SOCIAL MEDIA ADOPTION IN TOURISM PROMOTION AND TOURIST INTENTION: A DIFFUSION OF INNOVATION APPROACH

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Abstract

The tourism industry's reliance on social media as a potent marketing and promotional tool is increasingly evident, with platforms offering unparalleled reach and engagement with potential travelers. This research employs the Diffusion of Innovation (DOI) Theory to investigate the adoption and spread of social media platforms within the tourism industry. Using a sample of 300 respondents, selected through snowball sampling, the study employs Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with Smart PLS to analyze the data. The research aims to understand the relationship between social media usage by different entities—government and official authorities, influencers, and tourism organizations—and its impact on tourism promotion and travelers' plans. Results indicate a significant positive relationship between government and official authorities' adoption of social media and the promotion of tourism. Similarly, social media use by influencers and tourism organizations positively influences tourism promotion. Moreover, this study underscores the substantial influence of government-backed promotions and those supported by tourism organizations on the future travel plans of tourists. Notably, these promotional efforts play a crucial role in shaping the decisions of prospective travelers. In contrast, the research found a negligible impact of influencers' promotion on individuals' travel plans. The study's model, explaining 57% of the variance, attests to its predictive accuracy and concludes that in the contemporary digital era, the tourism industry's adept utilization of social media platforms, particularly through government and tourism organizations, emerges as a powerful force that significantly molds tourists' plans and contributes substantively to the industry's sustainable growth.

Keywords: Tourism industry, Social media, tourism promotion, organizations, Influencer, travel plans

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism in Pakistan has been a significant driver of economic growth and development. To fully capitalize on the potential of tourism, enhanced promotion efforts are needed using platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube (Hasni, et al., 2021). These platforms have turned into essential communication channels in the smart tourism era, helping the marketing of tourism by enabling tourism marketers to effectively interact with potential customers providing them with online information about tourist destinations and their travel plans. Potential tourists' decision-making regarding travel destinations has been significantly influenced by social media which has

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increased user-generated content, allowing tourists to share and exchange their experiences and photos or videos of their trips to different areas of Pakistan, hence, showing the beauty and diversity of the country.

Tourism authorities can improve their visibility and offer potential travelers authentic and attractive information, arousing the interest and curiosity of future tourists, above all that of those future tourists most likely to listen to what other tourists have to say and show (Sakshi et al., 2020), beyond any advertising and professional promotional campaign. The government and tourism organizations need to have a well-defined plan to go to many of the destinations of their country and social media can be that channel. However, everything needs a defined plan, and working openly with travel bloggers and influencers on these platforms can be crucial. A potential method can be achieved by creating content that appeals to the audience using interesting photos and stories that highlight the unique experiences and attractions that Pakistan has to offer, as well as engaging with followers and potential travelers by responding to comments, liking posts, and sharing updates. By strategically utilizing various social networking sites, governmental and private tourism entities within Pakistan have the potential to amplify the country's appeal and standing as a sought-after destination for tourists. As a result, utilization of the influence of social media platforms could position Pakistan as an attractive and essential stop for worldwide travelers. However, tourism as a discipline is new in the academic world in Pakistan (Shaikh & Syed 2013). The country's primary degree-granting organization in the travel industry was established in 2008. This explains why 14% of the studies state that a lack of travel industry education is a barrier to the travel sector's growth. Most of the degree-granting institutions are in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, although the rest of the country falls short in this regard. Many countries, including the Maldives, British Virgin Islands, Macao, Aruba, Fiji, Malta, Thailand, and the Philippines, rely heavily on the tourism and hospitality industries. They invest in and promote their tourism and hospitality businesses through effective policies. The Pakistani tourism industry has much potential but is currently facing challenges due to a lack of attention and investment from the government. Pakistan has the potential to enhance the expertise and skills of tourism professionals. Teaching students about the importance of social media and digital resources can greatly contribute to the growth of Pakistan's tourism potential. The intersection of degree-granting tourism and social media platforms can serve as a valuable link between academia and industry. This connection ensures that professionals in the tourism sector have the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively utilize social media for tourism promotion. Some studies have indicated that the role of media, both domestic and international, in shaping the perception of Pakistan is questionable. This is a concerning issue, especially for the growth of the tourism industry in the nation. If the media acts responsibly, the situation could be improved. The impact of social media on the promotion of the tourism industry is undeniable. It is a fast, effective, and cost-efficient tool for reaching a wide audience. Since there is a need for a minimal budget allocation here, less time for promotion, and low cost for advertisements. Therefore, it is essential for the Pakistani government to address the issue of media portrayal and utilize social media platforms effectively to promote tourism (Sukmana, 2022).

