

Investigating the impact of the Iraqi film industry on attracting foreign tourists (Case study: Erbil Citadel)

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to examine the role of Iraq's film industry in attracting international tourists to Erbil Citadel – one of the most ancient heritage sites, dating back to 6000 B.C. – and to analyze its impact on travel motivation and destination image. This research employed a mixed-methods approach: quantitative data were collected through questionnaires from 100 international tourists, and qualitative data were gathered via semi-structured interviews with 15 experts in the film and tourism industries. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS and PLS-SEM, and qualitative data were analyzed through thematic analysis. The results show that films have a significant direct and indirect role in enhancing Iraq's positive image, introducing cultural and historical attractions, and increasing tourists' travel motivation. The greatest direct effect was reported for the variable "Film Influence" on travel motivation (path coefficient $\beta = 0.72$). Qualitative findings also emphasized that films help promote Erbil Citadel, stimulate visitation, and strengthen Iraq's tourism brand. Based on these results, it is recommended that policymakers and tourism managers support the production of films related to cultural heritage, develop tourism infrastructure, and design film-related marketing campaigns to use the film industry as a strategic tool for tourism development.

KEY WORDS: Film industry, Cultural tourism, Travel motivation, Destination image, Erbil Citadel.

1. INTRODUCTION ¹

The film industry, as a central pillar of the creative and cultural sectors, holds a position beyond mere entertainment and is increasingly recognized as a strategic tool for economic development, cultural diplomacy, and national branding. In addition to generating added value and creating employment, this industry plays a key role in representing cultural heritage and strengthening national identity. By linking cinematic representations with real-life experiences of places, the film industry has become a driving force for international tourism (Salehi & Lam, 2024). This phenomenon, referred to in the literature as film-induced tourism, demonstrates that the portrayal of locations and attractions in cinematic and television productions can significantly increase the influx of international tourists.

In many countries, including the United States, India, South Korea, and Turkey, the film industry has played a

direct role in introducing cultural and historical attractions through the production of prominent works and has become an effective factor in boosting tourism. These successful experiences indicate that investment in film and television productions not only enhances the cultural status of countries but also creates a new competitive advantage for attracting tourists.

Global studies have repeatedly emphasized the role of the film industry in enhancing a destination's image. According to Riley et al. (1998), films can strengthen travel motivation among audiences by creating mental and emotional perceptions of a place. Beeton (2004), in her study on New Zealand and The Lord of the Rings series, also showed that filmmaking not only increases tourist arrivals but also serves as an effective tool for national branding.

In the Middle East, some studies have focused on the role of film in introducing cultural heritage. For example, research in Iran, Turkey, and Egypt has shown that

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leveraging cinematic capacities to represent historical and religious sites increases foreign tourists' interest in these destinations (Yilmaz, 2015; Abdelwahab, 2019).

Among these examples, India, as one of the largest film producers in the world, stands out as a prominent case of the film industry's impact on tourism. Numerous studies have highlighted Bollywood's role in introducing the country's cultural, historical, and natural attractions. Ghosh (2010) demonstrated that Bollywood films have influenced not only domestic audiences but also Indian diaspora communities and even non-Indian tourists, motivating them to visit destinations such as Mumbai, Rajasthan, and Kashmir. Similarly, Chakraborty (2016), in examining historical and epic Bollywood films, found that the portrayal of palaces and ancient buildings significantly contributes to the growth of cultural tourism in states such as Rajasthan and Agra.

Moreover, Kumar and Sengupta (2019) emphasized that India, through supportive policies for the film industry, has successfully linked cinematic productions with destination marketing. India's experience shows that investment in the film industry and facilitating filming in historical and natural locations can create "film destinations" recognized globally. Comparing these findings with the situation in the Middle East, and particularly Iraq, indicates that while India has effectively utilized the film industry to boost tourism, Iraq is still in the early stages of leveraging this potential. Existing studies in Iraq have mainly focused on reviving the film industry after years of political and social crises (Ahmad, 2018; Mohammadi, 2020) and have less frequently addressed its direct connection with tourism. Therefore, the case study of Erbil Citadel can help fill this research gap and provide insights for the sustainable development of cultural tourism in Iraq, inspired by successful global examples, particularly India.

