

SOCIAL MEDIA AS A CATALYST FOR TOURISM ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN PAKISTAN: A STUDY OF DIGITAL MARKETING STRATEGIES

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to show how social media helps Pakistani tourism entrepreneurs, boosting the exposure of tourist attractions and their own activities. Thanks to Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, entrepreneurs can easily reach tourists from all over the globe by sharing user content, which affects the destinations' tourism image. Though social media marketing is useful, there is not much information on how Pakistani tourism companies apply it in their business. To deal with this gap, the study carries out qualitative interviews with purposely selected business owners, who rely on social media to market their products. The study is looking for strategies in digital marketing that encourage tourists to take part and help businesses expand. It also analyses the issues that entrepreneurs encounter, for example, having limited digital abilities, having financial challenges and creating content. The research likely gives important guidance for using social media well in the tourism sector of Pakistan.

Keywords: *Social Media, Entrepreneurship, Tourism, Technology, Pakistan*

INTRODUCTION

In the past few years, the tourism sector in Pakistan has changed a lot, mainly because of social media being used in digital marketing. Thanks to these improvements, entrepreneurs can now easily reach a lot of people and display the nation's diversity and heritage. As tourism companies switch to digital platforms, they now have more

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ways to attract customers with compelling online content and interesting campaigns.

Promoting tourism in Pakistan now depends a lot on social media platforms. Thanks to platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, Pakistani tourism entrepreneurs can offer interesting experiences that appeal to people from all over the world. Such use of digital media advances the recognition of a city and also contributes to making tourists feel safe and positive about visiting. It has been shown that social media plays an important role in helping people choose where to visit by emphasizing the destination brand (Hussain, 2020).

Social media provides a convenient way for entrepreneurs to stay in touch with their audience, provide quick answers to questions and create strong connections with potential buyers. Reviews and experiences shared by other people via the internet bring more value to promotion and can motivate people planning their next trip. Through this interaction, a feeling of community is created and motivates constant communication between businesses and their customers.

Besides, using digital marketing is an attractive strategy for entrepreneurs who are working with a tight budget. Needing a large budget is a common feature of traditional advertising, but social media lets you advertise more cheaply and measure your success. Now, both big and small companies have the same chance to market their products to individuals all over the world thanks to low costs.

The presence of social media is also highlighted by the emergence of different tourism markets and unique experiences in Pakistan. Today, entrepreneurs have the ability to create content aimed at different groups, encouraging people to do adventure tourism, explore culture and choose eco-friendly adventures. Because of this approach, various kinds of tourists are attracted and at the same time, unknown places and experiences get introduced and the tourism industry grows sustainably.

Still, companies in tourism have to face several difficulties when using social media for marketing. People who run a business on the internet should keep up with constant changes in technology and computer techniques to sustain their image. You should also be careful, as disputes and factual errors can be easily shared on the internet and end up affecting your business's reputation. Thus, entrepreneurs must keep learning and adjusting to changes in the digital industry.

All in all, social media helps boost tourism business in Pakistan by giving new ways to promote and interact with potential visitors. Adopting digital marketing strategies helps Pakistan display its diversity to more people and also gives entrepreneurs the opportunity to establish honest connections worldwide. Thanks to developing digital platforms, tourism promotion in Pakistan is expected to keep progressing, making this unique country known to people from all over the globe.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social media is now a big part of digital marketing which has brought major changes to the tourism industry in countries like Pakistan. The role of social media in boosting tourism entrepreneurship in Pakistan is studied here, while shining a light on digital marketing actions used to make the tourism industry grow (Bögenhold & Klinglmair, 2016; Tunio, Shaikh, Katpor & Brahmī et al., 2023). How consumers behave and decide what to buy in tourism is now strongly affected by social media. He points out that Facebook, Instagram and Twitter create chances for tourism businesses to get in touch with patrons, increase their recognition and market their products. Such interaction creates meaningful links with people, which increases the chances of them using and buying from these companies. Verhoef, Reinartz and Krafft (2010) state that social media marketing is now a major factor in affecting customer behaviour and should be a key part of marketers' plans.

Pakistan's tourism industry has been adopting digital marketing more and more due to the growing use of internet and social media. The statistics from 2020 reveal that approximately 76.38 million people in Pakistan use the internet and this number includes 37 million social media users (Datareportal, 2020; Bögenhold, Klinglmair & Kandutsch et al., 2017). Thanks to this trend, entrepreneurs in the tourism industry are now using digital tools to help promote what they have to offer. Khan and Khan (2022) suggest in their review that digital media is becoming increasingly valuable in marketing, so Pakistan can now present its attractions to global audiences with less effort. Pakistan's tourism entrepreneurs have made use of various digital marketing ideas to welcome tourism. Such steps involve displaying the country's impressive views and cultural background, working with influencers and engaging in e-WOM activities. Hussain and Khan's (2023) study revealed that highlighting Pakistan's nature and cultural background can help tourism through creative posts on social media. It is evident from the research that tourism helps produce income outside the sector, drives the economy and shapes Pakistan's local areas through many travel destinations and things to do. The purpose is to emphasize how digital marketing helps tourism, especially in marketing Pakistani destinations (Tunio & Tunio, 2024).