The relationship between the tourism industry and various sectors within a nation's economy is well-established. Pakistan, endowed with a rich cultural heritage, diverse geography, and a storied history, possesses immense potential in the realm of tourism. Regrettably, the nation's tourist attractions have not been firmly established and this industry has never been a top priority in the past. Furthermore, the travel industry in the country is failing to fulfill its responsibilities, resulting in significant challenges for this sector. Local and foreign tourism in Pakistan has been
significantly impacted by these issues. In recent years, several scholarly investigations have been undertaken to examine the difficulties encountered by the travel sector within the nation and suggest approaches for its improvement (Fakhar, 2010). Utilizing social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok could be one approach to promoting tourism in Pakistan (Siddiqui & Siddiqui, 2019). By implementing calculated and focused social media initiatives, Pakistan can exhibit its multifarious cultural legacy, awe-inspiring topography, and hospitable nature to an international audience. Noteworthy tourist destinations, spanning from the scenic landscapes of Swat, Malam Jabba, and Naran to the historical and archaeological wonders of Murree and Chitral, showcase the country’s vast potential. Social media has the potential to increase tourist arrivals to Pakistan by generating interest in these popular tourist destinations.

**The influence of social media on tourism in Pakistan**

The United Nations World Tourism Organization highlights that travel and tourism have emerged as vital economic sectors globally over the last two decades, fostering development and socioeconomic progress on a global scale (Shabbir et al., 2020). Pakistan, an emerging nation blessed with abundant cultural treasures and spectacular landscapes, has huge potential for the development of its tourism industry. If Pakistan utilizes its natural endowments optimally and progressively, it can earn a good amount of revenue and help in the progress of the economy (Bano et al., 2021); and can uplift rural areas along with improving the living standard of the people residing there. However, its tourism department has undergone hard times in the past as well, e.g., security concerns have pushed tourism in Pakistan back in time after the 9/11 attacks (Khan et al., 2020). But, to remove these obstacles and to make its tourism department flourish, a ‘Strategic Tourism Development Plan’ should be formed for the government to develop and use its tourism potential which is no small task in Pakistan. Utilizing both mainstream and social media platforms in these strategies can further promote tourism (Siddiqui & Siddiqui, 2019). In particular, adding well-known social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok in promotional strategies can effectively boost the worldwide exposure of Pakistan's beautiful geographic spots and tourist attractions (Bano et al., 2021).

Given the increasing importance of social media and digital marketing strategies for the promotion of tourism offerings in decentralized markets among foreign tourists (Aftab & Khan, 2019), the extent to which the aforementioned strategies influence tourist travel decisions remains a considerable under-researched topic. This study responds to this knowledge gap by examining how social media promotion by government entities, tourist organizations, and influencers influences the travel decision-making processes of prospective tourists. By generating emotionally compelling content, sharing authentic travel stories, and employing highly focused and granular targeted advertising (Aftab & Khan, 2019), this study seeks to determine whether such actors can be influential in prompting more local and foreign tourists to consider Pakistan for their next destination. A direct consequence of this rapidly growing literature and the increased reliance on said technologies by business and marketing entities (Aftab & Khan, 2019) is the conspicuously limited understanding of social media’s actual influence on prospective foreign tourists’ decision-making processes. Concerning the previous literature, the primary aim of this study is to provide some critical knowledge about how the social media promotion of Pakistan — both by government and independent actors — does or does not influence the travel decisions of prospective tourists. Recognizing the critical role of the government in disseminating accurate and reliable information on safety, travel advisories, and visa requirements, the study aims to provide insights that can guide policymakers in optimizing their communication strategies on social media platforms.
In sum, this study answered the following research questions, examining the influence of social media on the travel plans of tourists in Pakistan, with specific reference to the contribution of government & official authorities, tourism organizations, and social influencers in the promotion of destinations through online platforms, and tested the following hypotheses:

H1: The use of social media by the government and official authorities is significantly related to tourism promotion.
H2: The use of social media by influencers is significantly related to tourism promotion.
H3: The use of social media by tourism organizations is significantly related to tourism promotion.
H4: The government and official authorities’ efforts in promoting tourism have a significant influence on shaping peoples’ travel decisions.
H5: Tourism organizations’ efforts in promoting tourism have a significant influence on shaping people's travel decisions.
H6: The influencers’s tourism promotion significantly influence individuals’ travel plans and decisions.