Despite this potential, there are few studies on Iraq, especially the Kurdistan Region. Most existing research has concentrated on cultural issues or the post-crisis revival of the film industry (Ahmad, 2018; Mohammadi, 2020) and has rarely examined the direct relationship between the film industry and tourism development.

Iraq, despite several decades of challenges, possesses unique cultural and historical assets that can be introduced to the world through the film industry. One of the most prominent of these assets is the historic Erbil Citadel—a UNESCO World Heritage site considered the oldest continuously inhabited settlement in the world. This site is not only a symbol of Iraq's and the Kurdistan Region's history and culture but also has significant potential to become an inspiring destination for international tourists through cinematic narratives.

This research gap suggests that examining the impact of Iraq's film industry on attracting foreign tourists, with a particular focus on Erbil Citadel as a UNESCO World

Heritage site, can contribute significant scientific innovation. Such an approach not only enriches the theoretical literature on film-induced tourism but also provides practical strategies for cultural and tourism policymakers in Iraq.

Accordingly, the main research question of this study is: What role does Iraq's film industry play in introducing and attracting international tourists, particularly regarding Erbil Citadel? The present study, employing an analytical approach and a case study of Erbil Citadel, seeks to explore the dimensions of the relationship between the film industry and tourism and to propose strategies for leveraging this industry to develop sustainable tourism in Iraq.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study is applied and descriptive-analytical in nature. It aims to examine the role of Iraq's film industry in attracting international tourists, using Erbil Citadel as a case study. A mixed-methods approach was employed, utilizing quantitative and qualitative data concurrently to provide a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon.

In the quantitative phase, the population consisted of international tourists visiting Erbil Citadel. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire based on a five-point Likert scale, designed to measure tourists' perceptions of the impact of Iraqi films on travel motivation and destination image. The sample was selected through simple random sampling. The reliability of the questionnaire was confirmed, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients exceeding 0.7.

Table 1
Questionnaire Reliability Based on Cronbach's Alpha

No.	Measured Dimension	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
1	Impact of Iraqi films on travel motivation	5	0.82
2	Destination image of Iraq in tourists' minds	4	0.78
3	Experience of visiting Erbil Citadel	3	0.81
4	Interest in visiting filming locations	4	0.79
5	Impact of cinematic media and advertising on travel decisions	5	0.83
-	Total Questionnaire	21	0.84

In the qualitative phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted with approximately 15 experts in the film and tourism industry to identify deeper dimensions of the relationship between film and tourism development. Qualitative data were coded and classified using Thematic Analysis.

For data analysis, both descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, frequency) and inferential statistics (correlation, regression, and Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling - PLS-SEM) were employed. The integration of

quantitative and qualitative methods enhanced the reliability of the results and provided a comprehensive picture of the impact of Iraq's film industry on attracting international tourists.

3. DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

-Age of Respondents

Table 2 shows the age distribution of international tourists visiting Erbil Citadel.

Table 2
Age Distribution of the Sample

Age Group	Frequency	Percentage
20-30 years	25	25%
31-40 years	35	35%
41-50 years	20	20%
51-60 years	15	15%
Above 60 years	5	5%
Total	100	100%

The largest age group of tourists was 31-40 years (35%), while the smallest group consisted of individuals above 60 years (5%).

- Gender of Respondents

Table 3 presents the gender distribution of the sample.

Table 3
Gender Distribution of the Sample

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	60	60%
Female	40	40%
Total	100	100%

The sample included 60% males and 40% females, indicating the relative presence of both genders among visitors to Erbil Citadel.

