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Assessment of Sustainable Practices in the tourism Businesses in Northern area of Pakistan

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Abstract

Being a developing economy, Pakistan can sustain its economic growth through the promotion of Tourism activities. In this regard, tourism is considered an important channel to boost the economic development of a country. In Pakistan, the tourism sector has been fluctuating due to various political and security issues. Moreover, Sustainability is an established business trend in the modern corporate world. The literature on sustainable tourism practices is scant, particularly in the least developed countries. Very few studies touch upon the concept and no holistic theoretical or conceptual frameworks around the idea of sustainable practices in the tourism industry have been formulated. This study aims to explore the implementation of sustainable tourism in Pakistan and how the tourism industry conceives its role in this regard. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with the tour operators who operated in the northern area of Pakistan. In-depth interviews were conducted to gather data. Results suggest that the tour operators although realize the importance of social, environmental, and economic dimensions of tourism on the communities have no management systems in place to cater accordingly. There are no incentives in place by the government to facilitate tour operators to design and implement such systems. The tour operators do not select a destination based on Sustainable practices, but rather the selection of destination is mostly demand-based and profit-oriented. The study suggests that corporate profit motive is the sole criterion for decision-making and is one of the major causes impeding sustainable tourism in Pakistan. The role of tour operators in developing sustainable tourism is vague as the tour operators do not have any systems in place to implement sustainable models. The study recommends that efforts need to be put in place to incentivize sustainable tourism in Pakistan and proper laws should be set forth by the authorities to comply by the tour operators. The role of tour operators is important and understood, however, there is a need to put proper systems in place.

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Keywords: sustainable practices; tourism industry; Qualitative study.

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INTRODUCTION

Pakistan possesses immense potential for tourism with its rich heritage of ancient archaeological sites, including the Indus Valley civilization, Kalasha, and Buddhist civilizations. Additionally, the country's awe-inspiring landscapes, particularly in the northern regions, with their majestic peaks, glaciers, and rivers, have gained widespread recognition in the field of adventure tourism. Despite this significant capacity to grow, the

tourism industry has not received due consideration and backing. Political instability and security challenges are major causes of fluctuations in this industry. However, it contributed significantly to the economy of the country and the government has shown interest in the development of this sector (Sajjad, Jillani, & Raziq, 2018). Tourism approximately earned USD 7.6 billion in 2016 for the country with an anticipated growth of 5.1% in 2017. Looking ahead, it is projected to increase by 5.6% annually, PKR 1,432.1 billion of GDP by 2027 (Arshad, Iqbal, & Shahbaz, 2018). In 2016, the contribution of the travel and tourism industry to Pakistan's GDP was 6.9%, equivalent to USD 19.4 billion. It is projected to witness a 6.0% increase in 2017 and continue to grow at an annual rate of 5.8% until 2027 and 7.2% of GDP (Ullah et al., 2021).

Pakistan holds tremendous tourism potential, owing to its striking mountains and diverse range of seasons (Imran, Alam, & Beaumont, 2014). Pakistan has countless potential tourism destinations, encompassing a vast coastal area extending over 1,000 km by the Arabian Sea, making it ideal for the development of beach resorts and other leisure activities. In the southern regions, diverse natural deserts offer unique attractions, while the northern parts of the country feature captivating hill stations and valleys. Moreover, the mountains in the northern areas provide ample opportunities for exciting adventure experiences (Sajjad et al., 2018). This industry can make significant contributions to the country's economy, amounting to billions of dollars. However, the present socio-economic crisis carries many challenges in realizing the expected economic benefits. Notably, the tourism and hotel sectors are highly sensitive to terrorism and political instability, which has been a major impediment to progress (Amran, Lee, & Devi, 2014). This study aims to address a variety of economic, social, and ecological issues that affect Pakistan. Some of these issues include political uncertainty, slow economic growth, corruption, social unhappiness, and terrorism, which have collectively impacted the nation's socioeconomic landscape. Directly or indirectly, these issues affect businesses generally and local tourism and the hotel industry particularly. Nevertheless, there are signs of gradual improvement, indicating the growth potential of the industry, making it a relevant and significant topic of investigation. Additionally, there is a lack of studies exploring business sustainability in Pakistan, with limited empirical studies with a particular focus on the tourism sector (Moses, Che-Ahmad, & Abdulmalik, 2020).