Diffusion of innovation coined by E.M. Rogers (1976), explains how a specific idea or product gains momentum and adopt by a social system with the passage of time. In this research the theory provides the framework to know the dynamics of social media adoption in tourism industry. It considers aspects such as the perceived benefits of using social media, the ease of use of various platforms, compatibility with existing marketing plans, relative advantages over traditional approaches, and the impact of opinion leaders and early adopters. Examining these components through the lens of diffusion of innovation theory can shed light on the patterns, problems, and variables affecting social media platform adoption in the tourist industry's dynamic landscape. Hence, the tourism industry may adopt social media as a powerful tool of communication and marketing to attract maximum travelers. Furthermore, incorporating social media in tourism can make the message more effective and contribute to the national economy by producing many job opportunities for the people.

Tourism in Pakistan

Given Pakistan's status as a developing country, it is vital to focus on boosting revenue and attracting investment to keep pace with other nations. One area that deserves attention is the development of the tourism industry in Pakistan. Numerous breathtaking destinations have the potential to generate significant revenue through the tourism industry. However, it is essential to utilize these resources in a progressive manner (Gallarza & Saura, 2002). The promotion of tourism in Pakistan remains a significant challenge due to the lack of effective promotion through mainstream and social media channels (Siddiqui & Siddiqui, 2019). Furthermore, strategic partnerships with influential social media influencers and travel bloggers can also play a crucial role in promoting tourism in Pakistan (Hasni et al., 2021). Collaborating with travel agencies and tour operators can also help to craft attractive and enticing tour packages for both domestic and international tourists (Khan et al., 2021). A coordinated effort between the government, tourism industry stakeholders, social media influencers, and travel bloggers will be critical to the successful promotion of tourism in Pakistan.

Moreover, Pakistan is highly attractive to developing nations. The cultural and historical legacy of this ancient region is readily apparent. Lulusar, Naran, Shogran, and Kaghan valleys, Lake Saiful Muluk, Supat Valley, Malika Parbat (the tallest peak in the Kaghan valley and known as the Queen of the Mountains), and other historically significant mountain ranges including the Hindu Kush are popular tourist destinations in the country (Arshad et al., 2018). Additionally, Pakistan’s climate is diverse to the extent that if one part has snow-capped peaks the other possesses sandy
beaches, attracting adventure enthusiasts and nature lovers and providing them with a wide range of activities such as trekking, mountaineering, skiing, and water sports. Pakistan’s capital cities, Lahore, Karachi, and Islamabad are also a combination of modernity and traditionality. Thus, the blend of rich cultural heritage, picturesque landscapes, and vibrant cities makes Pakistan an attractive tourist spot. So far, the tourism industry in Pakistan has not fully taken off. It has tremendous potential to boost the economy and reduce poverty by adapting modern and novel ways of communication via social media.

Literature shows a significant impact of social media on the tourism industry. The function of social media in promoting sustainable tourism in the Indian states of Assam and Odisha was examined in a recent study by Chatterjee & Dsilva, (2021), concluding that there is a need for the promotion of sustainable tourism and associated products on social media platforms for travel destinations. In a similar vein, Siddiqui and Siddiqui (2019), established that social media platforms had evolved into indispensable instruments for the promotion and dissemination of tourism-related information. An additional study conducted by Bano et al. (2021), discovered that the promotion and visibility of tourist destinations can be substantially enhanced using prominent social media platforms. An additional investigation carried out in the United States examined how social media impacts the tourist gaze, modifies experiences before, during, and after the journey, and transforms tourism within specific domains, including adventure travel and city tourism (Correia & Dolnicar, 2021). Although there has been considerable research conducted on the influence of social media on tourist behavior, the impact of social media on sustainable tourism has been the subject of very few studies (Gulati, 2022). Social media can be used to promote responsible travel in several ways. Informing people about environment-friendly travel options and adopting sustainable tourism practices is one approach. Supporting the local economy and elevating local enterprises are additional uses of social media (Haugen, 2023). In support of the preservation of these facets of a destination, social media users can assist in raising awareness by sharing photographs and anecdotes about the local culture and traditions (Haugen, 2023). Social media can additionally serve as a platform to promote conscientious conduct among tourists, including the mitigation of adverse environmental effects and the observance of indigenous customs and traditions (Greenfield, 2023).

