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The Role of Branding in Marketing Tourism “Study of Royal Karbala hotel”

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Abstract

The study shows that the brand plays a pivotal role in enhancing the tourist attractiveness of luxury hotels, as it reflects the quality of services and contributes to building customer confidence. The brand is a strategic tool with a significant impact on tourism performance. The study confirms the importance of investing in brand building as a means of attracting customers and enhancing their loyalty, which supports the sustainable growth of luxury hotels.

The statistical results showed that participants evaluate the brand positively, with averages ranging between 3.92 and 4.36, reflecting the importance of the brand in tourists' decisions.

Descriptive statistics show that tourists associate brands with quality of service and distinctive lodging experiences, which are decisive factors in their choice of destination. They also showed that while brand perception is an independent factor influencing tourists' decisions, it needs to be supported by other factors such as reputation and customer experience to improve its overall impact. The results showed that a strong brand reinforces tourists' decision-making, especially when it is in line with their expectations regarding service quality. The importance of focusing on enhancing the hotel experience by providing innovative and exceptional service is another key finding of the study.

Keywords: Tourism Brand, Brand Management, Tourist Decision Making, Destination Marketing

Introduction:

Branding is one of the main strategic elements that influence customer decisions and behavior, especially in the tourism sector, where it plays an important role in enhancing the interaction between customers and organizations. Branding is not just a means of promotion, but rather an integrated system that reflects the value and quality offered by an organization and is an effective tool for achieving sustainable competitive advantage (Kapferer, 2015). For example, global hotels such as Marriott and Hilton rely on the strength of their brands to ensure customer loyalty and continued customer attraction, which contributes to achieving high financial returns and sustainability in the market (Morrison, 2018). In the context of tourism, branding is one of the main



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axes that reflect the quality of services offered and the extent to which they match customer expectations; according to (Blain et al., 2016), a strong brand not only increases customer loyalty, but also improves customer perception of a tourist destination and and increase competitiveness. Studies show that customers often rely on brands as a reliable reference to evaluate the quality of services and avoid risks associated with the experience (Pike et al.) Furthermore, brands are considered a means to increase employee satisfaction and improve their performance. According to a study conducted by (Kladou et al., 2017), reputable brands have a positive impact on employee satisfaction and increase their sense of belonging to the organization. This sense of belonging leads to higher levels of service provided, which in turn is reflected in customer satisfaction and loyalty. However, the current literature lacks in-depth studies addressing the impact of branding in local contexts such as luxury hotels in Iraq. Therefore, this study aims to fill this knowledge gap by providing a comprehensive analysis of the role of branding in improving tourist attraction, focusing on its impact on tourist decision-making and satisfaction and employee satisfaction and loyalty. The study relies on a quantitative methodology that collects and analyzes data using advanced statistical tools such as correlation analysis and ANOVA tests. The results of this study can contribute to the development of innovative marketing strategies that support excellence in the luxury hotel sector.

About Royal Karbala Hotel:

Featuring a terrace, water sports facilities and views of city, Royal Karbala Hotel is located in the holy city of Karbala, Iraq, 800 metres from Hill of Zainabiyah. Among the facilities of this property are a restaurant, a kids' club and room service, along with free WiFi throughout the property. Guests can use the spa and wellness centre with an indoor pool, a fitness centre and a sauna, as well as a shared lounge. Each room includes a private bathroom, while selected rooms include a kitchen with a fridge. A buffet breakfast is available daily at the hotel. Royal Karbala Hotel offers 5-star accommodation with a hammam. Speaking Arabic, English and Persian at the 24-hour front desk, staff are always on hand to help. Popular points of interest near the accommodation include Imam Hussain Museum, Shrine of Imam Hussain and his brother Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas. Najaf International Airport is 82 km away.

Section One: The Concept of Branding and Its Importance in Tourism

The Concept of Branding

The brand is defined as the strategic tool used to enhance the interaction between the institution and its customers by providing a distinctive identity that expresses the quality and value of services. According to (Kapferer, 2015), the brand reflects the core values of the institution and plays a major role in attracting customers. (Morrison, 2018) adds that the brand goes beyond just logos and names to become a means that enhances customers' connection to the institution on an emotional and cognitive level.

In the tourism context, the brand is a crucial element in tourists' decisions. According to (Pike et al., 2016), the brand plays a role in enhancing the competitive distinction of tourist destinations, making it an indispensable tool in tourism marketing strategies.

