

## Evaluations of Chinese Travel Agencies on Mesopotamia Destination from the Marketing and Branding Perspective

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<b>Keywords:</b> Destination Marketing Tourism Industry Mesopotamia Destination  Received 7 May 2021 Revised 22 June 2021 Accepted 25 June 2021  <b>Article Classification:</b> Research Article	<b>Purpose</b> – The purpose of this study is to analyze the evaluations of Chinese travel agencies on Mesopotamia destination from the marketing and branding perspective. <b>Design/methodology/approach</b> – In this study, a case study pattern that is one of the qualitative research patterns, has been used. During the study, 5 questions were asked to learn the demographic information of the interviewees, and also 11 semi-structured interview forms including 10 questions were prepared to receive their opinions about Mesopotamia destination marketing. Content analysis has been done for the obtained data by using MAXQDA Qualitative Data Analysis Programme. <b>Findings</b> – According to the findings of the study, it has been determined that the representatives of 11 travel agencies coming from China think mostly that the local community in the region have great hospitality and also that local dishes have a wide variety and great taste. Additionally, they have described the existing culture of religious tolerance, which has been one of the dominant characteristics of the region, as another important cultural value. On the other hand; the qualification of the tourist guides serving in the region in Chinese and increasing the institutional capacities of the travel agencies serving in the region are listed among the aspects of the Mesopotamia destination that need to be developed. <b>Discussion</b> – Mesopotamia destination is one of the most important regions of Turkey that can attract the attention of Chinese tourists, in this sense, it is appropriate to consider China as a significant target market to be used in tourism destination marketing.

### 1. Introduction

After the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there has been an increase in welfare levels and incomes of some countries together with the influence of industrialization and globalization. The will of countries, whose income levels have increased, for going to different destinations has encouraged them to meet different cultures and contact with them. Individuals meet their needs that have emerged as a result of socio-cultural and technological advancements, by participating in various tourism activities. Therefore, countries as a stakeholder in the market can take advantage of their destination as much as they can pull the current demand into their countries (Yavuz & Karabağ, 2009).

Frisk (1999) defined a touristic destination as a geographical local place or region, where there are various touristic societies in an ordinary community. Destination includes the measurement of incomes and expenses of social services and employment opportunities that exist within a system. These system elements are the rings that associate individuals and locations in a destination with each other like gears of a machine (Tinsley & Lynch, 2001). The existence of many stakeholders in a destination and its very complex structure make destination management quite difficult. Being unique makes destinations exclusive. However, the emergence of structures that have come out as a result of the single line in destination planning and development, causes destinations to lose their characteristics as being a trademark or an image (Özdemir, 2007).

In the latest years; the tourism industry, which provides benefits for sectors such as transportation, accommodation, recreation, gastronomy, has been progressing. At the same time, the tourism sector has a crucial role in the financial development of many countries and tourism destinations (Lea, 1988). Therefore,

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tourism is seen as one of the most important industries that steadily grows on a global scale (Bansal & Eiselt, 2004). Especially, it should be well comprehended that the tourism industry has a lot of benefits and advantages for countries and destinations and therefore, destination regions, which are rich in terms of touristic attraction, should be used as financial development tools (Bodlender, Jefferson, Jenkins, & Lickorish, 1991; Manhas, Manrai, & Manrai, 2016). In the light of this information, destination marketing and management is one of the most attention-grabbing issues for a destination, country, or region in any part of the world. In addition to the naturality, the current status of resources, attitudes, and experiences of visitors and the management and marketing of a destination in the best possible way is the most important factors that create the difference in a destination (Manhas, Manrai, & Manrai, 2016).

Attraction factors of destination regions such as natural climate conditions, geographical conditions, historic and cultural values are turning into an economic value in the tourism industry day by day. Stakeholders in a destination are one of the greatest factors that help natural, historic and cultural attractions of a destination successfully take part in destination marketing in the long term (Atsız & Kızıllırmak, 2017). Turkey is a country that has destination attractions thanks to its location, climate, and history. However, the lack of educational, promotional, and marketing activities related to destinations at the international level requires more efforts so that it can realize its goal of having a big proportion in the international market.

Since the Mesopotamia destination is a region that Chinese tourism professionals know little about, it can not attract enough tourists from China. This situation prevents the region from getting a revenue share from the Chinese tourism market. To solve this problem, the region should be marketed to China by travel agencies. The region's development administration and 3 development agencies invited 11 travel agencies operating in different regions of China to promote the region's brand and destination marketing in 2019. The Group, consisting of 11 Chinese travel agency representatives, visited 5 provinces of the region within a week and had the opportunity to get to know more about the region. At the end of this field trip, an interview was made with the representatives of Chinese travel agencies asking their opinions about the region, and the data obtained were analyzed in the Maxqda data analysis program. This study aimed to analyze the evaluations of Chinese travel agencies on Mesopotamia destination locating the Southeast Anatolia Region of Turkey from the marketing and branding perspective.

In this regard, the second aim of this study is to demonstrate that Turkey can take a greater share from the Chinese market by creating solutions after analyzing the reasons for the low number of tourists coming to Turkey from China that has the highest spending in the tourism market worldwide. Following this idea, increasing tourism industry incomes in the cities within the Mesopotamia destination is planned. In this way, it will directly contribute to the regional economy by providing foreign currency flows and also it will help create new opportunities for employment by improving the qualifications of tourism personnel (Bilgiçli & Altınkaynak, 2016).

The researcher played an active and involved role in all stages of the research process. Technical terms or assumptions were avoided in the interviews conducted within the scope of the research. Questions have been designed in such a way that they can be easily answered by focusing on them. The researcher tended to be unbiased and objective during the interviews.

## **2. Conceptual Framework**

When we look at the history of marketing activities, their prints can be traced back to the very old times. Ancient people's marketing efforts can be seen to have taken place in open areas until the time money was introduced. In addition to this, marketing activities based on science have a history of approximately one hundred years. The marketing efforts that have been stretching from past to present have turned towards customer-oriented understanding from production and product (Girgin, 2019; Torlak & Altunışık, 2018). According to the American Marketing Association (AMA), marketing is defined as a set of processes and an institutional function for managing customer relations, which creates value for customers. Moreover, marketing is promoting and delivering this value to consumers in a way that a business enterprise and its shareholders will benefit (Bozkurt, 2015; Gundlach & Gregory & Wilkie, 2009). In short, marketing ideas today emerge as a developed form of an understanding that covers customers. One of the reasons why the term 'customer-oriented' is important is that customers hold an important place for companies and marketing because they have the freedom to choose among many products and services. Additionally, companies strive

for making customers perceive themselves as more privileged and special. Therefore, customers shape the processes in marketing by being in a competitive environment that will continue in the future of marketing (Ödemiş & Hassan, 2019).

