

Social Media as a Catalyst for Eco-Tourism Growth: Exploring the Perception of Social Media Users in Twin Metropolitan Cities (Rawalpindi & Islamabad), Pakistan

Ghulam Safdar ¹ Mahnoor Bibi ²



Abstract: Social media sites like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter frequently give individuals access to the breathtaking natural features of other places through visually appealing images that travellers and influencers share. The study aimed to explore how social media influences people's views about ecotourism. This research study was conducted using a quantitative research design. Using a survey approach, the data was gathered from (n=313) respondents based on purpose sampling who were active social media users. The sample consisted of males and females from Rawalpindi and Islamabad, Pakistan. For data collection, a self-design questionnaire consisted of three parts, i.e., demographic information of the respondents, social media use and eco-tourism based on the Likert scale. The data collection tool was designed on Google Forms and was distributed through Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram. The study findings showed that social media is an effective instrument for public education, awareness-building, and conservation activities. It helps to sell and promote ecotourism experiences and destinations, empowers local communities, and shifts consumer behaviour towards sustainability. The research concluded that ecotourism when adeptly managed via social media with a focus on social, cultural, and environmental sustainability, will shape its outcomes. This sector has the capacity to utilize social media's transformative power to foster a more resilient and inclusive future for our planet and its inhabitants through collaborative efforts and informed decision-making.

Key Words: Social Media, Eco-Tourism, Public Perception, Twin Cities

Introduction

In recent years, social media platforms have fundamentally transformed the way individuals communicate, exchange information, and make informed decisions (Chatterjee & Dsilva, 2021; Shabir et al., 2014a; Shakeel et al., 2024; Sheikh et al., 2021). Concurrently, there has been a growing global emphasis on sustainable practices and environmental preservation (Kim et al., 2004; Shabir et al., 2015; Shabir et al., 2014). Within this context, ecotourism—defined as responsible travel to pristine destinations aimed at environmental protection and community support—has emerged as a significant trend (Chi, 2021; Firman et al., 2022; Hussain et al., 2024; Javed & Shoab, 2021).

This study aims to investigate the influence of social media on ecotourism, with the intention of enhancing our understanding of how digital platforms shape perceptions, behaviors, and experiences related to sustainable travel. By gaining insights into the impact of social media, stakeholders can leverage these channels more effectively to promote eco-conscious travel and environmental preservation.

Statement of the Problem

This study aims to examine the impact of social media on visitor behavior, environmental awareness, and community engagement within the context of eco-tourism initiatives. By addressing the existing knowledge gap, the research seeks to provide strategic recommendations on leveraging social media to

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of Media & Communication Studies, Rawalpindi Women University, Rawalpindi, Punjab, Pakistan. ✉ safdarsting@gmail.com

² M.Phil. Scholar, Department of Media & Communication Studies, Rawalpindi Women University, Rawalpindi, Punjab, Pakistan. ✉ manowshah31@gmail.com

- **Corresponding Author:** Ghulam Safdar (✉ safdarsting@gmail.com)
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effectively promote and sustain eco-tourism activities. Eco-tourism has gained significant traction as a sustainable alternative to conventional tourism practices in recent years, fostering community development and enhancing environmental conservation efforts. Concurrently, social media platforms have emerged as powerful tools for marketing travel destinations and influencing traveller behaviours. Despite the growing interest in eco-tourism and the utilization of social media, there remains a paucity of understanding regarding the specific implications and effects of this intersection.

Significance of the Study

Social media platforms offer numerous opportunities for engaging with a diverse audience. By analyzing the impact of eco-tourism on these platforms, researchers can identify effective strategies for educating and engaging travellers in sustainable travel practices, thus fostering greater awareness and participation in eco-friendly tourism initiatives.

As the tourism sector continues to evolve, tour operators, destination marketers, and other stakeholders can derive valuable insights from understanding the influence of social media on eco-tourism. By recognizing social media trends, preferences, and behaviour patterns, businesses can tailor their marketing strategies to meet the needs of this niche market of eco-conscious travellers. In conclusion, researching the relationship between eco-tourism and social media is crucial for advancing sustainability objectives in the tourism industry, enhancing community empowerment, guiding marketing strategies, and shaping policies that promote eco-friendly travel.