In today's corporate settings, sustainability has become a well-established business trend. It revolves around harmonizing policies of companies, strategies, and practices with the principles of sustainable development, encompassing social, environmental, cultural, and economic aspects (Amini & Bienstock, 2014). The aim of managing a business sustainably is to enhance the overall performance of the company by addressing and improving its environmental, social, and economic aspects (Hahn, Pinkse, Preuss, & Figge, 2015). In developed regions, sustainability is frequently viewed as an intended business attitude or a form of self-regulation among businesses (Graham & Woods, 2006). Utting (2000) accordingly states that voluntary undertakings have predominantly been embraced in industrially rich nations. The adoption of these initiatives is heavily influenced by institutional factors. For example, the existence of green markets, consumer involvement, community pressures, and the influence of specific government institutes can motivate business stakeholders to practice in sustainable manners (Utting, 2000). On the contrary, many developing countries often lack such conditions, primarily because of limited consumer influence, public awareness inadequacy, weak regulations, fragile

institutions, governance challenges, and low monitoring and implementation government's capability (Utting, 2000). In addition, P. J. Buckley, Doh, and Benischke (2017) have the opinion that less developed countries face distinct and exclusive sustainability problems, different from those faced by developed nations. Existing literature also indicates a lack of comprehension regarding the perception of sustainability and implementation in the context of developing states (Dobers & Halme, 2009). Moreover, most developing economies face a multitude of challenges encompassing financial, ecological, social, and governmental (Dobers & Halme, 2009). Governments in developing nations often face resource constraints that hinder their ability to resolve sustainability complex issues systematically. Additionally, the degree and diversity of issues make it extremely challenging in the public sector to enhance environmental and socio-economic conditions effectively (Raza & Jawaid, 2013). These challenges encompass a wide spectrum of issues such as terrorism, pervasive corruption, social inequality, increasing poverty, violations of human rights, inadequacy of healthcare facilities, political volatility, inconsistent financial development, lack of employment opportunities, ecological deprivation, decreasing clean water reservoirs, sanitation difficulties, less literacy rate and unrest in the society (Jamali & Mirshak, 2007b). As a result, there is a strong argument for the business community to play a positive role in addressing these challenges. They can do so by asserting their dedication to sustainable development through the adoption of sustainable practices in business (Dobers & Halme, 2009).

Notably in the context of Pakistan, there is a lack of research on the subjects of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainability. Existing literature entitles sustainability as a new topic of development in the context of Pakistan. However, there is a positive trend of increasing significance and awareness of sustainability within the country (Sajjad & Eweje, 2014a). Furthermore, the business sector in Pakistan demonstrates awareness of inadequacy regarding sustainability principles and the benefits of adopting sustainable business practices. Additionally, the general population in Pakistan lacks adequate awareness and understanding of the sustainability outcomes and significance (Ehsan & Kaleem, 2012). The public, customers, and other stakeholders do not have a complete understanding of the role played by the corporate sector (Hall, 2019; Sajjad & Eweje, 2014a). Consequently, there is a significant requirement to enhance consciousness at both levels i.e. corporate and within the community regarding the importance of sustainability.

Sustainable tourism holds a crucial position on the agenda for Global Sustainable Development Goals 2030 (SDGs). The United Nations recognized the significance of tourism in accomplishing Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) while declaring 2017 as the UN International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) emphasized the association between the three SDGs and the tourism development goals of 2018, depending upon the domestic intrinsic characteristics of tourism events. Tourism is strongly influenced by the traditions and culture of local people and the environment (Hall, 2019). Touristic experiences often involve the participation of tour operators (TOs), who serve as intermediaries connecting tourists with their desired experiences. These operators are corporations or individuals that offer a range of packages, experiences, and services to facilitate tourists in their exploration and enjoyment.