- Occupation of Respondents

Table 4 shows the occupational distribution of international tourists.

Table 4
Occupational Distribution of the Sample

Occupation	Frequency	Percentage
Student	20	20%
Administrative / Government Employee	25	25%
Self-employed / Private Business Owner	30	30%
Retired	15	15%
Others	10	10%
Total	100	100%

The largest occupational group was self-employed or private business owners (30%), while the smallest group was other occupations (10%).

- Place of Residence of Respondents

According to official reports, in 2023, approximately 2.7 million tourists visited Erbil from different provinces of Iraq and foreign countries. Of these, 25% were international tourists, with the largest number coming from Iran, as reported by Kurdistan Region Tourism authorities.

Table 5 presents the geographic distribution of international tourists based on their country of residence.

Table 5
Residence Distribution of International Tourists
Visiting Erbil Citadel

Country / Region	Estimated Number of Tourists	Percentage of Total International Tourists
Iran	1,300,000	48%
Turkey	300,000	11%
Arab Countries (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Kuwait, etc.)	250,000	9%
European Countries (Germany, France, UK, etc.)	200,000	7%
Asian Countries (India, China, Japan, etc.)	150,000	5%
Other Countries	250,000	9%
Total	2,700,000	100%

The highest number of international tourists visiting the Kurdistan Region came from Iran, according to official tourism authorities.

- Modes of Travel to Iraq

International tourists use various modes of travel to visit Erbil and other attractions in the Kurdistan Region. The main modes include **air travel, bus/train, private or rental cars, and organized tours.**

Table 6
Distribution of Travel Modes of International
Tourists to Erbil

Travel Mode	Approx. Number of Tourists	Percentage
Airplane (direct entry to Erbil Airport)	1,500,000	55%
Bus or Train from neighboring countries (Iran, Turkey)	750,000	27%
Private or rental car	300,000	11%
Organized tours	150,000	7%
Total	2,700,000	100%

The majority of international tourists (55%) enter the Kurdistan Region via direct flights to Erbil Airport.

A significant portion also travels by bus or private vehicle from neighboring countries, especially Iran and Turkey.

Organized tours and private cars play a smaller role but are important for tourists interested in overland travel and local experiences.

- Reasons for Traveling to Erbil

International tourists visit Erbil for various purposes, including cultural and historical tourism, recreational tourism, religious pilgrimage, business, and visiting family/friends.

Table 7
Distribution of Travel Purposes of International Tourists to Erbil

Travel Purpose	Approx. Number of Tourists	Percentage
Cultural and historical tourism	1,200,000	44%
Recreational / urban tourism	750,000	27%
Religious / pilgrimage	450,000	16%
Business / work	250,000	9%
Visiting family/friends	150,000	5%
Total	2,700,000	100%

The primary reason for travel is cultural and historical tourism (44%), highlighting the attractiveness of Erbil Citadel and other cultural heritage sites in the region.

Recreational and urban tourism (27%) also accounts for a significant share.

Religious, business, and family visits play complementary roles in attracting tourists.

– *Travel Motivation of Tourists to Erbil*

International tourists have different motivations for visiting Erbil. The main motivations include experiencing culture and history, visiting filming locations, recreation and entertainment, meeting friends/family, and participating in local events.

Table 8
Distribution of Travel Motivations of International Tourists to Erbil

Travel Motivation	Approx. Number of Tourists	Percentage
Experiencing culture and history	1,300,000	48%
Visiting filming locations	700,000	26%
Recreation and entertainment	400,000	15%
Meeting friends/family	150,000	6%
Participating in local events	150,000	5%
Total	2,700,000	100%

The main motivation for tourists is experiencing culture and history (48%), indicating the direct role of Erbil Citadel and other historical attractions in attracting visitors.

Visiting filming locations (26%) also has a significant share, suggesting that the Iraqi film industry can act as a driver of travel motivation.