Brand Elements



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The brand in tourism includes a set of elements that work to build an integrated customer experience:

- ✓ Identity: expresses the unique values that distinguish the institution from others, which supports customer association with it (Kapferer, 2015).
- ✓ Image: built through customers' experience and opinions about the institution. (Morrison, 2018) explains that a positive image leads to enhancing customer loyalty.
- ✓ Perceived Value: A study by (Pike et al., 2016) showed that tourists associate the brand with the quality and value they get for their money.

Importance of Branding in Tourism

Branding plays a pivotal role in enhancing the tourism performance of destinations and hotels. A recent study by (Blain et al., 2016) indicates that branding enhances the attractiveness of destinations and makes them preferred by tourists, as it reflects the quality of services and customer experience.

Increase tourist loyalty:

Strong brands motivate tourists to return to the same destination; a study by (Kladou et al., 2017) showed that customers prefer brands that emphasize value and trust.

Enhancing the tourist experience:

(Morrison, 2018) explains that effective branding helps tourists define their expectations before the experience and contributes to enhancing their satisfaction after it.

Branding as a tourism marketing tool

In tourism, branding is an important component of promotional strategies; according to (Blain et al., 2016), branding is not limited to promotion but also includes building lasting relationships with customers.

Targeting international markets:

(Pike et al, 2016) study shows that brands facilitate access to new markets because of their ability to express destination identity.

Strengthen competitive differentiation:

The brand will emphasize the strengths of the tourist destination compared to its competitors to increase customer attraction.

Brand and competitive differentiation

Brands contribute to achieving competitive differentiation by

1. Improvement of reliability and quality:

Brands demonstrate an organization's commitment to providing high quality services (Kladou et al.)

2. Meet customer expectations

The brand is working to ensure that expectations are met to increase tourist satisfaction and loyalty.

Section Two: The Impact of Branding on Tourist Decisions

Relationship between branding and tourist decision-making

Studies have shown that branding plays an important role in influencing tourists' decisions because it is the criterion by which they evaluate the quality of tourism services. According to (Morrison,



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2018), tourists rely heavily on branding as a criterion for choosing a hotel because it gives them confidence and reduces the risks associated with tourism decisions.

(Kladou et al., 2017) study showed that hotels with strong brands are more attractive to tourists due to their association with high value and distinguished service. This relationship is particularly pronounced for luxury hotels, where brand is considered an indicator of quality of service and experience.

Factors affecting tourist decisions related to the brand

Branding is a key axis that affects tourist behavior, through the following factors:

- Trust and reliability: (Pike et al., 2016) explains that tourists tend to choose hotels with reliable brands to avoid negative experiences.
- Mental image: The brand plays a role in shaping tourists' impressions before their visit. According to (Blain et al, 2016), tourists associate brands with expectations of service quality.
- Value-added: (Kapferer, 2015) study shows that strong brands exhibit added value in their services, which contributes to customers' preference for a particular hotel over its competitors.

Brand as a decision-making tool

Brand is a factor that helps tourists make tourism decisions. According to (Morrison, 2018), brands provide tourists with reliable information about hotels and their services, thus helping to reduce the time tourists spend looking for suitable options. One of the most important factors enabling decision-making is the role of brands in mitigating risk, (Clado et al., 2017) explains that brands give customers a sense of security and trust, encouraging faster and more decisive decisions. (Blaine et al., 2016) explains that a strong brand evoke positive emotions in tourists, explaining that they are more likely to choose that brand.

Impact of Branding on Tourists

According to a study conducted by (Pike et al., 2016), strong brands can improve the tourist experience by providing clear expectations regarding quality of service. Also, increasing satisfaction and loyalty The brand directly affects the level of tourist satisfaction, as it works to enhance their loyalty and increase the likelihood of their return to the same hotel, and according to (Morrison, 2018), hotels that invest in building their brands achieve higher levels of loyalty.

Comparative studies

International studies show that the brand greatly affects the purchasing behavior of tourists:

- In a study by (Blain et al., 2016), it was found that international tourists prefer hotels with global brands because of the trust and reputation associated with them.
- According to a study by (Kladou et al, 2017), brands influence 40% of tourist decisions compared to other factors such as location and price.

Section Three: Brand Building and Management Strategies

Brand Building Concept



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Brand building is a strategic process aimed at strengthening a hotel's identity and increasing customer attachment to the hotel; according to (Kapferer, 2015), brand building involves designing a clear identity, enhancing the values associated with the brand, and effectively integrated planning that includes communicating the message. (Morrison, 2018) indicates that brand building in the tourism sector relies primarily on providing tourists with distinctive experiences that enhance their emotional attachment to the brand. In the context of hotels, brand building is an essential part of competitiveness because strong brands contribute to customer acquisition and retention by providing added value and ongoing quality.