### 2.1. Destination

The destination is a term that has a privileged place among the components of the tourism industry. 'Destinasyon' is a word that was modified to the Turkish language from the English word 'destination' and it means somewhere to go, to arrive, and a touristic place. The word destination is a commonly referred word that we frequently hear the tourism industry, which means a geographical region, where tourism products are served in an integrated way. While destinations are accepted as a region, they may also be a country, city, or town. According to a different definition in the literature, a destination is a region, where individuals/groups meet new services after leaving their residences for touristic purposes (Kozak & Kozak, 2006). According to (Buhalis, 2000), a destination is a combination of tourism products that make consumers gain new experiences in many ways and thereby offering them an integrated feeling of satisfaction. In addition to this definition, (Buhalis, 2000) puts a subjective complexion on the term destination by approaching it with a perceptual view under the effect of factors such as the places that tourists want to reach, their cultures, previous experiences, and their education levels. In the definition made by the Ministry of Tourism and Culture, the destination is a region, country, or a place to arrive during mobility, in which tourism activities take place and also destination is a targeted route and point that those traveling for touristic purposes want to arrive in the end (Akdemir & Kırmızıgül, 2015; Tourism, 1999). One of the most important factors affecting how tourists decide on what destination they will go to is the general image of the destination and how tourists perceive the destination around this image. Therefore, determining the destination perception of tourists in the studies carried out on destinations has importance to enhance destinations and extend the duration of touristic products (Öztürk & Şahbaz, 2017). Perceptions about the image of a destination, and also thoughts, judgments and attitudes on a destination contain all positive and negative beliefs and impressions together.

Globalization and technological inventions have become a reason for all the geographical areas to be known and transportation to be much easier. These advancements have made it possible for people to reach far distances more easily by different means of transportation that are suitable for all budgets, therefore it led to the creation of a competitive environment for the regions that are accepted as destinations. Enterprises in the destination regions spare capital for product development and marketing activities in order not to get lost in intensive competitive conditions and by this way, they can maintain their existence for a long time (Ünal, 2019).

When the historical roots of the term destination are examined, it is possible to trace the prints until the Mesopotamia region. It is known that the earliest civilization ruins of human history were found in Mesopotamia. The Mesopotamia region is located among the regions that stay between today's Syria, Iraq, Southeastern Anatolia, and some parts of Iranian land. The cradle of civilization, Mesopotamia, has hosted a lot of communities thanks to its fertile land and climate conditions. Proof can be found in that Sumerian community, in which a lot of inventions were made, lived in the Mesopotamia region. Due to their introduction, some important inventions such as the wheel, sailboat, and car, the Sumerians are possibly thought to have travel mobility (Acar, 2020; McNeill, 2019). Using wheeled horse-drawn carriages around BC 2300 and later the invention of bronze carriages led to the emergence of people's feeling of wonder, traveling, and traveler factor in addition to improving trade routes expanding from the Indus valley to Ganges River and China. Travel mobility that started in Mesopotamia appear in the regions of the Nile, Euphrates, Tigris, Syria, and Palestine. Although no findings related to accommodation facilities were found in the Mesopotamia region, the fact that structures in Gobekli-tepe met the need for accommodation and transportation has the evidential value that the earliest steps of destination organizations were taken in the past periods in this region (Acar, 2020; Casson, 1985).

In short; for a region to be a destination, it must have a unique cultural and geographic structure, historical background, climate, and natural beauties, and it must also involve some touristic attraction centers that have a certain image. For instance, Mardin which is one of the oldest cities of the upper Mesopotamia region holds an important place for cultural tourism due to its historical structure and its being home to groups from

different ethnicities, religions, and languages. Additionally, it is a destination province with its unique characteristics (Işık & Güneş, 2015; Ompu & Yıldırım, 2020).

### 2.2. *Tourism industry*

The industry is defined as integrated production performance that produces single and same goods and services. According to some theoreticians, tourism is not included in the scope of the industry due to having a great variety of products and a heterogeneous structure and also due to not involving single product production. On the contrary, tourism has the function of collecting and presenting many types of productions, most of which are separate and inhomogeneous structures. Therefore, it is accepted by the majority that tourism is a sector and a branch of industry, not a type of business to look down or neglect. Keeping this in mind, the term tourism industry means economic activities that respond to the demands and the needs of tourists for several goods and services (Selçuk, 2008). According to a different definition, the tourism industry includes sectors in it and it represents a whole that affects the production, presentation, and marketing of touristic goods and services. These goods and services are produced by bringing production factors together to meet the demands and requests of tourists.

When the development of the tourism industry is examined, it is seen that it has gained more momentum after World War II. The increase in welfare and education levels of countries, an increase in investments and resources regarding tourism, reciprocal acceptance of different countries' societies, technological advancements, and easier transportation can be ordered among the factors contributing to the development of the tourism industry in this period (Bilgiçli & Altınkaynak, 2016; Selçuk, 2008).

The reasons for tourism to be called as an industry are stated below:

- Investments and the allocation of resources for substructure and superstructure development, which are necessary for the creation of the tourism industry, show that tourism is a significant industry.
- The existence of production factors such as entrepreneurs, labor force, capital, and natural resources in tourism makes tourism gain the qualifications of being an industry.
- The integrity among production branches that are related to tourism makes tourism a compound industry.
- Tourism products' being intangible makes tourism qualify for becoming a service industry (Bilgiçli & Altınkaynak, 2016)

Tourism supply is the whole of the touristic product, service, nature, history, culture, and values, all of which are offered to tourists to meet touristic demands of a country or region (Aydın & Gencür, 2015; Ünlüönen & Tayfun, 2014). Tourism supply consists of two factors: dependent on tourism and independent of tourism. Dependent supply factors are accommodation enterprises, transportation enterprises and their organizations, marketing, and its mediator organizations (such as tour operators, travel agents), firms that produce and sell special products (firms that produce and sell products such as carpet, magnet, knickknack), and also institutions that support tourism (insurance offices, banks, etc.). The factors which are independent of tourism are natural beauties (climate, fauna, flora, sea, beach, etc.), values (archeologically historic values, historic ruins, traditions, food culture, etc.), various events (fairs, festivals, conventions, etc.) (Aydın & Gencür, 2015).