It is further contended that the tour operating market has witnessed fierce competition, resulting in concerns about the sustainability of destinations (Sandra Carey, Gountas, & Gilbert, 1997). The adverse effects of mass tourism have raised inquiries regarding how tour operators guide tourists to different destinations. Tour operators prioritize increasing profitability, leading to a growing number of people using their services to visit new places and explore novel experiences.

Tourism is a significant sector in the economy of Pakistan, and governments have placed special emphasis on its development in the near past. The vast tourism potential of the country is evident from its ancient archaeological sites representing various civilizations. Despite this immense potential, tourism has not received due attention and focus in Pakistan. A noticeable gap between service delivery and the demand for tourism exists and various departments lack coordination. To address these issues, it is crucial to shift the focus towards sustainable practices in Pakistan's tourism industry.

The study would have the following objectives:

- Understanding sustainable practices of the tourism industry in Pakistan.
- Investigate the implementation of sustainable practices in the tourism industry in the Northern area of Pakistan.
- Providing policy implications to support, promote, and strengthen the implementation of sustainable practices in the tourism business in Pakistan.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The World Commission on Development and Environment (WCED) defines sustainable development as "Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Goldemberg & Lucon, 2009). Sustainability and CSR highlight the importance of harmonizing financial development and environmental protection while struggling for economic development and profitability (Ahmad et al., 2021). Nowadays, the tourism sector just like every other sector considers sustainability as a significant matter (Liu, 2003). In developed countries, sustainability is often assumed a self-regulatory or voluntary business approach ((Vogel, Dombrovskiy, Graham, & Lowry, 2011). Utting (2000), accordingly describes that voluntary initiatives are primarily implemented by economies that are rich in industrial resources. The adoption of voluntary initiatives is influenced by institutional conditions. Factors such as green market development, ethical environment, consumer involvement, community pressures, and the influence of specific government institutes can motivate business stakeholders to practice in sustainable manners (Utting, 2000).

On the other hand, many developing countries lack such conditions primarily because of limited consumer influence, public awareness inadequacy, weak regulations, fragile institutions, governance challenges, and low monitoring and implementation capability (Utting, 2000). Consequently, R. Buckley (2020) stated that less developed economies confront distinct sustainability issues that are far different from those of developed states. In the context of Pakistan, there is a lack of research on the topic of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainability. Existing studies in the literature propose that sustainability is a new topic of research that is gaining gradual attention because of its significance and awareness (Sajjad & Eweje, 2014b). In addition, the commercial sector

of Pakistan is facing awareness inadequacy regarding the concept of sustainability and the significance of its business practices. Additionally, the general public in Pakistan lacks awareness about the consequences and essence of sustainability (Sajjad et al., 2018). The role of the business sector is also undermined by the public, clientele, and other participants (Sajjad & Eweje, 2014b). For this reason, there is a dire need to raise awareness about sustainability both in the public as well as in the business community. Additionally, government contribution to implementing sustainability in organizations has been limited. Sajjad and Eweje (2014b) proposed a dire need for the states to formulate countrywide CSR and sustainability regulations with the consultation of all potential stakeholders business communities, trade unions, NGOs, researchers, and all other stakeholders.

Two key players in the tourism business include the consumers of products and services (tourists) and mediators responsible for making these services and products available to tourists (tour operators and others) (Sigala, 2008). This study specifically focuses on tour operators, who play a central role in the sector by offering tour packages and services. Part of tour operators is significant in encouraging tourism sustainably (Marin-Pantelescu, Tăchiciu, Căpușeanu, & Topor, 2019). The "Tour Operators Initiative (TOI)" was established in 2000 through a collaboration between the "United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP)", the "United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)", and the "United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO)", with a specific focus on TOs on a global scale (Font, 2005). TOI operates on a worldwide level, aiming to encourage TOs to incorporate environmental, ethnic, and social considerations when creating tourism packages and managing their operations (Khairat & Maher, 2010). While sustainable tourism has been explored by scholars such as Mannings (1992) concerning legal, policy, and regulatory aspects, less attention has been given to intermediaries like TOs or travel agents (Manning, 1992). Nevertheless, over the past thirty years, tour operators have exerted a notable influence on the progress of tourism in various destinations. As integral players in the supply chain, various researchers have underscored the TOs' commitment to improving environmental administration (referred to as green management) within tourist spots (Lozano, Rey-Maqueieira, & Sastre, 2021).