Brand Building Strategies

Corporate identity design is a key element of a brand building strategy; according to (Kladou et al., 2017), corporate identity reflects the vision and values of the hotel and includes visual elements such as logos and colors, in addition to messages that emphasize differentiation and quality. It includes. The identity should also be consistent with tourists' expectations and reflect the lodging experience. Focusing on service quality also plays an important role in brand building, as a study conducted by (Pike et al., 2016) shows that quality is the foundation on which brands are built, as customer perception of service quality is directly related to brand strength. Innovation in service delivery also plays a major role in service building, as (Blain et al., 2016) shows that hotels that rely on innovation in providing new and unique services enhance their market position and attractiveness to tourists, and innovation in service delivery is also one of the most important strategies.

Brand Management Strategy

Brand management is a dynamic process that requires continuous revision in order to achieve the hotel's goals and enhance its market position. The most important of these strategies are

- ✓ **Maintaining Consistency:** Consistency in message and service delivery is a critical element in building trust with customers (Kapferer, 2015).
- ✓ **Develop marketing strategies:** using innovative marketing techniques, such as targeted advertising campaigns and loyalty programs, can help strengthen the relationship between hotels and their customers (Morrison, 2018).
- ✓ **Improving Reputation:** a good reputation is an extension of the brand; research by (Kladou et al., 2017) shows that effectively managing complaints and following up on customer feedback can build a strong reputation that enhances brand value.

Overseas Examples of Brand Building Strategies

Studies show that many global hotel brands are successful thanks to their innovative strategies; according to (Pike et al., 2016), global brands such as Marriott and Hilton offer a unified and consistent experience across all branches, increasing customer trust.

(Blain et al., 2016) study shows that hotels that rely on associating their brand with local cultural values achieve additional attractions for tourists.

Challenges in Brand Management



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• Intense Competition:

(Morrison, 2018), the tourism market is highly competitive and hotels need to constantly improve their strategies.

• Growing tourist expectations:

(Kladou et al., 2017) study showed that tourists are becoming more demanding and the challenges of maintaining satisfaction are increasing.

• Crisis management:

according to (Blain et al, 2016), crises such as bad reviews and poor service quality have a significant impact on brands.

Future of Brand Management

➤ Digital Transformation:

(Pike et al., 2016) study, using data to analyze customer behavior can provide a more personalized experience.

➤ Focus on Sustainability:

(Kladou et al., 2017) explains that brands that adopt sustainable practices will be more attractive to environmentally conscious tourists.

Methodology

Research Methodology

The study relied on a quantitative approach using a closed questionnaire designed to measure the impact of the brand on three main axes: tourist decision-making, customer loyalty, and employee satisfaction. The questionnaire was distributed to 100 participants, consisting of 70 tourists and 30 hotel department employees. The sample was selected using convenience sampling methods to ensure that participants representing different target groups were reached. The five-point Likert scale was used to analyse the data (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). To analyse the data, statistical tools were used including Pearson Correlation Analysis, ANOVA test, and simple regression analysis, which allows for a comprehensive understanding of the relationships between the brand and the studied axes.

Significance of the Research

Practical: This study contributes to providing practical recommendations for luxury hotels to improve their brand management, which helps increase bookings and build a loyal customer base.

Academic: The study fills a gap in the literature related to the impact of brand on tourists' decisions, especially in the context of Iraqi luxury hotels.

Research Questions

How do hotel brands influence tourists' decision to choose their destination?

How can luxury hotels use branding to enhance tourist attractiveness?

Brand Descriptive Statistics.

Table 1. Brand Descriptive Statistics



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Question	Average	Standard Deviation	Cronbach's Alpha
My first impression of the hotel brand was positive	3.92	0.981	0.66
The hotel brand reflects the quality of services provided	3.92	0.849	0.66
The brand is very important in my decision to choose a hotel	4.36	0.689	0.6

Table 1 shows the following

- High averages indicate positive evaluation of the brand by the participants.
- Low standard deviation reflects a degree of agreement among the participants in the answers.
- Cronbach's alpha of 0.66 shows an acceptable level of internal consistency among the questions.

Hypothesis testing results:

Hypothesis 1: Brand positively influences tourists' decisions.

Hypothesis 2: Strong brand increases the likelihood of customers returning.

Hypothesis 3: Strong brand positively influences hotel employee satisfaction.

