although positive digital representation received the highest evaluation, reliance on digital content for planning visits recorded the lowest mean score (2.84; relative weight = 56.7%). Only 25.0% of respondents agreed that digital content had become a major planning source, while 28.6% disagreed. This contrast suggests that tourism-related digital communication in Iraq may be more successful in generating awareness than in providing the practical information needed to facilitate travel decisions.

Digital marketing literature emphasizes that effective promotional strategies should integrate informative content, user-friendly platforms, and accessible digital services throughout the customer journey [9]. Consequently, strengthening tourism websites and applications with reliable information about accommodation, transportation, visa requirements, attraction opening hours, and reservation services may improve the practical usefulness of digital promotional activities. Integrating these functions could also help tourism organizations translate online interest into measurable inquiries and bookings.

Overall, the findings provide descriptive support for the potential contribution of digital marketing to tourism promotion in Iraq while highlighting significant differences across promotional dimensions. The relatively favorable evaluations of social media presence, digital content, visitor inquiries, and tourism-event participation indicate that digital channels are perceived as useful instruments for increasing destination awareness and encouraging engagement. However, weaker evaluations of paid advertising, competitive benchmarking, destination safety perceptions, and travel-planning information reveal areas requiring further institutional and strategic development. From a practical perspective, the Iraqi Tourism Authority and tourism companies should prioritize coordinated promotional campaigns, professional content development, digital service integration, and systematic performance monitoring. The study contributes to the Iraqi tourism marketing literature by examining the perceptions of employees and managers from both public and private tourism organizations. Nevertheless, its descriptive-analytical results do not establish the statistical significance of the proposed correlation and influence hypotheses because correlation and regression estimates were not reported. Future research should therefore incorporate tourists' perspectives, objective digital campaign indicators, and inferential statistical methods to determine the strength and significance of the relationship between digital marketing and tourism promotion.

5. Conclusion

First: Conclusions

The main findings are:

Ten of the fifteen items fell in the Agree range, which reflects a generally positive view of the role of digital marketing in supporting tourism in Iraq.

The strongest agreement concerned Iraq's growing association with positive tourism content online (mean 4.00).

Items on behavioural outcomes, namely more inquiries and bookings, higher turnout at seasons and festivals, and word-of-mouth encouragement to visit, scored relatively high means (3.55–3.67). In the view of employees, digital marketing does influence tourists' actual behaviour.

Five items fell in the Neutral range: reliance on digital content when planning trips (2.84), paid advertising (2.96), Iraq's image as a safe destination (3.11), showcasing tourism diversity (3.20) and benchmarking against competitors (3.36). Strategic importance is attached to these fields, particularly to paid advertising and competitive benchmarking where other nations have clearly excelled. The findings are consistent with the two main hypotheses. However, this does not amount to any statistical testing of the hypotheses since validation of the correlation and effect is through correlation and regression analysis.

The recommendations follow the study's main themes:

Strengthening Digital Presence

Increase the official presence on platforms such as X, Snapchat, and LinkedIn, alongside Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok to target a varied audience both at home and abroad.

Use a consistent visual branding (logos, colors, writing styles) for all official social media pages.

Make sure that the account information (opening hours, contact numbers, links) is correct and up-to-date

Improving Visual Content and Publishing

Make professional visual productions, including aerial shots and high-quality videos at the tourist and archaeological locations.

Follow a schedule for publishing that corresponds with the tourist seasons and religious/cultural festivals, created by professional designers and content producers.

Improving Audience Engagement

Create a community management team that can answer queries and make responses in specified time frames.

Utilize chatbots for answering commonly asked questions about booking and tourism

Activating Paid Advertising Campaigns

The most exposed part of the findings is the paid advertising. It is advisable to set aside a fixed budget each year for social media targeting promising regions and international markets. The performance of the ROAS should always be measured.

Working with Influencers and Content Creators

Develop sustainable relationships with respected travel influencers and conduct familiarization tours for them and the press.

Measure the effectiveness of an influencer marketing campaign based on engagement, not just the number of views.

Learning from Neighbouring Countries

Perform an analysis of the digital marketing techniques used by the competitors in the region – Turkey, Jordan, and UAE – and keep comparing your performance against them

Improving Iraq's Image as a Safe and Attractive Destination

Develop and distribute accurate content highlighting security, stability, and hospitality in Iraq, as well as create collaborations with international media

Encourage foreign tourists to share their experience in Iraq, where they were before.

Highlighting the Diversity of Iraq's Tourism Products

Launch campaigns for each type of tourism during different seasons and create content series based on certain themes, such as "Discover Kurdistan" and "The Karbala-Najaf Road.

Making Digital Content a Primary Planning Source

Give accurate and current data on prices, visa policies, opening times, and interactive maps

Give access to a reservation system through blog entries and users' personal pages

Converting Interest into Actual Visits

Track the journey of interest generation from view to inquiry and booking through online analysis tools

Offer discounts and special codes to the followers of official social media pages

Supporting Domestic Tourism

Launch campaigns to promote tourism among Iraqis within other provinces, together with local governments and internal carriers.

Future Research

Examine the hypotheses of the study through the application of correlation and regression analysis involving tourists.

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