

Terrorism to Tourism: The Impact of Social Media on Tourism Business of Hunza Valley

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Received: 13-11-2025	Revised: 28-11-2025	Accepted: 15-12-2025	Published: 27-12-2025
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ABSTRACT

Different issues, including that of terrorist activities, have affected tourism industry in the Hunza valley. Tourism industry in the Hunza valley, which attracts a huge number of tourists from all across the globe, plays a very important role for their overall economic development. So, there is a need to take account of this wave of terrorism and find out how it impacts the tourism industry in the valley. However, a qualitative analysis of such impact and its durability on the tourist inflows into the valley is lacking. The main objectives of this study are (a) What is the magnitude of the impact of terrorism on tourism in the Hunza valley? (b) What are the macro-economic impacts from such loss of tourism in the valley? (c) How social media played a role in the revival of tourism industry of Hunza Valley? This research is qualitative in nature and theoretically based on development communication theory. The data collection for this research is done through semi-structured interviews of international and local visitors, travel companies, hotel managers and shopkeepers of Hunza Valley. Findings reveal that tourism industry of Pakistan had collapsed amid the terrorist attacks and an image of a dangerous country attached to it. Due to such terrorist activities in a country reduces the flow of local and foreign visitors and tourists activities. Findings show that after uprooting the terrorists and reinstating the peace by Pakistan army, social media networks has played a vital role in promoting and developing tourism business in Hunza Valley. Specially, after the vlogs of various social media influencers on Facebook took the lead role in attracting the foreign and local tourists. It helped many tour and travel companies to access customers and improved their economic condition.

Keywords: Tourism, Terrorism, Hunza Valley, Social Media, Pakistan

INTRODUCTION

A country with diverse cultures and natural beauty, Pakistan is a heaven for any local and international tourist. From snowcapped peaks and frozen lakes to serene valleys and beautiful shores, interspersed with the ruins of ancient civilizations and Mughal monuments, Pakistan is full of breathtaking views. Moreover, the religious sites of Hindus and Sikhs are a source of attraction for pilgrims. Religious tourism plays a vital part in boosting economic activities in the country. Old Hindu and Sikh Temples, mainly the shrine of Guru Nanak, are visited by thousands. With the opening of the Kartarpur Corridor, even many more religious tourists are daily arriving in Pakistan (Hussain, 2018).

In addition to all this, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is another opportunity Pakistan should be looking to make most out of in order to increase its tourism. Under CPEC, numerous

infrastructure and power projects are being developed in the country, which will offer more facilities to travelers. In addition, the Chinese spend a great share of their earnings on sightseeing and easier travel to Pakistan will encourage them to visit the country and avail themselves of its natural beauty.

Pakistan has clear attractions for locals and foreigners alike. However, terrorism and a lack of facilities had hamstrung tourism in Pakistan in the past. Previous governments did not bother much boosting this potential industry. They spent little effort to highlight the positive image of the country and neglected the essential steps needed to enhance the tourism sector. Foreigners hesitated to visit Pakistan, considering it a war-stricken, intolerant, and ultraconservative country. But recently, there has been a laudable improvement in the tourism industry in the whole country. Enhanced security conditions are perhaps the key reason for ever-increasing numbers of tourists (Farooq, 2014; (Raza & Jawaid, 2013).

Another important development is a new visa policy, which offers e-visas and visa on arrival to tourists. Pakistan has also abolished the requirement for No-Objection Certificates (NOCs) to visit certain parts of the country. Besides this, the government is also converting its rest houses and palatial buildings to hotels, offering more charming accommodations to visitors. The Tourism Coordination Board is yet another measure taken to capitalize on the potential of Pakistan's tourism sector and increase the inflow of wealth in the country. Likewise, the growing hospitality industry of Pakistan is building up the trust of sightseers. International hotel chains are expanding their services and the entrepreneurs are launching innovative ways to serve guests.

Alongside these developments, international travel bloggers and vloggers are visiting the country and showing the true nature of Pakistan and the hospitality of its people. The revival of sports in Pakistan is also helping to clear the security concerns. These developments have helped to present a softer image of the country. The high-profile royal visit by the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge also contributed a lot to this trend (Ahmed & Anwar, 2016).

As a result of all these factors, some of the world's most reputable magazines and societies are encouraging people to tour Pakistan. *Forbes* considered Pakistan to be "one of the coolest places to go" in 2019. In 2017, the British Backpacker Society, in ranking Pakistan as its best adventure travel destination, described it as "one of the friendliest countries on earth, with mountain scenery that is beyond anyone's wildest imagination." Conde Nast Traveler ranked Pakistan as the number one holiday destination in 2020, acknowledging the improved security, visa relaxation policies, and of course its beauty.