The more there is an increase in price factor affecting tourism supply, the more supply and production it will create since the price increase brings an increase in income as well. However, at the same time, these increases in prices may cause a decline in tourism supply depending on the risk of decreasing demand in time. The customer choices, estimating the need and stockpiling accordingly, rivals and substitutes, technological advancements, climate conditions, the number of enterprises, prices of production factors can be counted as the main factors that affect tourism supply (Aydın & Gencür, 2015). In short, there is a need for large-scale investments and spendings in the tourism supply. Marketing of products suitable for different social structures and customer expectations is of high importance.

### 2.3. *Stakeholders in destination*

The contributions of all stakeholders are needed for an effective arrangement of factors such as planning, management, marketing, and competition in organizations and also for providing cooperation among organizations. Therefore, it is really important to understand well who the stakeholders that should be in a destination are and what the term stakeholder means in its scope. Freeman (1984) defines the term shareholder

as all individuals and groups that play important roles in determining the aims of institutions or organizations and also that affect and/or affected during this process. According to (Goeldner & Ritchie, 2012), stakeholders in destinations are classified as the local community of that region, public management, tourists coming from inside and outside of the country, destination management organizations, guests, daily visitors, organizations taking place in the fields of education and health. The term stakeholder in a destination was firstly used by the World Tourism Organization in 1999 under the name 'Tourism Stakeholders'. According to this definition of the World Tourism Organization, stakeholders are said to be 'individuals, groups or organizations dealing with a problem area in destinations' (İnanır, 2019; Liu & Xu, 2010). Following this definition, stakeholders in a group of tourism destinations are counted as accommodation and food-drink enterprises, tour operators, travel agencies, institutions giving training in this field, domestic and foreign tourists, public institutions and organizations, NGOs, support service enterprises, and the local community.

#### 2.4. Destination marketing

The arrangement and development of activities for a destination region and also maintaining their continuity depend on the satisfaction of that region's customers and the image they perceive. Therefore, there should be some marketing activities to create a destination image in customers' minds (Seçilmiş, 2012). According to Seçilmiş (2012), envisioning marketing strategies by researching just the traits of tourists traveling to that region will not be sufficient for customer satisfaction. Accordingly, she has emphasized that the topics such as what are the desires and expectations of customers related to a region and what is the image of the destination in their mind should be studied as a part of destination marketing. In this regard, she has defined destination marketing as all kinds of activities and events to attract customers to the destination region. Considering destination marketing from a broader perspective, the World Tourism Organization (WTO) (2004,10), has defined it as such: 'Destination marketing covers all the activities and processes regarding delivery, promotion, marketing division, price, branding, and decisions on the product, which are necessary for bringing buyers and sellers together by focusing on having a competitive position in the market and meeting consumers' demands, with the continuous coordination of the set of related activities in the distribution of effective products to markets with high potentials' (İçöz, 2013).

While destinations are being marketed, aims such as planning, advertising, and promotion should be taken into consideration to determine the markets that contribute to the effective presentation of goods and services and resources used here, to promote these markets, and finally to affect the decision-making processes of tourists in the targeted market related to their destination choices. In addition, organizing marketing mix elements such as product, price, promotion, efforts for distribution in an efficient way and also realizing the work of brand and image according to needs and expectations of the targeted group in direct proportion should be aimed to achieve in destination marketing (Aktaş, 2007; Vatan & Zengin, 2019).

#### 2.5. Mesopotamia as a destination marketing brand

The tours organized in the cities of the Southeastern Anatolia Region used to be marketed as the GAP tour by travel agencies. However, the word GAP standing for 'Güneydoğu Anadolu Projesi' (The Southeastern Anatolia Project) connotes a destination, where technical development projects such as watering, dam, road construction are carried out, being far from associating the region with its reflection of historical and natural beauties it has in the minds of tourists. This situation has rendered the promotion to external target markets and destination marketing difficult. To solve this problem, the GAP Regional Development Administration that runs its activities under the supervision of the Ministry of Industry and Technology, started the GAP Regional Tourism Oriented Promotion and Branding Project in September 2014, to develop and promote the regional tourism substructure and to make it a brand. After the studies and researches within the Project, the decision of promoting and marketing the region, where 9 cities remain within the border of Southeastern Anatolia Region, under the brand of 'Mesopotamia' was taken. The brand Mesopotamia was chosen due to its referring to the whole region, the historical richness of the brand, including all the elements of history, culture, nature, religion, folklore, and gastronomy belonging to the region, and most importantly due to the familiarity of the brand both in national and international scales.

The second significant work to promote and market the Southeastern Anatolia Provinces under the name of Mesopotamia is putting 'Mesopotamia Promotion and Branding Results-Oriented Programme' in practice. This started in 2019 by bringing three regional development agencies together – namely, Silkroad

Development Agency, Karacadag Development Agency, and Tigris Development Agency, under the coordination of the GAP Development Administration, and the implementation of the program will last for three years.

Located in the region, Silkroad Development Agency, Karacadag Development Agency, and Tigris Development Agency have designed the Mesopotamia Promotion and Branding Results-Oriented Programme consisting of common activities by gathering under the coordination of the GAP Development Administration to develop tourism in the region and strengthen the Mesopotamia brand. This program includes promotional and marketing activities planned specifically for the regions of TRC1 (Silkroad), TRC2 (Karacadağ), and TRC3 (Tigris) regarding the tourism sector. The general purpose of the program within this scope has been determined as to 'accelerate the regional development through branding, promotion and marketing activities of the tourism sector that is among the strategic sectors of the GAP region and that has a potential of growing fast and also that can create an increase in employment. The specific purposes of the program that will serve this general purpose are as below:

1. Carrying out branding, promoting, and marketing activities on a global scale for the Mesopotamia tourism destination
2. Bringing natural, historical, and cultural values into tourism by considering the balance of protecting-using
3. Developing thematic tourism destinations
4. Reviving gastronomy tourism

This study aims to receive the opinions of the travel agencies operating in China about the Mesopotamia destination and their marketing suggestions for the region. Additionally, although some studies have been found in the literature about the provinces including the Mesopotamia destination (Çuhadar & Kervankıran, 2017; Giritlioglu & Bulut, 2015; Ukav, 2009; Yaşarsoy & Oktay, 2020; Değerliyurt, Aksu, Aydoğmuş, & Kaya, 2013; Serçek & Hassan, 2016; Toprak, 2014) no study approaching the destination in this way and exhibiting a comprehensive perspective has been met.