There are still several issues that slow the effective use of social media marketing by tourism SMEs in Pakistan. According to Ahmad and Salam's (2021) major obstacles include uncertainty about how much a company will gain from marketing, doubts about the truthfulness and reliability of news, shortfalls in technological knowledge, limited time for marketing and undefined targets. Besides, when it comes to the environment, consumers being aware and open-minded, businesses facing competition and the risk of damaging comments, all add to the difficulty in adopting social media marketing approaches (Tunio, Sabir, Rashid & Gilal et al., 2024).

Social media is important for more than marketing since it affects how people choose their travel destination and how a place is viewed. Experts suggest that posts made by tourists about their travel

experiences give people new insights that help influence their final choices (Hajli, 2015) Due to this relationship, there is a strong sense of community, lasts conversation and enhances promotion of the destination. Because of social media, tourism businesses in Pakistan now enjoy new ways to promote themselves and build relationships with customers. With the use of digital marketing, Pakistan's unique attractions gain more attention and local entrepreneurs can connect with people all over the globe. It is necessary to manage the issues that arise when applying social media marketing to reach its best results.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this study, we rely on qualitative research, as it helps us study in detail and understand the backgrounds of Pakistani tourism entrepreneurs using online platforms for marketing. Much of what makes qualitative research valuable is its ability to explain how people feel, what encourages them and what they face (Creswell, 2014). The research collects detailed and helpful data rather than doing much mathematical analysis, related to the objective of revealing in-depth insights about digital marketing strategies in the tourism sector.

The reason for choosing qualitative methods is that they allow for the study of the intricate features of entrepreneurship and digital marketing in Pakistan's tourism sector. Rather than focusing on statistics like quantitative methods, qualitative research helps people go into more detail about their experiences, plans and the problems they face (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Data Collection

Interviews with open-ended questions are the main way the research collects data. This way of discussion proves to be suitable as it rests on flexibility, easy interactions and steady exploration of vital topics. Interviews are based on open-ended questions meant to discover how social media helps and hurts the tourism industry.

Participants are recruited using a strategy where the participants are chosen for a purpose. The study focuses only on those tourism entrepreneurs who make active use of social media for marketing. Besides, referrals from the first participants are used to gather more respondents, which helps to reach many relevant entrepreneurs.

The reason for selecting 15 tourism entrepreneurs from Pakistan is that the research standards state that saturation happens when roughly ten to fifteen interviews are completed (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Every interview lasts for roughly 40-60 minutes and can be done online via video call or in person, depending on the respondent's choice and availability.

Demographics of Respondents

Total of 15 tourism entrepreneurs involved in this study and they were from Lahore, Karachi, Islamabad, Gilgit-Baltistan and the Swat Valley. Research participants were heterogeneous in terms of residence, gender and previous business experience, so they each bring different opinions to social media marketing in the tourism sector.

Table 1: Profile of the Respondents

Demographic Variable	Details
Gender Distribution	10 male, 5 female
Age Range	25-50 years
Business Experience	2-15 years in the tourism industry
Social Media Platforms Used	Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, and YouTube
Primary Business Focus	Adventure tourism, eco-tourism, cultural heritage tourism, and hospitality services

Data Analysis

The data were analysed by using thematise analysis approach. The reason for using this method is that it makes it possible to spot, arrange and interpret the core themes of the interview transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The procedure for analysis goes as follows:

1. All interviews are turned into a written format for correctness.

2. The researcher going through and re-reading the transcripts helps them dive into the data.
3. Codes are given to similar statements and ideas to make the analysis more efficient.
4. To organize codes, they are grouped into themes such as marketing strategies, obstacles in digital marketing, the influence of social media and the outcomes of business development.
5. Researchers break down themes and check them against both their questions and previous research studies to find important outcomes.

Through thematic analysis, the researchers guarantee that all findings are well-organized and let them investigate social media's influence on tourism entrepreneurship within Pakistan. Thanks to qualitative methods, research outcomes reflect real-life issues which appeals to scholars, governments and business people.

FINDINGS AND RESULTS

The thematic analysis of the data reveals four major themes, which are given in table No. 2.

Table 1: Themes Generated from Interviews.

1. Social Media as a Growth Driver
2. Engagement and Customer Interaction
3. Challenges in Digital Marketing
4. The Future of Social Media in Tourism

Social Media Helps to Increase Growth

It is demonstrated that using Instagram, Facebook and YouTube enhances a company's potential for growth. Many entrepreneurs say that content that catches the eye is important for getting tourists from around the world. In Gilgit-Baltistan, one entrepreneur pointed out that social media offers more visibility to their business than

conventional ways could. Another man from Lahore stressed how influential people help sellers reach a larger number of customers by highlighting the brand.