According to Statista (2023), Pakistan has been identified as one of the ten most prospective tourist destinations globally. Between 2024 and 2028, the tourism sector in Pakistan is anticipated to expand at a CAGR of 3.59%, reaching $3,918.00m by 2028. Social media has significantly transformed the tourism sector in Pakistan through the provision of an effective medium for advertising and promotional activities. The way individuals strategize their journeys and disseminate their experiences has been fundamentally altered (Ali, 2016). Social media platforms function as influential marketing instruments, enabling destinations to exhibit their distinctive points of interest, customs, and encounters to an international audience (Statista, 2023). Thus, the integration of social media platforms into tourism promotional endeavors holds immense potential.

2. METHOD

Social media is conceptualized as participatory, conversational, and fluid online communities (Qualman, 2009), mostly focused on user-generated content (Buhalis & Law, 2008). Since tourism is an information intensive industry hence, social media is particularly relevant to this industry (Gretzel et al., 2000). Consumers get information to assist in the tour-planning process and to make informed decisions about their potential destinations, accommodations, restaurants, and other attractions (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Thus, social media platforms are highly relevant to enhance tourism in a country. The current research employed quantitative research as its principal
methodology to categorize, quantify, and analyze how governmental bodies, travel organizations, and influencers employ social media to interact with the public, consumers, and market destinations. An online questionnaire was designed and validated to measure the study's variables. Responses from tourists and potential visitors (i.e., the general public) were gathered via a self-administered questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed to encompass both the actual and prospective advantages that individuals and organizations stand to gain from implementing social media. In total, 300 responses were collected. This was done through Google Forms, WhatsApp, and face-to-face questionnaires. A self-administered questionnaire was developed with 30 items to meet the objectives of the study. In this research design, convenience sampling was used to determine the likely outcomes. It is a popular method in social media research because of the availability and easy recruitment of prospective participants (Liu et al., 2019). For example, in the tourism context, where people are active on social media platforms and available for researchers, convenience sampling can help in data collection from tourists as they are readily reachable for such purposes (Venkatesh & Suresh, 2016). Structural equation modeling was employed because it is useful for quantitative analysis since it allows testing hypotheses and building models with several predictor and criterion variables.

3. ANALYSIS & FINDINGS

Among all respondents, 65.7% were males while females constituted 34.3%. In terms of age group most respondents, namely 59.0%, fell into the category of between 21-25 years old. Additionally, 23.3% fall within the age range of 16-20, while 14.0% were in the age group of 26-30. A mere 4.7% of respondents fall within the age range of 31-35. The findings reveal that a significant portion of respondents dedicate a substantial amount of time to social media. The largest group, comprising 37.7% of the participants, spends more than 4 hours on social media. Another 37.3% allocate 3-4 hours to their social media activities. A smaller proportion, 20.7%, devotes 1-2 hours to social media, while a mere 4.3% of respondents spend less than an hour on these platforms. It was evident from the data that Facebook was the most popular social media platform among the respondents, with 50.3% of them using it. Instagram came in second place with 26.3% of the respondents, followed by TikTok with only 4.0%. Interestingly, 19.3% of the respondents prefer other social networking sites for tourism discussions and travel-related information.

The research consisted of five constructs, including four independent variables and one dependent variable. The focus was on understanding the impact of these variables on people's behavior when making travel plans. All the measures were reflective. The reliability statistics are given in the table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Outer loadings, Composite Reliability, and AVE values</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Items</td>
<td>Outer loadings</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social media use (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, other)</td>
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<td>SMU1</td>
<td>.773</td>
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<td>SMU2</td>
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<td>SMU3</td>
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<td>Influencers’ social media use for tourism promotion</td>
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<td>ISM1</td>
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<td>ISM2</td>
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The first hypothesis has been confirmed, suggesting that the utilization of social media by government and official authorities is an effective method for promoting tourism. This is due to the perception that promotional efforts from the government are more trustworthy compared to other sources ($\beta = 0.929$, $t = 17.272$, $p < 0.01^* $). The second hypothesis (H2) was supported, which means that there is a positive relationship between social media use and the promotion of tourism by an influencer. The higher beta and t values ($\beta = 0.568$, $t = 12.679$, $p < 0.01^* $), indicate the adoption of social media by an influencer to promote a tourist place for their followers. Social media influencers are individuals who possess a substantial number of followers and are recognized for their proficiency or status within a specific domain. Their followers frequently regard them as reliable and credible purveyors of information. Their endorsement of a tourist
spot can thus affect the perceptions of their followers regarding that place and the probability that they will visit the place increases. Hence, collaborations between governmental bodies, tourism enterprises, and Instagram influencers to endorse their services can have a favorable impact on the promotion of a particular destination.