### 3. Methodology

China became the country that spent on tourism most in 2016 by achieving fast growth in the international tourism market. Therefore, the Chinese market has started to take attention around the world and many countries have gone into the effort of increasing their proportion in China. In this perspective, when the numbers of Chinese tourists visiting Turkey and other countries are compared, it is seen that the number of Chinese tourists coming to Turkey is very low. Accordingly, it is thought that Turkey, in need of alternative tourism markets, can receive more from the Chinese market. For this purpose, a 7-day Mesopotamia info trip including the provinces of Gaziantep, Adıyaman, Şanlıurfa, Diyarbakır, and Mardin was organized for the representatives of 11 travel agencies coming from the People's Republic of China within the Mesopotamia Promotion and Branding Results-Oriented Programme carried out in cooperation of 3 Regional Development Agencies under the supervision of the GAP Development Administration. At the end of this tour, interviews were made with the representatives of Chinese travel agencies. In this meeting, they were asked about their opinions and perceptions regarding Mesopotamia as a destination.

No study has been met about the Mesopotamia destination that is being newly promoted. Carrying out this study with semi-structured interview questions brings a different perspective to the study. The study is distinctive in this aspect.

In this study, which was carried out to receive the opinions of the travel agencies operating in China about the Mesopotamia Destination and their marketing suggestions for the region, the case study methodology, a qualitative research method, has been used and the participants were ethically informed in detail about the research via the questionnaire form. The case study is a case description, in which the researcher collects detailed information in depth through multiple information sources (observation, interview, visual-auditory materials, and documents) or it is an approach, in which he/she puts forward case themes (Creswell J. W., 2016, p. 97). In this regard, content analysis has been applied to the data.

In this context, the research question of the study has been formulated as follows: 'What are the opinions of travel agencies operating in China about the Mesopotamia destination and how should marketing activities

be for the promotion of the region?'. For this purpose, a semi-structured interview form has been created and the participants have been asked five questions to present their demographic information and they have been asked ten questions to receive their opinions of the Mesopotamia destination and suggestions for marketing activities. These questions are indicated below:

1. What are your general thoughts on the Mesopotamia region?
2. What do you think about the promotion and destination marketing of the region through the Mesopotamia brand?
3. What do you think about the local dishes in the region, the product ranges of food and drink enterprises, and the service and product quality?
4. What do you think about religious tourism in the region?
5. What do you think about the variety of accommodation enterprises and their service quality?
6. What do you think about the institutional capacities and destination marketing activities of travel agencies in the region?
7. What do you think about the qualifications of the tourist guides in the region?
8. What do you think about the destination marketing of the region?
9. What are your suggestions to make tours in the region more comfortable for Chinese tourists?
10. What do you think must be in tour programs in the Mesopotamia region?

During the interview, the participants were recorded with their approvals. The audio records were then transcribed by the writer conducting the study. The document of 11 interviews has been computerized. It has been understood that the transcripts (deciphered texts) resulted from the interviews, consist of 35 pages. These transcripts have been subject to content analysis by using the MAXQDA Qualitative Data Analysis program.

Content analysis is a four-staged process that provides coding of the data and creating the categories (Merriam, 2015, p. 196). In these stages, initially, the statements of the participants that they expressed about the Mesopotamia destination in the question forms were examined carefully. After the analysis, they were coded according to their meanings. With the help of these codes, the data were classified according to the related main and sub-themes in line with the conceptual framework and the coding scheme.

The data obtained from this study were coded by two different encoders independent from each other to test their reliabilities. In these codings, the encoders worked blindly - 'secretly / without notice of each other-without knowing the questions and expectations of the researcher and both encoders used the Maxqda program (Creswell J. W., 2016, p. 253). When the results of coding were analyzed, it was determined that there is %78 similarity between the encoders. It shows that the reliability of coding is satisfying (Miles & Huberman, 1994). When the term validity is considered, it has to include reliability, transmissibility, consistency, and verifiability (Creswell J. W., 2017). Reliability is about the trueness of findings obtained at the end of the study and at the same time, it means studying the repeatability of the findings of the study. The validity and reliability of qualitative studies are explained through the terms transmissibility, consistency, and verifiability. Reliability focuses on the principle of objectivity and it is important to benefit from the resources in a sufficient amount. Therefore, many resources have been reviewed within the framework of the study and experts have been consulted for their opinions. Based on the idea that qualitative researches cannot be generalized, transmissibility focuses on the issue of transfer. Sampling is used, detailed data is collected and descriptions are made deeply for the condition of transmissibility. Similarly, variety has been used and findings have been put forward after deep research in this study. At this point, the direct quotation has been used in the necessary parts. The term consistency is based on the idea that terms and facts can change in time and therefore, the researcher has completed the process of data analysis by considering consistency. Finally; keeping in mind that qualitative researches cannot be objective, the researcher has structured the data in a verifiable way and with reasonable statements in the process of analysis and coding (Stenbacka, 2001).

The reliability, transmittance, consistency and verifiability analyzes of this study were carried out in accordance with the applied research method. Additionally; starting from developing data collection tools, the study has been completed by taking opinions of 5 experts (3 academicians, 2 high-level officers in the tourism industry), who are qualified in the field of theme and sub-codes that appear in the part of deciphering, coding, and analysis, which is necessary for the internal validity of qualitative researches. In this way, all the

processes mentioned have been examined by external controllers and they have been enriched by taking notice of consistency (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). In this way, it was understood that the themes were created suitable for the study purposes and that coherence between the encoders is enough to provide reliability.