1. Statistical analysis of the first hypothesis:

Hypothesis: The brand has a positive effect on tourists' decisions.

Results: The overall average of tourists' answers to questions related to their decisions was 4.2, indicating a clear positive effect.

The correlation test showed a strong relationship between the brand and tourists' decisions ($r=0.75, p<0.01$)

2. Statistical analysis of the second hypothesis:

Hypothesis: A strong brand increases the likelihood of customers returning.

Results: The overall average of tourists' answers to questions related to loyalty was 4.1.

Simple regression analysis showed that the brand explains 58% of the variance in customer loyalty ($R^2=0.58, p<0.01$)

3. Statistical analysis of the third hypothesis:

Hypothesis: A strong brand has a positive effect on hotel employee satisfaction.

Results: The overall average of employees' answers was 3.9, indicating a moderate to strong effect.

ANOVA test showed statistically significant differences between employee satisfaction levels in different departments based on their perception of brand strength ($F=4.72, p<0.05$)

Table 2 Descriptive statistics

Axis Mean	Mean Standard	Deviation
Brand influence on tourists' decisions	4.2	0.85
Customer loyalty and return	4.1	0.79
Employee satisfaction and performance	3.9	0.92



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The table shows the means and standard deviations of the participants' responses to the three axes studied. The mean represents the level of general agreement with the statements, where 1 indicates "strongly disagree" and 5 indicates "strongly agree". The standard deviation reflects the extent of variability of responses among participants.

It appears that the "Brand impact on tourists' decisions" axis had the highest mean (4.2), indicating that participants consider the brand a decisive factor in their decision-making.

In contrast, the "Staff satisfaction" axis had the lowest (3.9), but it was still within a positive level.

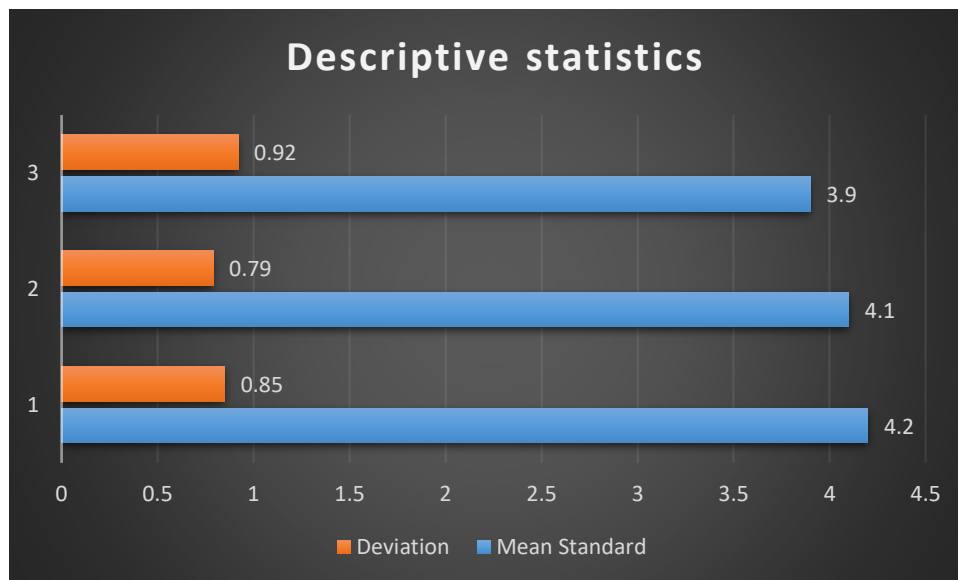


Figure 1: Descriptive statistics of brand influence on tourist decisions, customer loyalty, and employee satisfaction

Table 3 Correlation Heatmap

	Tourist decisions	Customer loyalty	Employee satisfaction
Tourist decisions	1.0	0.75	0.68
Customer loyalty	0.75	1.0	0.72
Employee satisfaction	0.68	0.72	1.0

Table 3 shows the following:

- The relationship between "tourist decisions" and "customer loyalty":

The correlation coefficient ($r=0.75$) indicates a strong positive relationship, which means that the strength of the brand significantly affects tourists' decision to return to the same hotel.



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➤ The relationship between "tourist decisions" and "employee satisfaction":
The correlation coefficient ($r=0.68$) shows a good positive relationship, which means that tourists' decisions influenced by the brand are also associated with employee motivation and increased satisfaction.