Numerous research studies underscore the significant role tour operators can undertake in implementing sustainable practices within the realm of tourism, as indicated in reference (Font, 2005). Serving as a pivotal link bridging supply and demand within the tourism industry, tour operators engage in collaborations with diverse organizations to provide all-encompassing packages to tourists under a single price structure. Acknowledging the pivotal role of TOs in supporting maintainable tourism, the inception of the TOI occurred in the year 2000 through a joint effort of the UNEP, UNESCO, and the UNWTO (Liu, 2003).

Tourism is universally recognized as a prime catalyst for economic growth (Sigala, 2008), contributing significantly to foreign exchange earnings and the generation of employment opportunities. Extensive literature attests to the positive influence of tourism on economic activities (Modeste, 1995) and employment rates (Pavlić, Tolić, & Svilokos, 2013). A study conducted by Adnan Hye and Ali Khan (Adnan Hye & Ali Khan, 2013), which analyzed yearly time series data ranging from 1971 to 2008 in Pakistan, identified a lasting correlation between tourism revenues and the economic growth of a country.

Nonetheless, it is of utmost importance to execute tourism sustainably to avert adverse environmental consequences. Studies, exemplified by the research conducted by Adnan Hye and Ali Khan (2013), expose that the tourism sector accounts for approximately 8% of Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions. If not subject to sustainable management practices, this proportion is projected to escalate to 12%, posing a grave environmental risk and exacerbating global warming. Various researchers emphasize that the core objectives of sustainable tourism encompass the enhancement of socio-economic conditions and the betterment of environmental facets, ultimately culminating in enriched and fulfilling tourist experiences.

About twenty years ago, Sharpley (2000) introduced the term "sustainable tourism." In the first decade following its introduction, scholars investigated foundational frameworks drawn from diverse fields including tourism and environmental protection. In the subsequent period, a multitude of conceptualizations and critiques were put forth by figures such as Bramwell and Lane (2011). While researchers defined sustainable tourism from various perspectives, however, the widely recognized and familiar description asserts sustainable development involves fulfilling present needs without sacrificing the capability of upcoming generations to fulfill their requirements. The WTO describes "sustainable tourism" as an approach that not only caters to the desires of existing tourists and host areas but also safeguards and enriches prospects for the times ahead. This encompasses the careful management of resources to account for social, economic, and environmental dimensions (Manente & Minghetti, 2006). To foster a shared comprehension of "sustainable tourism," the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) has formulated a set of essential criteria that must be fulfilled by those aiming to explore sustainable tourism endeavors (Krippendorf, 1987).

METHODOLOGY

In this study, a qualitative approach was employed to explore the sustainability practices within Pakistan's tourism industry. The utilization of a qualitative method is of significant importance due to its iterative nature, setting it apart from other research approaches (Elliott, Husbands, Hamdy, Holmberg, & Donovan, 2017). Given that various realities are associated with a specific phenomenon in our world; qualitative methods offer a means to apprehend these diverse facets (Willis, Sullivan-Bolyai, Knafl, & Cohen, 2016). Each individual possesses a distinct mode of perception, interpretation, and response shaped by their knowledge and experiences. Acknowledging this element of the qualitative technique, the researchers chose to embrace this methodology to attain a more profound comprehension of the subject at hand. Survey and a semi-structured interview approaches were used to collect data. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with 8 tour operators and hotel managers who are actively engaged in organizing tours in the northern regions of Pakistan, particularly in places like Shogran, Naran, and Kaghan. The average interview duration was 45 minutes, while the lengthiest interview spanned 1 hour and 30 minutes. The analysis of responses and data was undertaken through thematic analysis. Initially, responses were assigned codes, and subsequently, data was meticulously studied to identify connecting patterns and frequent subjects emerging from the information. The significant idea that emerged from the cross-case examination encompassed the tour operators' and hotel managers' awareness regarding