In this study, all rules stated to be followed within the scope of "Higher Education Institutions Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Directive" were followed. None of the actions stated under the title "Actions Against Scientific Research and Publication Ethics", which is the second part of the directive, have been carried out. The research conducted does not contain ethical violations. The data in the study were obtained by obtaining permission and approval from the participants. The data obtained has been evaluated within the scope of scientific studies. For this reason, it is a study that intellectual property and copyright principles have been taken care of at most levels in the article. According to the TR Index 2020 criteria, since the data related to the research were obtained in October 2019, an ethics committee report was not required.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Demographic findings and participant profile

In this part of the study, demographic findings of the owners and administrators of the travel agencies operating in China are shown.

**Table 1:** Demographic Findings of the Owners and Administrators of the Travel Agencies Operating in China

	Gender	Age	Education Status	Position	Work Experience
A1	Male	48	Postgraduate	Owner	More than 15years
A2	Male	37	Bachelor's dg.	Administrator	For 16 years
A3	Female	35	High School	Administrator	More than 10years
A4	Male	44	Postgraduate	Owner	For 18 years
A5	Female	45	Bachelor's dg.	Owner	More than 20years
A6	Male	56	Postgraduate	Owner	For 16 years
A7	Male	47	High School	Administrator	For 18 years
A8	Male	35	Postgraduate	Owner	For 9 years
A9	Male	38	Postgraduate	Owner	More than 10years
A10	Male	29	Postgraduate	Owner	For 9 years
A11	Female	38	Bachelor's dg.	Owner	For 8 years

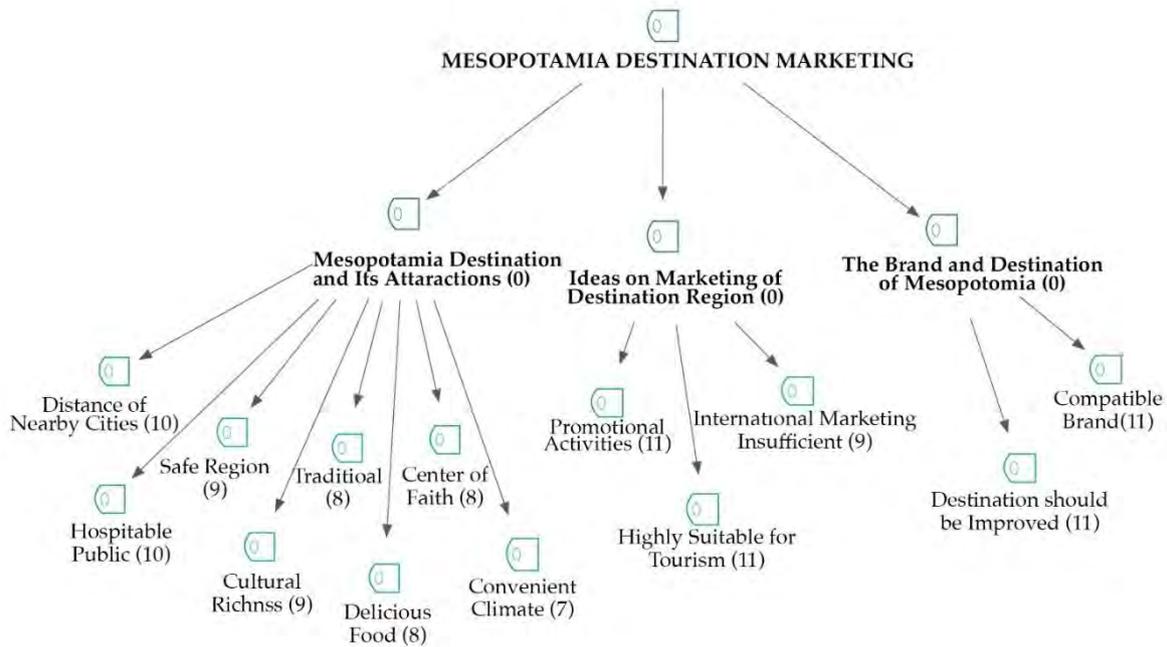
According to Table 1, 8 interviewers out of 11 are male (A1, A2, A4, A6, A7, A8, A9, A10) and 3 out of ten interviewers are female (A3, A5, A11). While 8 participants (A1, A4, A5, A6, A8, A9, A10, A11) are travel agent owners, 3 of them (A2, A3, A7) are administrators. While the participant that has the least experience in the field of a travel agency (A11), has been working for 8 years, it is seen that the participant with the most experience (A5) has been working for more than 20 years. It is seen that 6 participants (A1, A4, A6, A8, A9, and A10) have postgraduate degrees, 3 participants (A2, A5, and A11) have bachelor's degrees and 2 participants (A3, A7) are high school graduates.

### 4.2. Findings about Mesopotamia destination

In this part of the study, findings on Mesopotamia destination are shown. Findings under this title consist of three themes and ten sub-themes.

*Theme 1: Mesopotamia Destination and Marketing*

In this part, the opinions of the participants were asked about the Mesopotamia brand, attractions of Mesopotamia, and Mesopotamia destination marketing in the region.



**Figure 1:** Mesopotamia Destination and Marketing Hierarchic Code-Sub Code Model

All of the participants think that the Mesopotamia brand is compatible with the region. However, they have reached the point that there is a lack of communication and marketing related to Mesopotamia destination and there should be an advancement in these fields. All the participants have stated that the region is very convenient for tourism in terms of regional destination marketing and they have suggested producing some promotional work. While all of the participants have agreed that the regional marketing is locally sufficient, 9 participants (A1, A2, A4, A5, A6, A7, A8, A9, and A10) have stated that it is internationally insufficient. They have emphasized that the reason behind the insufficiency is lack of language, in other words, inadequate number of staff that speaks Chinese and the lack of directions, brochures, signs, and promotion materials in Chinese.

When the attractions of Mesopotamia were asked to the participants, the great majority (A1, A3, A4, A5, A6, A7, A8, A9, A10, and A11) has stated that it is convenient in terms of location and it has a close distance for road and air transport. Ten participants (A1, A2, A3, A4, A5, A6, A7, A8, A10, and A11) agree that the local community is hospitable and friendly. The participants have taken attention to the region’s cultural richness, safety, traditionality, delicious local dishes, suitable climate, and its being a center of faith by appealing to many different religions.

*Theme 2: Mesopotamia supply sources*

In this part, comments about tourist guides, local dishes, travel agencies, accommodation and service quality, and the potential for religious tourism of the Mesopotamia region have been received from the participants.