The acceptance of H3 i.e. social media use by tourist organizations is positively related to the promotion of their tourism brands ($\beta = 0.459$, $t = 8.357$, $p < 0.01$ *), suggests that social media marketing creates a sense of motivation among the potential tourists to visit a particular destination through a particular brand or agency. This hypothesis implies that peoples’ motivation to use a particular service for their tourism can be influenced by their exposure to content posted via Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and other social networks including tourist spot reviews, recommendations, and endorsements. The positive relationship between tourism promotion and making tourism plans suggests that tourism organizations' marketing can not only influence tourists’ attitudes and beliefs about a tourist place but also encourage them to act and make a tour. The fourth hypothesis H4 was supported by the results with ($\beta = 0.384$, $t = 5.437$, $p < 0.01$ *), which revealed a strong relationship between the government bodies’ promotion of tourism spots and its impact on future tourist travel plans. It means people consider any promotion by the government more authentic and reliable than anyone else. It has a huge margin for tourism increase if there is a back by the government. The government can increase its revenue and attract local and foreign tourists by engaging people through social media and sending attractive messages like other countries. The fifth hypothesis H5 was accepted ($\beta = 0.460$, $t = 6.167$, $p < 0.01$ *), showing another robust relationship between the promotion of tourism destinations by tourism organizations and people’s plans of tourism. It means any message from some authentic source has more impact on people’s plans rather than a common man's. The sixth hypothesis H6 was not accepted ($\beta = 0.017$, $t = 0.195$, $p = 0.524$), showing an insignificant relationship between influencers’ promotion and impact on peoples’ behavior regarding tourism plans. The possible reason might be that various factors can influence people's decisions when it comes to planning their tourism activities. These factors include personal preferences, recommendations from friends and family, availability of resources, and accessibility to travel destinations. Finally, the coefficient of determination ($R^2$) was calculated to determine the percentage variance of the exogenous constructs and the predictive accuracy of the study's model (Hair et al., 2017). The R squared value ($R^2$) of 0.570, shows that the exogenous constructs account for 57% of the variance, that is a moderate and satisfactory ratio according to Ramayah et al. (2018).

4. DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION
In today’s digital world social media stands out among other online platforms to promote tourism-related communication (Vengesayi et al., 2009). Current research findings strengthen the previous literature that the promotion of tourism via social media by government and tourism organizations can greatly attract tourists to Pakistan as their next travel destination. Thereby, tourist companies may enhance the credibility of their sponsored advertisements and official sources, thus leading to a boost in the tourism industry. This research further found that social media influencers’ promotion of a particular tourist spot had an insignificant influence on tourists’ behavior. Considering the results, this study emphasizes the need for an enhanced role of government to provide accurate information regarding tourist places, accommodation, expenses, and more importantly accurate weather predictions during these periods of rapid change (Vengesayi et al., 2009). It is due to the reason that most foreign travelers rely heavily on precise weather forecasts because they enable them to plan for their activities and hence make informed decisions about
when to travel (Bustamante-Morales, 2018). Moreover, precise weather predictions can add value to trips by giving local and foreign tourists options for outdoor activities and enjoyment. As such people are more likely to plan their holidays around what they like and receive recommendations from trusted sources like government officials and tourism organizations rather than simply being persuaded by influencer marketing alone. Therefore, accurate and trustworthy information should be disseminated through social media channels particularly official ones by governments, tourism agencies, and businesses so that people can trust them when deciding on visiting certain places or not. The rise of social media platforms has made accurate and reliable information vital in the tourism industry (Chen et al., 2020). Consequently, using these platforms would be highly beneficial to the tourism industry to facilitate effective decision-making among travelers (Sun, 2014) and the growth of the local tourism market.

All in all, the tourism industry in Pakistan has tremendous potential to be a major propeller of economic growth in this country but it is still growing and developing. This research emphasizes the crucial role that promotional activities play in driving the development of the tourism sector and calls for the use of current technologies such as social media. In particular, the direct involvement of government agencies and travel bodies in employing social media platforms strategically can make a great contribution to promoting this industry. Using these platforms, they can not only increase the exposure of Pakistan's wide range of tourist attractions but also interact with a worldwide audience, highlighting the country's vibrant cultural heritage and stunning natural scenery. As the tourism industry continues to evolve, it is decisive to focus on both physical infrastructure development and innovative digital strategies to fully tap into the economic potential and establish Pakistan as a prominent and sought-after destination on the world tourism map.

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