sustainability, by adopting sustainability initiatives, and the broader influence of environmental features on the sustainability integration within Pakistan's tourism industry.

RESULTS

The study findings disclosed a range of trends concerning the awareness and application of sustainability initiatives within the tourism industry of Pakistan. Some hotel managers and tour operators exhibited a lack of familiarity with the term "sustainability." Analysis of the interviews highlighted a prevailing trend among the majority of Pakistani companies and tour operators, indicating inadequacies in their management systems. Notably absent were comprehensive procedure manuals and effective integration of plans. In the operational realm, there exists a heavy reliance on tour guides once a tour has been booked, and crucially, risk analysis mechanisms were largely absent. The collection of weather-related information primarily relied on local guides, with limited attention given to gathering other critical details. Moreover, there were no established guidelines for the protection and preservation of tourist destinations. One respondent succinctly stated, "We don't possess any manuals or guidelines" to address these gaps in the industry's operational framework.

The authors posit that the establishment of management systems seemingly comes with an associated cost. Given the profit-driven nature of tour operators (TOs), their primary aim is to minimize expenses whenever feasible. This aligns with the observations made by Simon Carey, Davidson, and Sahli (2013), indicating that tour operators demonstrate limited enthusiasm for developments that extend into the long-term future. Instead, their focus remains predominantly on periodic and short-term advantages. This pattern holds, particularly within the context of Pakistan, where private tour operators already grapple with elevated costs and a reduction in tourism influx due to inadequate road infrastructure (Khan, 2012), escalating inflation, and increased fuel charges. This stands in contrast to more developed nations. Consequently, Pakistani tour operators are inclined to avoid incurring additional costs unless there exists a corresponding incentive. Nevertheless, it was evident that these operators diligently prioritized customer care. Around half of the tour operators surveyed consider customer care as an integral aspect of their operations. They have taken steps to enhance customer satisfaction by furnishing their contact details and establishing website portals to facilitate seamless interactions with their clientele.

One of the respondents in Islamabad emphasized, "The customer is the ultimate authority." However, it is imperative to solicit customer feedback about the services provided to ensure their satisfaction. Conversely, certain hotel managers, tour operators, and managers not only displayed awareness of prevailing sustainability challenges but also exhibited proactive measures to enhance their sustainability initiatives. These guesthouses have undertaken noteworthy social as well as environmental practices intending to boost their sustainability outcomes. Within the realm of a sustainable environment, efficient energy emerged as a primary concern across the surveyed hotels. The electricity supply situation has posed a significant challenge for Pakistani hotels, given the issue of power outages. Nearly all the managers conveyed their focus on implementing initiatives aimed at curbing electricity consumption costs while concurrently upholding operational standards.

Due to the interrupted supply of electricity in the country, certain guesthouses found themselves bound to generate electricity on their own using diesel generators, a more costly alternative compared to the government power distribution system. However, some hotels have taken the initiative to install small solar systems to fulfill their electricity requirements. Moreover, all the sampled hotels have transitioned to utilize light-emitting diode (LED) bulbs or surface-mounted diode (SMD). These options consume less power while maintaining the expected standard of hotel services. A manager explained, the shift towards LED lighting is motivated by our commitment to reducing electricity expenses, and our architectural layout places a strong emphasis on optimizing energy efficiency. Our progression has seen us transition from conventional bulbs to energy-efficient lighting, followed by LEDs, and currently adopting SMD technology. Furthermore, we've integrated our solar panels into the system. Over two years, we've achieved noteworthy advancements in effectively addressing electricity scarcity.