*Theme 2-1: Tourist guides*

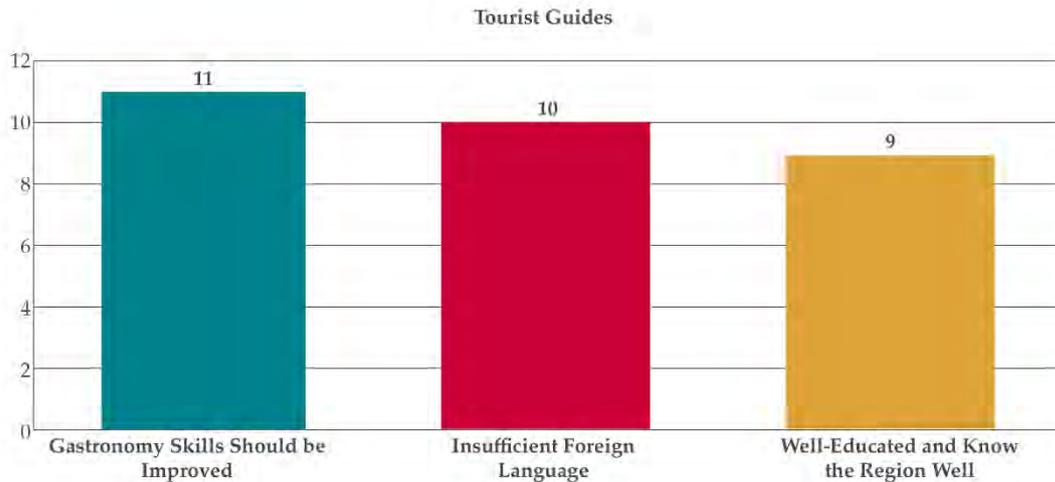
The majority of the participants (except A3, A5) think that guides are well-educated and they know the region well. However, it seems that they have some problems with language. Almost all of the participants (except

A2) complain that guides don't speak Chinese and it is not comfortable for Chinese groups. The participant A1 has said about this situation:

*"...I always say; language is a big problem, there are scarcely any tourist guides that can speak Chinese in this region, therefore, I think transferring some guides to this region from Cappadocia region may help..."*

All of the participants state that the region is very rich in terms of gastronomy but tourist guides have low skills in gastronomy. They all agree that tourist guides should receive training on this matter and improve their skills. Participant A2 has said about it;

*"... Moreover, I suggest that tourist guides had better strengthen their knowledge and skills about gastronomy since the region is very rich in terms of gastronomic elements..."*

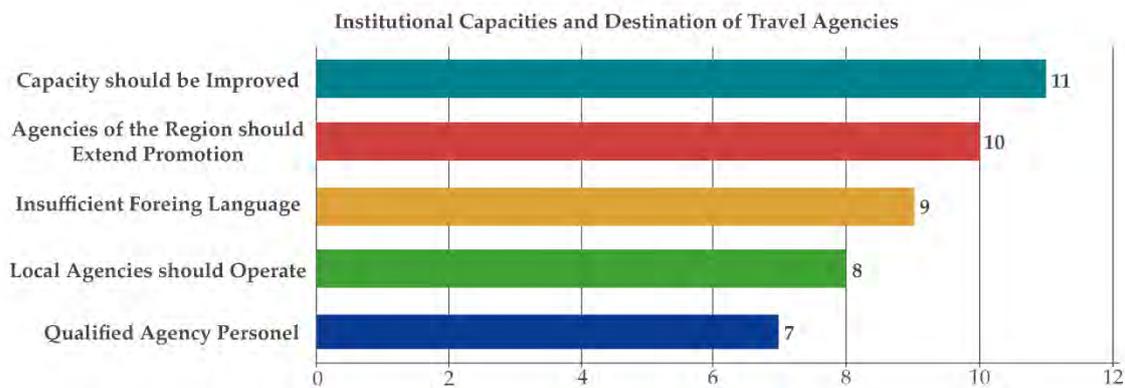


**Figure 1:** Opinions of the Participants about Tourist Guides

*Theme 2-2: Institutional capacity and destination of travel agencies*

The general view on this matter is that the capacities should be increased. Again, they have emphasized that there is a deficiency in language and promotional work is insufficient. However, seven participants (A1, A4, A5, A6, A7, A8, and A10) have said that staff in travel agencies is qualified and they don't have any problems. Participant A1 has said about it;

*"... When we consider the personnel, the personnel working in agencies can be said to be more qualified compared to other personnel working in this sector..."*



**Figure 3:** Opinions of the participants about the institutional capacity and destination of travel agencies

Theme 2-3: Accommodation variety and service quality

All of the participants have stated their pleasure about service quality. They have said that their problems have been solved quickly and they have welcomed warmly. However, they have expressed that the understanding of luxury in China is not the same as here and they think the luxury level is lower in the region. Additionally, eight participants (A1, A4, A5, A6, A7, A8, A9, and A10) have stated that they wanted to use SPA services to relax after busy workdays and that the region remained insufficient in terms of SPA services. Participant A5 has said about it;

*“... I only have a suggestion for the SPA issue, because I didn't find SPA services sufficient for those who would like to rest up from the whole day's fatigue ...”*



**Figure 2:** Opinions of the participants about accommodation variety and service quality

Theme 2-4: Religious tourism

The Mesopotamia region is important geography, where religions emerged and spread. It is defined as a center of faith since it has characteristics from every religion. Therefore, religious tourism has become widespread in this region.

10 participants (A1, A2, A3, A4, A6, A7, A8, A9, A10, A11), who have been asked about their opinions for religious tourism, have stated that the region appeals to different religions and they are happy to see that everyone can practice their religions freely. Additionally, the same participants have stated that religious tourism sites are well-preserved.

The majority of the participants (A1, A2, A3, A4, A5, A6, A7, A8, A10, and A11) have demanded that tourists visiting these sites be warned to preserve the sites to future safely. Participant A1 has said about it;

*“... to bring these values to the future safely, tourists must be given clear instructions to follow in the sites before they arrive there ...”*

Most of the participants (A1, A4, A5, A6, A7, A8, A9, A10, and A11) have stated that there is a lack of promotion and marketing for the region. The reason is emphasized to be the language issue, stemming from the lack of people who can speak Chinese.