➤ The relationship between "customer loyalty" and "employee satisfaction":
The correlation coefficient ($r=0.72$) indicates a strong positive relationship, which indicates that customer loyalty enhances employee morale, as it increases their sense of belonging and job satisfaction.

Table 4 Correlation test

Variables	r	P-Value
Branding and Tourist Decisions	0.75	< 0.01
Brand and Customer Loyalty	0.72	< 0.01
Brand and Employee Satisfaction	0.68	< 0.01

The table shows the relationship between the brand and the three axes through the correlation coefficient (r) Statistical significance values (Value-P-).

- The correlation coefficient indicates the strength of the relationship between variables:
- A value of r close to 1 means a strong positive relationship.
- A P-Value of less than 0.05 means that the relationship is statistically significant.
- The table shows that there is a strong positive relationship between brand and tourists' decisions ($r=0.75$), followed by its relationship with customer loyalty ($r=0.72$) and employee satisfaction ($r=0.68$).

Table 4 ANOVA analysis of job satisfaction

Variable	F	P-Value
Employee satisfaction by brand strength	4.72	< 0.05

The table presents the results of ANOVA analysis to examine the differences in employee satisfaction based on their perception of brand strength.

- F-value=4.72 indicates that there are differences in employee satisfaction between groups.
- P-Value<0.05 means that these differences are statistically significant, i.e. brand strength significantly affects employee satisfaction.

Descriptive statistics show that the average response for all questions is approximately 3.81, indicating an overall positive perception of the hotel brand. A variance of 0.71 indicates a moderate level of variability in responses.



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A Cronbach's alpha value of 0.90 indicates a high level of internal consistency and reliability of the scale used in the survey. This indicates that the questions are actually measuring the same underlying construct (i.e., perception of the hotel brand).

Overall, the data shows a strong and consistent positive perception of the hotel brand among respondents, with the brand having a significant impact on their travel experiences and decision-making.

Results:

The results indicate that brand has a significant impact on tourists' decision-making when choosing a hotel. Descriptive statistics showed a high mean value of 4.2 for the "tourist decision-making" axis, reflecting participants' awareness of the importance of brand as an important factor in evaluating the quality of services provided. This result reinforces the importance of brand in building customer trust and reducing the risks associated with tourist decision-making, which is an essential factor in choosing a hotel.

The results show a strong positive relationship between brand and customer loyalty, as indicated by the correlation analysis ($r=0.72$). This relationship indicates that customers who are exposed to a strong brand tend to revisit the same hotel and increase their commitment to that hotel. This reflects the role of brands in increasing the desire for repeat experiences and achieving long-term loyalty.

Impact of Brand on Employee Satisfaction and Performance The results showed that a strong brand has a positive impact on employee satisfaction; ANOVA analysis revealed a statistically significant difference between employee satisfaction based on perceptions of brand strength ($F=4.72$, $p<0.05$). Employees who work within establishments with a strong brand show higher levels of job satisfaction, which enhances their belonging and increases their motivation to provide high-quality services.

The Role of Brands in Driving Sustainability and Innovation The importance of integrating sustainability and innovation into brand strategies was confirmed. Research shows that customers are attracted to brands that reflect environmental and social values, which increases brand appeal and customer interaction. Innovation is also a crucial factor in improving the customer experience and increasing brand value in the marketplace.

Importance of Branding in Domestic Tourism

Results indicate that branding is an important factor in improving tourism performance in the local context. Brand design reflects the cultural and heritage values of a tourist destination and has a positive impact on attracting both domestic and international visitors. This indicates the importance of focusing on marketing strategies that reflect the identity of the tourism destination in order to increase its competitiveness in the market.

Finally, the importance of branding as a strategic tool to improve the performance of tourism operations by positively influencing tourist decision-making and loyalty, as well as employee satisfaction and performance, was demonstrated. These results reinforce the importance of adopting innovative and sustainable strategies in brand management to enhance its attractiveness and achieve sustainable competitive advantage.



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Recommendations

1- Improve the integration of the brand with the services offered: ensure that marketing messages reflect the actual quality of service of the hotel, so that there is no gap between customer expectations and reality.

2- Enhancing job training programs:

Conduct regular workshops for employees to improve customer relations skills that will enhance the brand's reputation.

3- Leveraging digital data:

Use digital analytics to identify customer preferences and improve marketing campaigns to make them more targeted.

4- Adopting sustainable practices:

Introduce environmentally friendly practices into hotel services to enhance the brand's appeal to sustainability-conscious visitors.

5- Building strategic partnerships:

Work with global booking platforms and airlines to expand the brand's reach in international markets.

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