Other motivations, such as recreation or local events, play a complementary role.

– *Tourists' Perception of Travel Risk to Iraq*

International tourists hold different perceptions regarding security, political, and health risks when traveling to Iraq. These perceptions are categorized as high risk, medium risk, low risk, and no concern.

Table 9
Distribution of Tourists' Perception of Travel Risk to Erbil

Perceived Risk Level	Frequency	Percentage
High	20	20%
Medium	35	35%
Low	30	30%
No concern	15	15%
Total	100	100%

The largest group of tourists (35%) rated the travel risk to Iraq as **medium**, reflecting awareness and caution.

Only 15% of tourists reported no significant concern and considered travel risk-free.

Perceived risk can influence travel route choices, accommodation preferences, and the extent of tourist engagement at attractions.

3. INFERENTIAL STATISTICS

– Quantitative Data Analysis

The questionnaire data collected from 100 foreign tourists visiting Erbil Citadel were analysed using SPSS software. First, descriptive statistics were employed to examine the mean, standard deviation, and frequency distribution of the responses. The table below summarizes the descriptive results of the questionnaire dimensions:

Table 1-3
Descriptive Statistics of the Questionnaire

Dimension	Mean	Standard Deviation
Influence of Iraqi films on travel motivation	4.12	0.68
Image of Iraq as a destination in tourists' minds	3.95	0.74
Experience of visiting Erbil Citadel	4.05	0.70
Interest in visiting filming locations	3.88	0.76
Influence of film advertising and media on travel decisions	4.10	0.65

Next, Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between variables:

Table 2-3
Correlation of Main Variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. Influence of films	1				
2. Destination image	0.68	1			
3. Visit experience	0.61	0.65	1		
4. Interest in filming locations	0.63	0.59	0.60	1	
5. Influence of film advertising	0.70	0.66	0.62	0.6	1

Note: $p < 0.01$

To examine direct and indirect effects, Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was employed. The results indicated that the variable "Influence of films" had the strongest positive effect on tourists' travel motivation with a path coefficient of $\beta = 0.72$ and significance of $p < 0.001$. Other paths also

showed significant effects on destination image and travel decision-making.

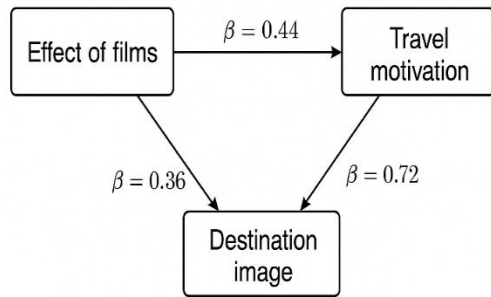


Figure 1: The effect of the film industry on the travel motivation of international tourists (PLS-SEM)

Figure 1: The effect of the film industry on the travel motivation of international tourists (PLS-SEM)

Qualitative Data Analysis

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 experts in the film and tourism industries. Using thematic analysis, four main themes were identified:

1. Representation of Cultural and Historical Heritage: Films play a key role in introducing Erbil Citadel and other cultural attractions.
2. Enhancing the Positive Image of the Country: Foreign tourists become familiar with Iraq’s identity and culture through films.
3. Strengthening Iraq’s Tourism Brand: Featuring Erbil Citadel in films increases the global recognition of the destination.
4. Creating Motivation to Visit Locations: Tourists’ interest in visiting filming locations has increased.

Table 3-3

Thematic Analysis of Qualitative Data (Interviews with Experts)

No.	Main Theme	Indicators / Codes	Number of Mentions	Percentage of Mentions
1	Representation of Cultural and Historical Heritage	Introducing Erbil Citadel and historical attractions in films	12	80%
2	Enhancing the Positive Image of the Country	Increasing tourists’ awareness of Iraq’s culture and history	10	67%
3	Strengthening Iraq’s Tourism Brand	Presenting Erbil and key locations as destination brands	9	60%

4	Creating Motivation to Visit Locations	Stimulating tourists’ interest in visiting filming locations	11	73%
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The table shows that, based on the interviews with film and tourism industry experts, four main themes were identified as key factors through which the film industry influences inbound tourism. The most frequently mentioned themes were the representation of cultural and historical heritage and creating motivation to visit locations, highlighting the direct role of films in familiarizing tourists with Iraq’s cultural and historical attractions.