Theme 2-5: Local dishes and food & beverage business

All of the participants have stated that service quality and product quality are high in terms of business enterprises. However, the Chinese participants have complained that there isn't enough variety of food since they couldn't find food particular to their culture. Similarly, while some of the participants (A1, A2, A4, A5, A6, A7, A8, A10, A11) have mentioned the lack of world cuisine, many of them (A1, A3, A4, A5, A6, A7, A8,

A10, A11) have criticized business enterprises for not speaking Chinese. Most of the participants (A1, A3, A4, A5, A6, A8, A9, A10, and A11) have stated that they have felt discomforted since enterprises in the region serve only nonalcoholic drinks and it causes an inadequate number of the variety of drinks. Participant A6 has said about it;

“... Another point, the absence of which we have felt strongly, is the lack of alcohol service in restaurants. This case is a little weird to me...”

Local Dishes and Food-Drink Enterprises

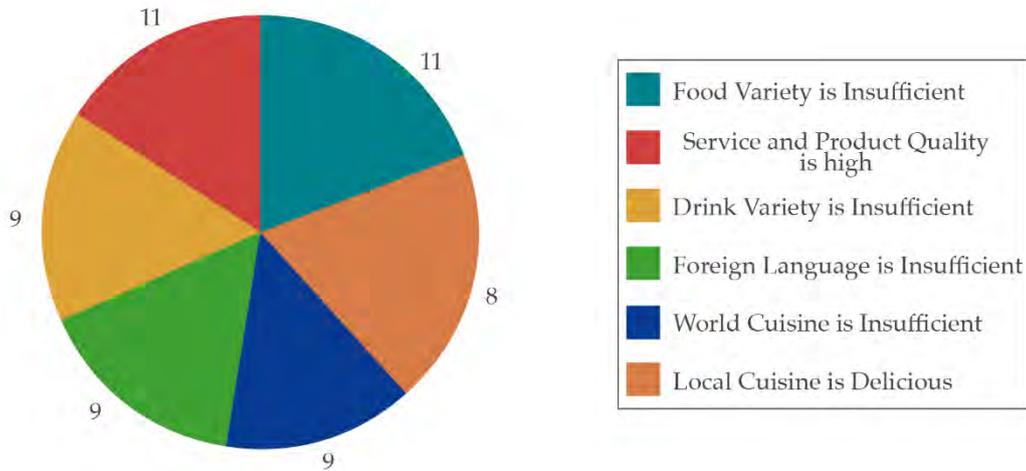


Figure 5: Opinions of the Participants about Local Dishes and Food-Drink Business

Theme 3: Tour programs

In this part, the participants have stated their indispensable points in a tour and made some suggestions for comfortable tours.

Theme 3-1: Must-Haves in tour programs

All of the participants have agreed that baklava, kadayıf, and copper-processing workshops should be added to tour programs and also that in addition to the cities covering the current tour program, cities within the neighboring region should be added to tour programs.

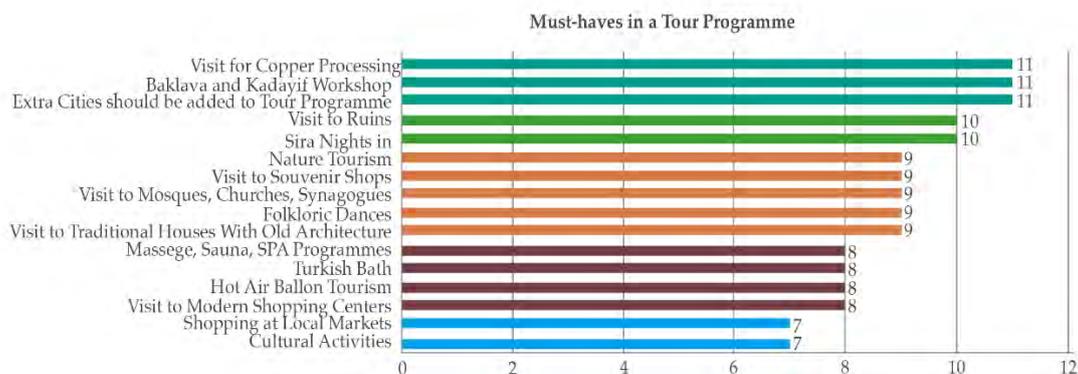


Figure 6: Must-Haves of the Participants in a Tour Programme

Theme 3-2: Suggestions for comfortable tours

All of the participants have agreed on their suggestion that tourists should not be exposed to a busy program on their arrival day in order not to have jetlag problems during the China-Turkey flight. Participant A1 has said about it:

“... Another point to pay attention can be that people can have jetlag problems at the end of the China-Turkey flight. Therefore, I think they shouldn't be included in a busy program on the arrival day and they should be given time to rest enough...”