Interaction with and the Engagement of Customers

Building relationships with customers was mainly done through messages, reviews and posting that encouraged interaction. An entrepreneur from Swat focused on eco-tourism company mentioned, “Options to get in touch promptly on social media platforms secure potential guests and turn them into customers.” In addition, many use TikTok and Instagram Reels to feature traveling which helps attract more people and makes them want to book trips.

Problems Facing Digital Marketing

On the other hand, tourism entrepreneurs find it hard due to algorithm updates, expenses for paid advertising and having to deal with opposing reviews. According to a local entrepreneur in Karachi, because of Facebook’s recent algorithm updates, she has to depend on paid ads, which adds extra cost to her marketing efforts. The fact that negative reviews can be seen by everyone is very concerning for business owners and as an Islamabad-based respondent said, “One unhappy review may keep people from using the business.”

The Way Social Media Is Changing Tourism

Chief Executive Officer (CEOs) aware that the development of Artificial Intelligence (AI) influencer programmes and technologies such as AR and VR will bring fresh changes to digital marketing. In Islamabad, someone pointed out that using artificial intelligence and data analysis is leading digital tourism forward. A further businessperson says that exploring tourist spots virtually before making a reservation is about to become popular among future travellers.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

By studying the results, it is evident that social media has a major role in improving and supporting tourism-related entrepreneurship in Pakistan. Using Instagram, Facebook, YouTube and TikTok is not only about promoting, but also about interacting with customers, building the brand and making profits. In many regions including Gilgit-Baltistan, Lahore, Swat and Karachi, people agreed that sharing content visually on Instagram and YouTube allowed them to represent their unique tourism destinations. This matches what is found in global research, indicating that visually attractive content influences both tourism marketing and people's decisions (Sigala, 2018). Because social media is accessible to everyone, entrepreneurs in distant places can participate in national and international markets. Influencers' support for brands increases their exposure and adds to the concept of social proof, which now plays a big role in influencing what customers decide to do (Marques & Almeida, 2021).

Social media also plays a big part in helping companies to interact with their customers. Those taking part from Swat Valley and elsewhere noted that responding quickly to customers' questions and providing interactive content like stories, reels and reviews help establish good customer relationships. When travellers interact with the service workers in real time, it helps build trust, which is essential in the service-based tourism industry (Hudson & Hudson, 2017). TikTok and Instagram Reels are being used more and more to give people exciting tastes of tourism, appealing to them by using short, engaging videos. It follows recent studies that underline the rising trend of people becoming more actively involved with others during their choices to travel (Xiang, Du, Ma, & Fan, 2021).

Still, the results also point out the important challenges that come with social media marketing as it develops. New developments in how social media platforms filter posts can limit the number of people a business reaches, resulting in entrepreneurs paying for more ads. People from Karachi explained that their marketing costs have gone up because their websites aren't visible on search engines like before.

These challenges are well known among experts, as digital entrepreneurs usually have to deal with changes in platforms and rising costs of finding new customers (Gretzel, 2020). Additionally, facing negative comments openly on social media can harm a restaurant's image and discourage visitors from sending their business in the future. As explained by the responder in Islamabad, one bad online review can easily affect the business for a long time and that's why tourism businesses should take care of their digital reputation.

As for the future, the entrepreneurs interviewed feel positive about the use of advanced technology in marketing for tourism on the internet. AI chatbots and using data are viewed as important, as they help businesses offer personal messages to each customer and place targeted ads. The advancements in AI are built on new research that shows it plays a valuable role in making tourism customer service and marketing better (Tussyadiah, 2020). Besides, virtual and augmented reality are set to change the way people plan trips, letting them take virtual visits before buying tickets which could lead to higher sales.

To conclude, having social media in tourism entrepreneurship results in greater interaction with customers, but there are also some major problems to handle. Because technology keeps evolving, entrepreneurs need to use new tools and methods to stay in the lead and be resilient in modern tourism.

CONCLUSION

The study proves that social media has helped greatly promote tourism, beginning in Pakistan. People starting businesses in various locations make use of Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok to reach more people, interact with customers and boost their brand exposure. It is cheaper and easier on these platforms to advertise tourism-related services than with traditional marketing, which usually achieves less success. Nevertheless, the topic points out some significant concerns, including updates in platform algorithms, the expense of paid ads and the dangers of having unfavourable reviews

on the internet. However, entrepreneurs look forward to future success, mainly because AI and VR are expected to improve how customers buy products and how companies promote them. Since digital trends are always changing quickly, tourism entrepreneurs have to keep up or they could fall behind. If technology and social media are used accurately, they can help tourism in Pakistan grow, mainly in areas not known to the public yet. All in all, social media is not only used for marketing but greatly helps businesses in the tourism sector by fostering relationships, increasing visibility and guaranteeing the industry's longevity. It seems that entrepreneurs who improve their digital skills and become familiar with various platforms enjoy more benefits from the opportunities offered by the digital world.

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