FROM FEARS TO TOURS: A SURGE IN KP TOURISM THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa-KP has undoubtedly been the most beautiful federal unit in Pakistan. Blessed with crystal-clear glaciers, whispering pines, rocky mountains, roaring rivers, and lush green meadows, this land has always been a jewel of the eye for emperors and rulers worldwide, and the conflicting situation remained there till a few years back. Regarding the worth of swat valley and overall KP, fewer researchers have emphasized the relevance of the regional community that faced violence and the wider tourist supplies and tourism activities that how the tourism sector has been affected, and what has been changed in the last few years in the region and in the lives of local communities. A huge surge in social media marketing has been observed in recent years promoting tourism in the KP after devastating instability due to the fear and terrorism in the region. This study primarily focuses on the recent development through survey research and perception analysis of 188 social media consumers keeping in view the study objectives including, an assessment of the impact of recent years' violence on the local community, by evaluating the role of social media use for promotion of tourism in KP and suggest more effective use of social media for sustainable growth of tourism industry for the uplift of local communities and its role in the sustainable development of Pakistan. The data revealed that social networking sites are the major source of information on tourism in Pakistan. However, the potential of social media is to some extent utilized but government initiatives are highly desirable. Findings revealed that the presence of fear is still there which needs immediate attention by the concerned stakeholders. Better facilitation, law and order, and infrastructure are the key to the success of this potential industry.

Keywords: *instability & violence, local communities, social media, sustainable development, tourism*

Introduction

Tourism becomes a great source of annual earnings, cultural exchange, economic growth, jobs for the local community, infrastructure development, employment opportunities, exchange of goods, and foreign exchange nationwide. But somehow Pakistan had faced some issues in the tourism industry particularly in the KP region affecting our tourism industry. In recent past years, some security conditions have created problems for international and local travellers. The potential of social networking sites (SNS) is globally acknowledged for their influence on perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and eventually in behavioral attribution as the McLuhan (1964) said "Medium is the Message".

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Research questions

1. Are the SNS an important source of tourism-related information in Pakistan?
2. How do social media facilitate tourists in planning their trips to KP?
3. How are social media platforms used by travelers to inspire prospective tourists to visit different regions of KP?
4. Whether and to what extent are the tour planners utilizing the potential of SNS to visit KP?
5. Whether and to what extent does the recent surge on SNS helps reduce the fears through promoting tourism in the KP region?

Objectives of the study

- To analyze the salience of different social media outlets in tour planning to different regions of KP.
- To examine the effectiveness of social media in promoting KP tourism.
- To probe the public perception regarding the social media surge in recent years in KP tourism.
- To investigate the impact of SNS in reducing fears through promoting tourism in KP?

Literature Review

The tourism sector is improving with the digital marketing strategies of new media. Getting information about the tourist spot and the requirement of tourists is the main objective (Serra Cantallops & Salvi, 2014). Communication technologies are very useful for promotional activities; nowadays, tourism is more reliant on social media. Social media is playing a huge role in destination marketing; it has strengthened the business of traveling and collaborating better with the tourist as their customers. Moreover, these traveling agencies are also offering rather cheap packages to promote tourism and, of course,to promote tourism and increase their business by using the latest marketing strategies. From the perspective of destinations and service providers of these destinations, social media enables easy access to a wider range and variety of potential visitors at a relatively low cost, thus increasing the efficiency of their marketing strategies. Social media is giving information about rather unknown and less frequently visited destinations to hobbyist travelers. These exciting social media offers are very

helpful for tourists for various activities to plan the trip, select the destination, and book the vehicle. Not only for the planning phase these services are provided during the trip for various on-spot activities that cannot be planned in advance. Another feature offered by tour operators which are gaining popularity is holiday's package. A remarkable percentage of people are consulting these tourist sites and social media pages to check new packages before planning their trips. In Pakistan, A study held in December 2020 showed that more than 70% of travelers were using social media for information about different places prior to their visit (Malik, Naseeb, Dogar, Shah, & Ali, 2020).

Tourism services are also helping in building relationships between tourists and local members of the visiting destination through interaction by social media as well as face-to-face interaction which further helps in promoting business deals. This is a good way of strengthening local businesses and the overall economic development of the country (Hussain, Social Media Impact on Tourism in Pakistan, 2020).