Theoretical Framework Media Dependency Theory

The media dependency theory is applicable in this context, as it suggests that individuals seek information from media sources. In the realm of ecotourism, travellers often turn to social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and travel blogs to identify eco-friendly destinations and explore sustainable travel options. This theory indicates that both individual and societal decision-making and social validation are heavily influenced by media. Therefore, ecotourists may depend significantly on social media to validate their travel choices, garner approval from their peers, and visually document and share their experiences through photos and videos.

Figure 1
Study Model



Research Objectives

1. To determine the critical elements affecting ecotourism businesses' ability to effectively use social media for marketing and promotion.
2. To examine how social media influences travellers' views and choices for environmentally friendly travel.
3. To offer suggestions on how to best use social media in ecotourism projects, with an emphasis on improving visitor experiences, community involvement, and sustainability.

Research Questions

1. What are the critical elements affecting ecotourism businesses' ability to effectively use social media for marketing and promotion?
2. How does social media influence travellers' views and choices for environmentally friendly travel?
3. How can social media be effectively utilized to enhance visitor experiences, promote community involvement, and advance sustainability in eco-tourism projects?



Hypothesis

It is likely that increased social media engagement positively correlates with heightened awareness of eco-tourism initiatives, leading to greater visitor interest and participation in sustainable travel practices.

Research Methodology

Research Design

The nature of this study is a quantitative research approach. The questions were informative all about time eco-tourism through social media that might influence the public perception of tourism or not. The population of the research consisted of people ages above 18 years, including males or females who live in Rawalpindi and Islamabad. Due to time and budget constraints, the research sample (N=313) respondents included males and females from the Twin Cities.

Independent Variable

Social Media was the independent variable of the study.

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable in this study was eco-tourism growth, which included sustainability, economic impact, environmental impact, and marketing and promotions as sub-variables.

Population and Sample Size

All of the study's participants were people of all ages, including (male or female) who lived in Rawalpindi and Islamabad, and the sample size of this study was (N=313).

Sampling Technique

A quantitative survey method was used to study the effects of eco-tourism through social media. A non-probability (purposive sampling) who visited various places as tourists were employed as a sample to collect the data.

Data Collection Tool

A survey through an online (self-design) questionnaire was used to collect the data to evaluate how the respondents feel, behave, and think about eco-tourism, which is affecting them positively or negatively. The questionnaire consisted of two parts. Part A consisted of demographic information (age, gender, education, income, etc.) PART B contained general questions about the effects of eco-tourism through social media. Questions were based on a Likert scale to help the respondents choose appropriate responses according to their choice.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed through descriptive statistics which involve calculation of frequency and percentage by utilizing the SPSS 2021 version. Tables were used to display the results.

Result

Table 1

Demographic Information of Respondents

Respondents' Demographics	Frequency	Percent	
Gender	Male	108	34.6
	Female	204	65.4
	Total	312	100.0
Age	16-19	48	15.4
	20-25	152	48.7
	26-30	73	23.4
	31 or older	39	12.5
	Total	312	100.0
Marital Status	Married	93	29.8
	Un-married	219	70.2
	Total	312	100.0
Education Level	Inter	48	15.4

Respondents' Demographics	Frequency	Percent
Bachelor degree	198	63.5
Master degree	50	16.0
Above Masters	16	5.1
Total	312	100.0
Income	50000 to 100000	138
	100000 to 150000	64
	150000 to 200000	86
	>200000	24
	Total	312

The above table shows the result of responses age-wise. Most of respondents ages were 20-25 (N=152). The table also showed that most of the respondents' education was a bachelor's degree (N=198). Most of the respondents' marital status was unmarried (N=219). The income of most of the respondents was 50000 to 1lac (N=138). Most of the respondents were female (N=204)