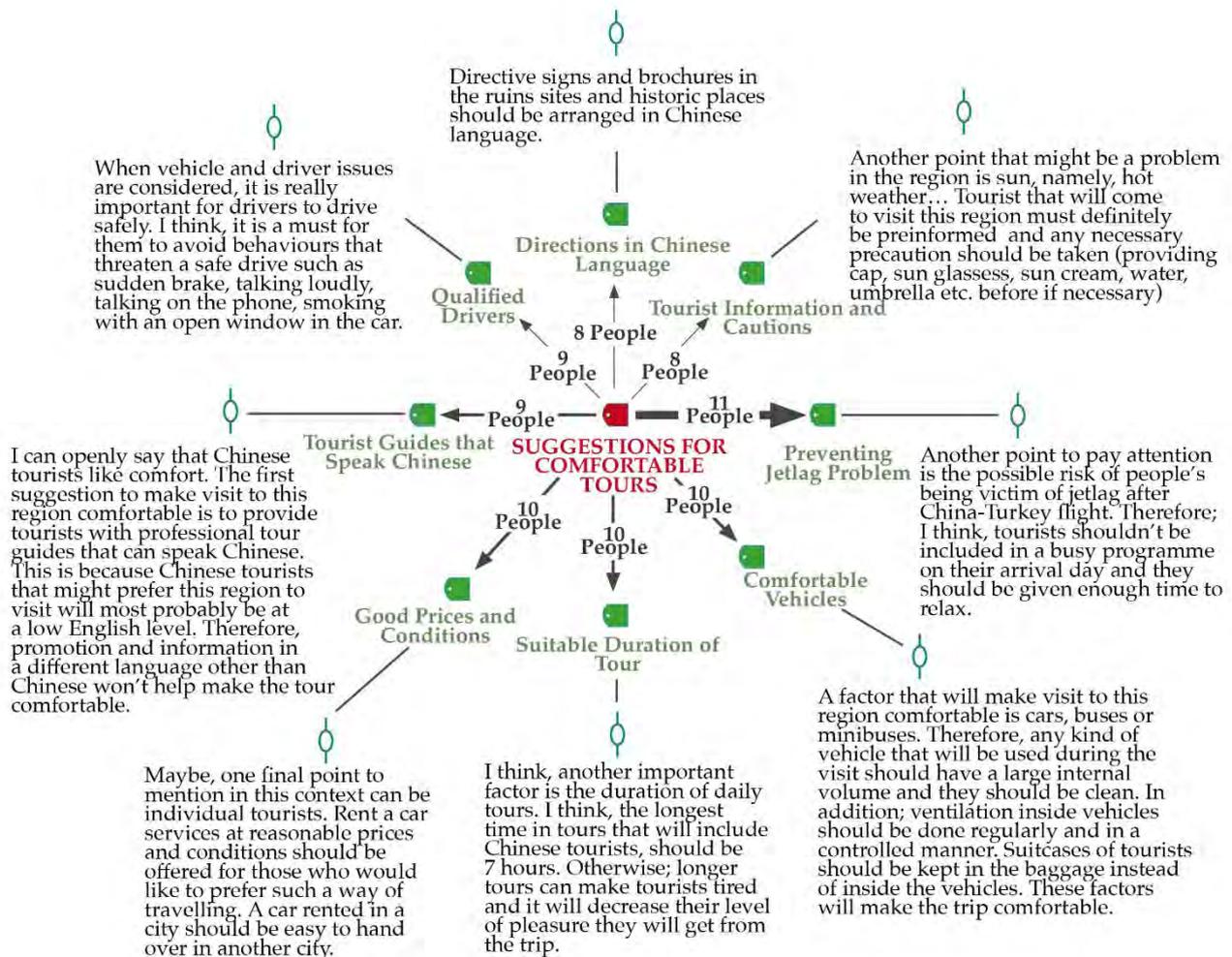


Figure 7: Suggestions of the participants for comfortable tours code-subcode model

5. Conclusion and Discussion

This study has been carried out with the representatives of 11 travel agencies coming from China within the framework of the Mesopotamia Promotion and Branding Oriented Project that is run under the coordination of GAP Regional Development Administration and in cooperation with 3 Regional Development Agencies. The participants have generally expressed their appreciation of the region. A destination needs to be satisfying because it is seen that tourists, who have a good experience in that destination before, give positive feedbacks such as visiting the region again, improving the destination image and recommending it to others (Baloğlu & McCleary, 1999; Oppermann, 1999; Cai, Wu, & Bai, 2003; Ekinçi & Hosany, Destination Personality: An Application of Brand Personality to Tourism Destinations, 2006; Taşçı & Kozak, 2006; Chi & Qu, 2008; Öztürk & Şahbaz, 2017). In this regard, the representatives' having a high-level satisfaction from their regional tour is

important in terms of the number of tourists that they will bring to the region and the number of package tours that they will organize in the region.

The representatives of tour operators often mentioned the great hospitality and religious toleration of local people and tasty dishes of the region in the related meetings. The hospitality of the local people plays a key role both in a tourist's decision to go on a vacation and in his/her being satisfied with the destination (Taşçı & Kelly, 2016; Ünal, 2019; Schlesinger W., 2020). In addition, toleration of local people living in the region for different religions and the richness of local cuisine are two other important factors affecting the holiday satisfaction of tourists (Buhalis, 2000; Ünal, 2019; Patwardhan, Ribeiro, Maurice, Payini, & Mallya, 2020). The participants have found travel agencies and business enterprises in the region insufficient. The most important reason for it is that both tourist guides and workers in the sector can't speak Chinese. The lack of tourist guides that can speak Chinese and the lack of introductory brochures and direction signs that are arranged in Chinese have caused problems for Chinese tourists in this region. Tourists feel comfortable and have a better holiday experience when all tourism workers in a destination speak the mother tongues of tourists (Manhas, Manrai, & Manrai, 2016; Erdem & Bakkal, 2019). Therefore, it is strongly advised for tourist guides and staff working in tourism establishments in these destinations to learn Chinese. Municipalities and public education centers can cooperatively arrange Chinese-based in-service training to encourage the use of the Chinese language. On the other hand; the Mesopotamia region that has been hosting many different religions for centuries is not well-known in China and the interviewers state that this is because the Mesopotamia destination has a low effect on international marketing. Attending international fairs and taking place in international promotional activities are extremely important for a destination to be internationally well-known (Güven & Ceylan, 2019). In this sense, attending China-oriented tourism and other different fairs is advised to promote the Mesopotamia destination and improve its image as a brand.

Mesopotamia is a focus point for the Middle East. This region attracts people from every religion and culture to itself due to its being a center of belief, suitable climate and easy transportation (Çuhadar & Kervankıran, 2017; Acar, 2020). The local people are accustomed to busy visits and they welcome tourists with their smiling faces and great hospitality. Tourists are very happy about this toleration and they often emphasize the freedom of belief here. To maintain this beautiful attitude in a more qualified way, all stakeholders can be given tourist satisfaction-oriented training. Additionally; accommodation establishments operating in the region can improve their SPA services for the relaxation of tourists. SPA services are one of the leading factors affecting the hotel satisfaction of tourists (Bastič & Gojčič, 2012). Hotels and catering firms can add traditional Chinese dishes to their menus for Chinese tourists.

Another suggestion will be for tourists coming from far regions. It is advised that tourists coming from far regions like China are not taken out for tour programs without letting them rest enough. They shouldn't be exposed to busy programs to prevent the risk of their feeling jet-lagged and they should be given enough time to rest and get adapted. It is important to inform tourists before the tour program. They should be well-informed and cautions against possible unfavorable situations due to hot weather. It will be helpful to take precautions by establishing some rules in advance and inform tourists on how to behave in the sites they will visit because protecting the sightseeing places from negative attitudes works for the advantage of the region. Bringing the Mesopotamia region that is the focal point for beliefs to the future with true acts plays an important role in promoting our culture to the world and it functions as a gate in order to enhance our quality in the international arena.

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