Travelers rely vigorously on consumer-generated online information when making travel-related decisions. Travel-related Social Media (TSM) users can give their opinions, reviews, and sometimes suggestions about a particular place, be it a hotel or an airline. Apart from this, they can also leave their comments (Nusair, Bilgihan, & Okumus, 2013). Such reviews arextremely trustworthy (Yoo, Lee, Gretzel, & Fesenmaier, 2009).

It is noted that the variety of information generated by users of social media, experiences of other tourists, their opinion, videos, photos, reviews, and other stuff is very helpful towards travel decisions (Yoo, Lee, Gretzel, & Fesenmaier, 2009). It can also be a part of a marketing tool as far as travel companies are concerned. People are always curious to find out other people's views and reviews about any visiting point, reliability of the website or social media pages also take part in this process (Nusair, Bilgihan, & Okumus, 2013).

There is the trend of heavy reliance on travel-related online opinions, reviews, comments, and related stuff. The tourism industry in Pakistan is making marketing techniques more impressive and better. Pakistan is a very beautiful country that has a very eye catchy landscape, the trend of tourism is increasing with the exposure to traveling information. So, this is the need of time to compete with the global standard to also gain an international level of interest and attraction toward our country. Sometimes lack proper guidelines and misinformation creates a huge problem for tourists. Concerned agencies and companies should focus to improve the quality of services and reliable information to get the trust of interested tourists (Crooks et al., 2013. Improved standard of promotional and persuasive stuff, travel guides, credibility of information is much needed (Sussman & Siegal).

This is already acknowledged that social media has turned tourism trends and given various information for making decisions. The tourism sector is providing services to vacationers a lot of recent studies are focusing (Rodríguez-Díaz, Rodríguez-Díaz, & Espino-Rodríguez, 2018).

And the interest of people in traveling and using social media during holidays is notably increasing. The Internet has become their planning agent (Dergiades, Mavragani, & Pan, 2018).

Pakistan tourism agencies have a big challenge to portray the positive image of Pakistan as a safe country to visit. The importance of tourism and related information cannot be ignored with the increase in social media use. Various famous personalities are also contributing to this area with the help of vlogs, and blogs. Moreover, tourist organizations are sponsoring famous people and giving them free visits. They make videos and vlogs while traveling so the visited place, hotel, or local product can be advertised and become known and famous. But still, Pakistan has to do a lot of work to meet international standards (Khan, Ali, Zada, Saeed, & Zada, 2022).

Most people show great interest in social media channels to seek information in planning their trips and believe that social media is contributing effectively, especially through the pictorial display of the prospective destinations. The government should just add to it by ensuring safety and security, health facilities, healthy food, and some very serious initiatives to control pollution. Strict law enforcement is required. Besides, the government should focus on the strength and scope of social media outlets for targeting tourism development, especially attracting foreign tourists (Hussain, 2021).

Methodology

The researchers used the quantitative method with survey methodology. A comprehensive questionnaire was constructed on Google Forms as the major tool which was disseminated to all the contacts on Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp. A purposive sample of 385 respondents was considered adequate by using the Sample Size Calculator of Surveymonkey.com with a 5% margin of error and 95% confidence level. The purpose was to acquire the responses of social media users of different psychographics and demographics. Respondents were given two reminders to fill in the particulars over the period of two weeks; by the end of which a total of 188 responses were received. Data were analyzed with descriptive statistical procedures to seek answers to the research questions.

Hypothesis of the study

H_1: It is more likely that the extent of reliance on social networking sites leads to an attitudinal change in tour planning.

H_0: There is no correlation between reliance on social networking sites and attitudinal change for tour planning.

Results and Discussions

This section of the article contains major findings and their interpretation relevant to study objectives and research questions posed earlier in the article.

Table 1: Use of social media for tourism

Variables	n	Percentage
Consumed social media for tourism information	188	Agreed (78%)
		Disagreed (12)
		Neutral (10%)
Consulted social media for tour planning	188	Agreed (92%)
		Disagreed (6)
		Neutral (1%)
The usefulness of SNS for travel planning	188	Agreed (94%)
		Disagreed (6)
		Neutral (0%)
What inspires you most on social media to finalize your destination?	188	Pictures/Videos posted by friends (28%)
		Youtube Vlogs (36%)
		Posts of Celebrities (6%)
		Other (1%)
		Tour Operator Ads (29%)