Table 2

Sustainability

Question	Responses	Frequency	Percent	Mean	S.D
Are there any effects of incorporating sustainability into the growth of tourism on society and culture?	Strongly Agree	96	30.7	2.20	.959
	Agree	1	0.3		
	Neutral	79	25.2		
	Disagree	115	36.7		
	Strongly Disagree	22	7.0		
	Total	313	100.0		
What are travellers' perceptions and reactions towards sustainability initiatives while making travel decisions?	Strongly Agree	111	35.5	2.13	1.027
	Agree	83	26.5		
	Neutral	90	28.8		
	Disagree	25	8		
	Strongly Disagree	4	1.3		
	Total	313	100.0		
What are the advantages and difficulties for the environment that come with developing sustainable tourism?	Strongly Agree	75	24.0	2.36	1.017
	Agree	97	31.0		
	Neutral	98	31.3		
	Disagree	38	12.1		
	Strongly Disagree	5	1.6		
	Total	313	100.0		
Do the laws and regulations play in encouraging sustainability in the travel and tourism sector?	Strongly Agree	98	31.3	2.24	1.046
	Agree	82	26.2		
	Neutral	96	30.7		
	Disagree	32	10.2		
	Strongly Disagree	5	1.6		
	Total	313	100.0		
Are the efforts promoting sustainable tourism involving and empowering local communities?	Strongly Agree	84	26.8	2.23	.947
	Agree	101	32.3		
	Neutral	99	31.6		
	Disagree	1	0.3		
	Strongly Disagree	28	8.9		
	Total	313	100.0		

The above table shows the effects of incorporating sustainability into the growth of tourism on society and culture. Most of the respondents showed that there are no effects. They disagreed with this (N=115). The results showed travellers' perceptions and reactions to sustainability initiatives while making travel decisions. Most of the respondents were agree with this (N=111). About the advantages and difficulties for the environment that come with developing sustainable tourism. Most of the respondents replied neutral (N=98) about the laws and regulations played in the travel and tourism sector. Most of the respondents agreed with this (N=98) and responded that the efforts promoting sustainable tourism involve and empower local communities. Most of the respondents strongly agree with this (N=101).

**Table 3***Economic Impact*

Question		Frequency	Percent	Mean	S.D
Is there any impact changes in exchange rates have on the amount visitors spend at a place?	Strongly Agree	112	35.8	1.98	.896
	Agree	110	35.1		
	Neutral	74	23.6		
	Disagree	1	0.3		
	Strongly Disagree	16	5.1		
	Total	313	100.0		
Does a relationship exists between tourism earnings and government actions (such as taxation and visa requirements)	Strongly Agree	1	.3	3.98	.187
	Agree	2	.6		
	Neutral	7	2.1		
	Disagree	300	96.7		
	Strongly Disagree	1	0.3		
	Total	313	100.0		
Do travel expenses affect the way people travel and how much they spend at a destination they visit?	Strongly Agree	96	30.7	2.15	.975
	Agree	101	32.3		
	Neutral	91	29.1		
	Disagree	20	6.4		
	Strongly Disagree	5	1.6		
	Total	313	100.0		
Are the financial advantages and disadvantages for a nation's tourism business of hosting major events like the Olympics and world cups?	Strongly Agree	109	34.8	2.18	1.042
	Agree	71	22.7		
	Neutral	103	32.9		
	Disagree	25	8.0		
	Strongly Disagree	5	1.6		
	Total	313	100.0		
Have you ever altered your travel plans due to economic factors?	Strongly Agree	112	35.8	2.12	1.062
	Agree	95	30.4		
	Neutral	64	20.4		
	Disagree	38	12.1		
	Strongly Disagree	4	1.03		
	Total	313	100.0		

The above table shows that there is any impact changes in exchange rates have on the amount visitors spend at a place. Most of the respondents agreed with this (N=112) and that a relationship exists between tourism earnings and government actions (such as taxation and visa requirements). Most of the respondents were disagree with this (N=300). Travel expenses affect the way people travel and how much they spend at a destination they visit. Most of the respondents strongly agreed with this (N=101) and about the financial advantages and disadvantages of hosting major events like the Olympics and World Cups for a nation's tourism business. Most of the respondents agreed with this (N=109). Whereas altered travel plans due to economic factors. Most of the respondents were agree with this (N=112).

Table 4*Environmental Impact*

Question	Responses	Frequency	Percent	Mean	S.D
Are there any effects of climate change on tourist attractions and destinations?	Strongly Agree	120	38.3	2.12	1.006
	Agree	56	17.9		
	Neutral	115	36.7		
	Disagree	21	6.7		
	Strongly Disagree	1	0.3		
	Total	313	100.0		
Are there any effects mass tourism has on a delicate ecosystem in terms of the environment?	Strongly Agree	95	30.4	2.28	1.010
	Agree	62	19.8		
	Neutral	131	41.9		
	Disagree	20	6.4		
	Strongly Disagree	5	1.6		
	Total	313	100.0		