Problem Statement

It is a known fact that the tourism industry of Pakistan had collapsed amid the terrorist attacks and an image of a dangerous country attached to it. It is mostly noted that foreign tourists stopped visiting Pakistan, but we do not ponder how the Pakistanis themselves had stopped visiting the tourist spots as well. After successfully uprooting the terrorism by Pakistani army, social media has played a pivotal role in removing this stigma and once again revived tourism in Pakistan. Social media apps such as Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp have immensely helped the foreign and local tourists and travel companies to access people throughout Pakistan, generating an economic development activity and boom of the tourism industry. The Tourism Industry of Hunza Valley has flourished over the last decade it has become one of the most visited tourist destinations. Numerous foreign visitors have admired and made vlogs about many tourists' attractions located in the valley. Since 2019, the tourism industry of Hunza Valley has developed immensely. This research explores the role of social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp that how social media impact and contributed to the development of the Tourism Industry of Hunza Valley?

Research Objectives

Following are the research objectives of this study:

1. To examine the impact of terrorism on the tourism industry of Hunza valley.
2. To explore the influence of social media on the revival of tourism industry of Hunza Valley.
3. To find the impact of social media on the economic growth of local community, venders and travel business of Hunza valley.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many studies have been conducted on tourism activities. Some of them show the relationship between tourism activities with economic growth and found significant positive relationship between tourism and economic growth. On the other hand, some studies are done on the relationship between terrorism and tourism activities and conclude the negative and significant effect of terrorism on tourism activities.

Among the studies that had investigated the impact of terrorism/violence on the tourism industry, Kalesar (2010) noted the emergence of new tourism markets in the world post 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States. The coordinated attacks at the World Trade Centre have had dramatic consequences for the global tourism market and were seen by many as a significant setback in the history of tourism industry (Kalesar, 2010).

According to Hazbun (2006), in the 1970s and 1980s, an “incident” (as for example, terrorist attacks/ political violence) anywhere in the region would have a sizeable negative impact on tourism receipts across the world as Western tourists reconsidered their travel plans. He further pointed out that in the post-9/11 era, however, such a broad neighborhood effect is mitigated by other factors. For example, despite the civil war in Iraq and the global tensions over Iran’s nuclear program, the United States’ posting its most serious “travel warnings” for locations across the region such as Lebanon, Israel, the Palestinian territories, Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen have done little to dampen the expansion of regional tourism, as in places like Dubai. The author cited the World Tourism Organizations’ (UNWTO) Report of 2005 which clearly stated that, ‘in terms of consumer behaviour, it is quite evident that travelers have been undeterred by external threats. At the global level the impact of such shocks have been negligible. They have led to temporary shifts in travel flows, but they have not stopped people travelling. At the local level, the impact can be severe in the affected areas, but in most cases, this is surprisingly short lived (Hazbun, 2006; Enders & Sandler, 1991; Endlers & Sandler, 1992; Fleischer & Buccola, 2002; Gut & Jarrel, 2007).

The nature of the different events of terrorism and political violence is not always comparable. For example, the recovery and expansion of tourism flows since 2001 has shown a marked divergence from patterns following the 1990– 91 Gulf War, which itself posed little direct threat to tourists. For example, following the 1997 terrorist attacks at Luxor, Egyptian tourism revenues dropped by 50 %. However, the Egyptian tourism sector eventually recovered two years later from the crisis, and this recovery can be attributed as a major success of the crisis-response marketing and promotion policies of the country (Gut & Jarrel, 2007; Kalesar, 2010; Mustafa, 2010).

Among various previous studies, it also has been observed that social media has played a key role in changing the tourists perception. In this respect, Singhal and Khattri (2018) conducted the impact of social media on consumer attitude and purchase decisions in the travel and tourism industry. The main purpose of their research was to assess how social media affect the purchase decision and also the behavior of the

consumer in the Indian travel and tourism industry. The authors use quantitative research process, which helps the authors to collect useful data by conducting a survey. The results of this research have revealed several aspects of social media that affect tourism industry. Moreover, it is also revealed that social media provide a platform to share reviews of the tourist. Now the social media users are increasing, and more people share their experience with others on social media by posting, commenting, rating, and reviewing. Inferences have explained that social media changes the purchase decision of the people. The overall research study explained that the social media helps the people to provide useful information about the tourism places and also provide the information of travel for tourism places which affect the people purchase decision (Singhal & Khattri, 2018).