CONCLUSION

This research delved into the realm of sustainability practices within the Pakistani tourism industry landscape. The findings unveiled a gradual evolution in the understanding of sustainability, albeit with a present-day deficiency in its awareness across the business sector. Notably, sustainability has not yet taken root as an established business model within the framework of the Pakistani tourism industry. However, existing insights underscore that sustainability stands as a crucial business necessity, and the prolonged viability of any business hinges on its adept management of internal operations through a sustainable approach. Furthermore, from a societal standpoint, the significance of sustainability is equally paramount, given the increasing anticipation among stakeholders for businesses to adopt conscientious and responsible operational practices.

Although there is currently a limited demand for sustainability among Pakistani stakeholders because of their insufficient awareness, it's important to note that international hotel clients might necessitate the adoption and promotion of sustainable business practices. Consequently, sustainability can serve as a strategic advantage, appealing to both local and foreign customers who prioritize a hotel's ethical conduct. To achieve this, the hotel industry must proactively implement measures that incorporate sustainability practices, thereby augmenting its image, reputation, and overall operational effectiveness. Additionally, fostering a sense of collective effort and collaboration is imperative among the business communities, government bodies, and community organizations to effectively resolve the prevailing sustainability apprehensions in the country.

This study provides limited validation for the stakeholder theory, with the observation that the sampled tourism entities largely prioritize the financial and profitable benefits of owners. This inclination to emphasize these particular stakeholders is largely attributed to the prevailing lack of awareness about sustainability and the broader role of businesses in society of Pakistani. This absence of strong stakeholder influence, coupled with unfavorable social, political, and financial conditions, has led guesthouses to predominantly emphasize the economic aspects of sustainability, as noted by Jamali and Mirshak (2007a). Still, it is crucial to recognize the substantial potential inherent in using sustainability as a competitive policy, specifically to appeal to an international

clientele. As such, embracing sustainability becomes a matter of key self-interest for the hotel business. With these initiatives, hotels not only can enhance their financial performance but also boost their image of responsible citizens who are actively engaged in preemptive social and environmental practices.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- The tour operators appear to possess an understanding of the sustainability concept; however, a more profound comprehension coupled with a motivation for actionable change seems to be lacking.
- The tour operators demonstrate an awareness of the detrimental environmental and cultural impacts associated with mass tourism. Nevertheless, they currently perceive a dearth of immediate benefits or incentives to prompt the adoption of sustainable practices for effective tourism management.
- Among the tour operators, a subset engages in the valuable practice of training local guides, thereby facilitating knowledge transfer to local communities.
- While acknowledging their pivotal role in the promotion of sustainable tourism in Pakistan, tour operators underscore the necessity for knowledge (encompassing awareness and training) and the implementation of relevant regulations.
- For the advancement of tourism in Pakistan sustainably, a collaborative effort between the public sector (government agencies) and the private sector is paramount. This collaboration should operate within a model comprising incentives, sustainable practices, and a conducive environment for progress.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

Tour operators (TOs) within Pakistan must embrace sustainable practices to facilitate the enhancement of the tourism sector. By adopting these sustainable measures, several positive outcomes can be achieved, including the promotion of a healthier environment, the preservation of cultural heritage, and the stimulation of local economic growth. In contrast, practices that lack sustainability have the potential to inflict harm upon the environment, leading to long-term losses and generating social tensions within local communities, impacting their relationship with tourists. The imperative lies with TO managers to establish comprehensive systems catering to sustainable tourism practices. This encompasses the implementation of strategies such as developing a risk assessment matrix for activities, formulating tourist guidelines that emphasize environmental and cultural considerations, and instituting reporting mechanisms for sustainability efforts. While these initiatives might contribute to elevated costs in crafting tour packages, the enduring advantages inherent in such systems cannot be underestimated. The long-term benefits, including improved reputation, minimized negative impacts, and enhanced community relationships, stand as compelling reasons for integrating these practices into the core of tour operations.

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