Question	Responses	Frequency	Percent	Mean	S.D
Do waste management and pollution have effects on the attitudes and actions of tourists?	Strongly Agree	88	28.1	2.29	1.067
	Agree	103	32.9		
	Neutral	64	20.4		
	Disagree	57	18.2		
	Strongly Disagree	1	0.3		
	Total	313	100.0		
Are there any effects of long-term consequences of deforestation on ecotourism?	Strongly Agree	76	24.3	2.34	1.011
	Agree	95	30.4		
	Neutral	109	34.8		
	Disagree	24	7.7		
	Strongly Disagree	8	2.6		
	Total	313	100.0		
What do natural disasters like hurricanes and wildfires have on economies that rely heavily on tourism?	Strongly Agree	94	30.0	2.37	1.152
	Agree	72	23.0		
	Neutral	95	30.3		
	Disagree	40	12.8		
	Strongly Disagree	12	3.8		
	Total	313	100.0		

The above table shows the environmental impact of climate change on tourist attractions and destinations. Most of the respondents were agree with this (N=120). Furthermore, results showed that any effects mass tourism has on delicate ecosystems in terms of the environment. Most of the respondents' responses were neutral (N=131). Waste management and pollution have effects on the attitudes and actions of tourists. Most of the respondents were strongly agree (N=103). Regarding the long-term consequences of deforestation on ecotourism, most of the respondents were neutral (N=109). Also, about natural disasters like hurricanes and wildfires that affect economies that rely heavily on tourism, most of the respondents were neutral (N=95).

Table 5

Marketing and Promotions

Question	Responses	Frequency	Percent	Mean	S.D
Do social media platforms influence tourists' decision-making regarding destination choices?	Strongly Agree	92	29.4	2.30	1.081
	Agree	87	27.8		
	Neutral	84	26.8		
	Disagree	45	14.4		
	Strongly Disagree	5	1.6		
	Total	313	100.0		
There are emerging trends and technologies in tourism marketing. Are the destinations adapting to these changes to stay competitive?	Strongly Agree	86	27.5	2.20	.888
	Agree	87	27.8		
	Neutral	135	43.1		
	Disagree	1	0.3		
	Strongly Disagree	4	1.3		
	Total	313	100.0		
Are there ethical implications of certain marketing tactics in the tourism industry?	Strongly Agree	91	29.1	2.28	1.046
	Agree	88	28.1		
	Neutral	93	29.7		
	Disagree	36	11.5		
	Strongly Disagree	5	1.6		
	Total	313	100.0		
Do you believe that there is a need for greater collaboration between governments, NGO's and private business to promote eco tourism effectively?	Strongly Agree	74	23.6	2.32	1.033
	Agree	118	37.7		
	Neutral	70	22.4		
	Disagree	46	14.7		
	Strongly Disagree	5	1.6		
	Total	313	100.0		



Question	Responses	Frequency	Percent	Mean	S.D
Do you believe that marketing and promotion have a positive impact on eco-tourism?	Strongly Agree	115	36.7	2.13	1.029
	Agree	69	22.0		
	Neutral	104	33.2		
	Disagree	20	6.4		
	Strongly Disagree	5	1.6		
	Total	313	100.0		

The above table shows how social media platforms influence tourists' decision-making process regarding destination choices. Most of the respondents were agree (N=92). Regarding the emerging trends and technologies in tourism marketing, the destinations adapt to these changes to stay competitive. Most of the respondents were neutral (N=135). Also, regarding the ethical implications of certain marketing tactics in the tourism industry, most of the respondents were neutral (N=93). Regarding the collaboration needed among governments, NGOs and private businesses to promote eco-tourism effectively, most of the respondents strongly disagreed (N=118). Whereas marketing and promotion have a positive impact on eco-tourism, most of the respondents agreed with this (N=115).

Conclusion

To sum up, the impacts of ecotourism on social media are complex and include both advantages and disadvantages. Positively, social media is an effective instrument for public education, awareness-building, and conservation activities. It helps to sell and promote ecotourism experiences and destinations, empowers local communities, and shifts consumer behaviour towards sustainability. Social media also makes it possible for conservation efforts to raise money through crowdfunding and other means, democratising support for environmental causes.

In the end, how ecotourism is used and managed on social media with careful attention to social, cultural, and environmental sustainability will determine its effects. Ecotourism has the potential to leverage social media's revolutionary capacity to build a more resilient and inclusive future for the planet and its inhabitants through cooperative efforts and well-informed decision-making.

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