A study was carried in Jordan by Alghizzawi Salloum, & Habes (2018) to determine the role and effect of social media on the tourism industry by means of marketing. Many of the businesses have been changed their marketing styles after perceiving the growth of marketing performance in the section of information technology and social media. The growth of many businesses has witnessed the remarkable development of social media in domains of the tourism industry. This research has been performed in order to assess the effect of the performance of the IT- based marketing structure on the performance of the business of the tourism industry in Jordan. As tourism is based on the effective marketing policy, so development in marketing structure has created competition in the industry of tourism. The core aim of this study was to measure the extent to which social media is helpful in promoting the tourism business in Jordan (Alghizzawi, & Habes, 2018).

METHODOLOGY

It is a qualitative study whereby the data is collected through interviews and interpreted in thematic study of the role of social media in developing tourism business in Hunza Valley. Qualitative research is most concerned about collection of data regarding whys and hows of the experiences, behaviors and opinions of human beings. All such information is most likely impossible to be collected through the quantitative data collection. The data is conducted through the method of semi-structured interviews. In this type of data collection a few question are prepared to be asked from the respondents but more questions can be added depending upon the response of interviewees. The semi-structured interview questionnaire is formulated with 12 questions. The participant's responses can lead to more questions if they are relevant to acquire the objective of our research. To conduct this research Tour and Travel companies' spokespersons are interviewed on telephone. The local business holders of Hunza Valley which included hotel managers, fruit seller and shop keeps are interviewed on the telephone.

FINDINGS

Impact of Terrorism on the Tourism Industry of Hunza Valley

One of the central propositions in this study is that terror attacks reduce the local and foreign tourist flow in a country and thereby reduces the income from tourism receipts and affects employment in the tourism sector. This conforms the existing literature which argues that due to terror incidents there will be a decline in the tourist inflow net of trend, seasonal dependencies and stochastic fluctuations in the foreign tourist arrivals. The results reveal that due to terrorist activities in a country reduces the tourists' activities. In this regards, Hunza valley has also suffered a lot after the horrified incident of 9/11. Pakistan was one of the countries among other Muslim countries which got severely affected due to this incident. Many respondents in the valley were off the view that this wave of terrorism has disturbed the local community as economically they are dependent on tourism business. One of the hotel manager named "Ahsan Khan" responded that

“Due to the terrorist activities in the region, people are worried and frightened to visit the Hunza valley. They do not want to put their life in danger by visiting such a beautiful place. Due to this our economy is declining and many locals are dying due to hunger”.

Most of the empirical research suggests that terrorism has significant negative effect on tourism activities. Cook and McCleary (1983) and D'Amore and Anuza (1986) argue that previous international experience of tourists also influences their reaction to terrorism. In contrast, Sonmez and Graefe (1998) suggest the indirect impact of past international experience on future behavior. The nature of previous travel also has impact on future travel behavior (Mazursky, 1989).

Hartz (1989) argues that tourists modify their traveling behavior to risky destination because of the risk of terrorism. Cost of experience increased due to increase in tourist perceived risk caused by the risk from the terrorism at destination resulting in the substitution of that destination with one perceived as safe (Gu and Martin, 1992).

On the other hand, many respondents are off the view that after the military operations and uprooting the terrorists and their hideouts, social media has play a significant role in removing the doubts of tourists. The tour and travel guides have emphasized that social media has removed the stigma of Hunza Valley as a dangerous or insecure place. The common urban people believed that every mountainous area far from the metropolitan cities is dangerous. It was a common perception that it is a life risk to travel this far as the place was not very known to people.

Arslan from the Tours and Treks said:

“Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and WhatsApp have created another virtual world. People communicate freely which each other. There is a lot of transparency on these social media platforms. This has contributed immensely in changing the damaging image of Pakistan. Now people love to visit far-flung valleys like Hunza. Can you imagine this happening without these platforms? It would not have been possible.”

The Tourists that visited Hunza Valley uploaded their pictures, reviews and blogs about their experience of Hunza Valley which has proven to be really helpful in creating a better picture of Hunza Valley which is Tourist friendly and very hospitable towards the tourists. They further stressed that now people are not afraid to travel anywhere in Pakistan. People travel with their colleagues, friends and families. Hunza is considered one of the safest tourism spots where groups of people come together to enjoy their vacations. Now the fear of being treated in wrong manners or being threatened is completely removed. People feel safe to travel in all Mountainous areas. The ways are far smoother and people enjoy the color weathers of Hunza very much.