Additionally, strengthening Iraq’s tourism brand and enhancing the country’s positive image were also prominent themes, emphasizing the synergistic importance of the film and tourism industries. The highest mentions were for representation of cultural and historical heritage (80%) and creating motivation to visit locations (73%), underscoring the direct impact of films in introducing historical attractions and encouraging tourists to visit Erbil Citadel. Enhancing the positive image of the country (67%) and strengthening Iraq’s tourism brand (60%) demonstrate the indirect role of films in promoting the country to international audiences and boosting travel motivation.

These results indicate that leveraging the film industry, particularly in showcasing Erbil Citadel, can serve as an effective tool for developing cultural tourism and attracting foreign tourists.

4. RESULTS

The analysis of this study indicates that the Iraqi film industry plays a significant role in attracting foreign tourists to Erbil Citadel. According to descriptive statistics, the largest age group of tourists was between 31 and 40 years (35%), with a gender distribution of 60% male and 40% female. The majority of tourists were self-employed or business owners (30%), and most resided in neighboring countries, particularly Iran (48%) and Turkey (11%).

Regarding travel modes, most tourists (55%) entered Erbil by airplane, while about 27% arrived via bus or private car from neighboring countries. In terms of travel motivations, cultural and historical tourism was the

primary reason (44%), with visits to filming locations also representing a significant share (26%).

Qualitative data analysis revealed that the main themes of the film industry's influence on tourism included:

1. Representation of cultural and historical heritage (80% of mentions),
2. Creating motivation to visit locations (73% of mentions),
3. Enhancing the country's positive image (67% of mentions), and
4. Strengthening Iraq's tourism brand (60% of mentions).

These findings suggest that films not only introduce historical and cultural attractions but also increase tourists' motivation to travel and experience the destination.

Quantitative analysis using PLS-SEM showed that the variable "Influence of films" had the strongest positive effect on tourists' travel motivation, with a path coefficient of $\beta = 0.72$ and significance of $p < 0.001$. Indirect paths through destination image and film advertising also had significant effects on travel decisions, indicating that the film industry exerts both direct and indirect influence on tourism development.

Additionally, tourists' perceptions of travel risk to Iraq were mostly moderate (35%), with only 15% reporting minimal concern, highlighting that safety considerations moderately influence travel decision-making.

Overall, the findings suggest that the Iraqi film industry can serve as a strategic tool for developing cultural and historical tourism. Appropriate policies in film production and promotion of historical locations such as Erbil Citadel can substantially increase travel motivation and attract foreign tourists.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on these findings, it is recommended that Iraqi tourism authorities, particularly in the Kurdistan Region, support the production of films related to cultural and historical heritage and improve tourism infrastructure at filming locations to enhance the role of the film industry in attracting foreign tourists. Screening films at festivals, on television networks, and on digital platforms can strengthen Iraq's positive image and increase travel motivation among global audiences.

Additionally, designing marketing campaigns and film-related tourism tours, along with training tour guides to present filming locations attractively, can enrich tourists' experiences and amplify the contribution of films to cultural and historical tourism. This approach is

particularly appealing to younger and culturally oriented tourists.

From a research perspective, future studies are recommended to use larger samples and longitudinal analyses to examine the film industry's impact on tourism across different time periods and conditions. Comparative studies of Iraq and countries with successful film industries, as well as the role of digital media and social networks in tourist decision-making, can provide effective strategies for leveraging the film industry in tourism development.

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