Table 2: Reliance on social media for tourism

Variables	n	Percentage
Believe that tourism companies are effectively targeting potential tourists	188	Agreed (82%)
		Disagreed (11)
		Neutral (7%)
Reliance on social media for tourism information	188	Agreed (82%)
		Disagreed (11)
		Neutral (7%)
Believe that effective use of SNS reduces fears and persuades tourists	188	Agreed (88%)
		Disagreed (7%)
		Neutral (5%)
SNS helps choose the right destination	188	Agreed (92%)
		Disagreed (7)
		Neutral (1%)

	n	Percentage
Personally, experienced a trip supported through social media	188	Agreed (64%) Disagreed (31) Neutral (5%)

Table 3: Prioritizing KP for tourism

`	n	Percentage
Favorite tourist region after noticing it on social media platforms	188	Punjab Region (22%) KP Region (41%) Sindh Region (2%) Balouchistan Region (7%) GB Region (29%)
What is the most important factor in prioritizing KP as your destination?	188	Economy (56) Beauty (23%) Convenience (18%) Other (3%)
Previously held fears while visiting KP	188	Terrorism (64%) Language Barrier (18%) Culture Barrier (11%) Ethnic Barriers (4%) Other (3%)
KP govt must initiate a massive social media campaign to reduce fears and promote tourism	188	Agreed (98%) Disagreed (2%) Neutral (0%)
Still, have any fears about visiting KP?	188	Agreed (24%) Disagreed (68) Neutral (8%)
Local Tour operators are effectively using the potential of SNS	188	Agreed (74%) Disagreed (26%) Neutral (0%)

Testing Null Hypothesis

H_0: There is no correlation between reliance on social networking sites and attitudinal change for tour planning.

Table 4: T-Test Analysis

One-Sample Statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Reliance on SNS for Tourism Information	188	1.50	.827	.185
Attitudinal Change for Tour Planning	188	1.65	.875	.196

One-Sample Test

Test Value = 0

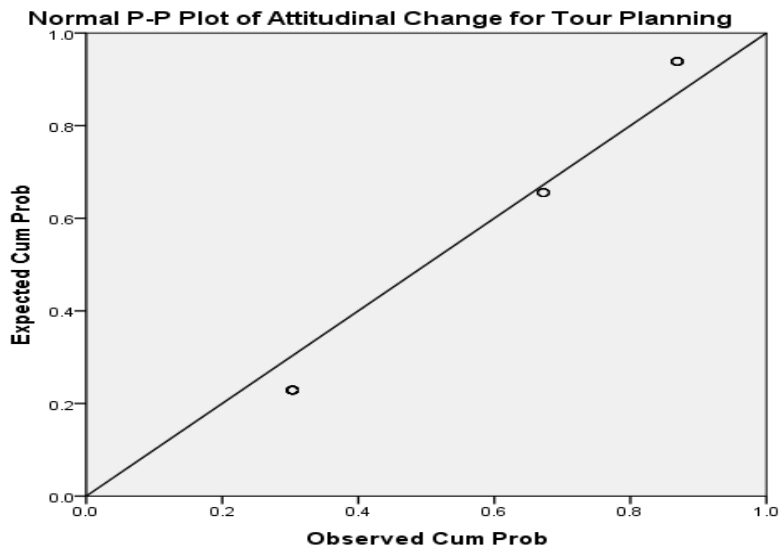|	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Reliance on SNS for Tourism Information	8.110	19	.000	1.500	1.11	1.89
Attitudinal Change for Tour Planning	8.432	19	.000	1.650	1.24	2.06

Figure 1: Normal P-P Plot

Table 4 carries the values of the t-test comparing the means of both variables, i.e. Reliance on SNS for tourism information and Attitudinal Change for Tour Planning. A significant correlation in the mean scores further indicates a strong correlation in both the Lower and Upper limits. H_0 was rejected with 95% confidence level. Perception of the audiences was analyzed regarding the attitudinal change.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The data revealed that social networking sites are the major source of information on tourism in Pakistan. Most social media users deem it necessary to browse it over Facebook and YouTube whenever planning their recreation. They find it more economical and convenient to visit different regions of KP compared to other regions of Pakistan. The potential of social media is to some extent utilized by tour operators with the help of advertisements and promotional strategies such as vlogs and documentaries, but government initiatives are highly desirable. A phenomenal number of respondents still have certain fears or concerns while planning a trip to the KP region that needs immediate attention from the stakeholders. Social media users seem more inspired by their friends visiting tourist places in KP and peer groups can be instigated through a social media campaign. Better facilitation, law and order, and infrastructure are the key to the success of this potential industry.

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