Hafiz Asad from Awarah Parinday said:

“I put the reviews and videos of people who travel with me. The videos of Hunza Valley are very well received although people still ask me if is it safe to travel to Hunza Valley but these pictures and videos especially have encouraged more people to travel and visit Hunza Valley.”

Security concerns hinder people from engaging in tourism to new places but this barrier is removed through social media platforms. The effective communication through the latest means has contributed in encouraging tourism in Hunza Valley. The increase in tourism also ensures the economic development of the valley.

Highlighting Tourist Attractions of Hunza Valley through Social Media

According to the respondents Hunza Valley was not known to the urban population of Pakistan. It was after the boom of social media that people started to know about the beauty and aesthetic value of this valley. Especially Facebook pages such as Hunza, Hunza Valley and numerous tour and travel companies such as Destination Tours and Travel uploaded the pictures of the beautiful Valley. These Facebook pages put Hunza Valley on the Map of Pakistan as the Tourism Spot.

The spokesperson of Destination Tour and Travel Company Asad said:

“Nobody knew about the beauty of Hunza Valley before its pictures were uploaded on FB. A few years ago it was not even considered as a tourism attraction and now it is the third most visited place of Pakistan”

Waqas the spokesperson of company “De Tourist” shared that the tourism company could not have established if there was no social media. There was no big tourism business industry before Facebook but now other social media networks are also available. Hunza Valley is one of the newly explored tourism spot. People started discovering about Hunza Valley due to pictures and videos were uploaded on various Facebook pages. He further said that “De Tourist” also have a FB page named “Trip Trails” where we upload pictures and reviews of people about Hunza Valley and other tourist areas we visit.

The Owner of “De Tourist” Waqas said:

“Hunza Valley is no less than a heaven on earth. The pictures of the valley are so attractive. People on Facebook get crazy about Hunza Valley especially the foreigners”

Mian Nouman of a travel company “Traveling Hawks” also added to the same opinion by saying that internet and social media has opened a new chapter for Tourism business as whole and especially for the far-flung areas of Pakistan such as Hunza Valley. There is so much more to explore in Hunza Valley than most people know.

Mian Nouman further said:

“Internet is like a miracle for us tour and travel guides, I had not imagined I could run a business like this before these social media platforms. Hunza was completely out of reach and there was a lot of fear. Things have changed because of internet.”

According to Joshau Dilawar of “Travelling Hawks”

“People have just got to know about the ancient forts of Hunza Valley such as Baltit Fort. There is a lot of culture and heritage in that small Valley. People love travelling to Hunza Valley because of its beautiful view and weather as well.”

According to the previous researches, the developed means of communication play a significant role in exploring new tourism spots. The Hunza Valley is surfaced for the tourists due to social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, twitter and WhatsApp. Here the social media platforms are playing vital role as the medium of communication building tourism industry in Hunza Valley thus reinforcing development in the region through communication.

The Locals on Social Media

The local public of Hunza Valley is computer and Social Media literates. According to Joshua the spokesperson of tour and Travel Company, tourism in Hunza Valley is mostly promoted by the local public of the valley itself. The literacy rate of Hunza Valley is 99.7 percent. People are not only aware how to communicate properly but they are much trained in promoting the specialties of our beautiful Valley. He further said it is not just my page but you will find numerous pages and groups about Hunza Valley where people share the pictures of changing weathers in Hunza Valley. The autumn in Hunza is very beautiful; spring is even more beautiful as all trees are covered with beautiful berries and fruits.

Rizwan Sultan a shop keeper in Hunza said:

“We love the tourists, they bring business. Once they become our customers then they order our dry fruits and cherries even from the foreign countries. I speak with my customers on WhatsApp.”

Most of the respondents stressed on the importance of communication. They told that we use Facebook to not only share videos and pictures but we also engage in communication with people around the globe. They told that foreigners are much interested in visiting Pakistan to come to Hunza Valley. The youth from urban cities are also very inclined as we communicate with them about our hospitality and love for the tourists.

The social Media platforms such as FB, Instagram and WhatsApp have enabled the local public of Hunza Valley to build a better and beautiful picture of this amazing tourist spot. It has empowered them to create tourism business in a far-flung Valley of Pakistan, which was not even popular before the emergence of social media and social media platforms.

There are more than 50 FB pages with title similar to Hunza and Hunza Valley. These pages include Hunza on Foot, The Incredible Hunza, Visit Hunza, Hunza Pictures, Hunza Travel Guide, The Hunza Valley, Hunza Organic Food, Hunza Travel and Tours Pakistan, High End Travels and Treks and many more.

Mian Nouman of Traveling Hawks said

“People of Hunza Valley do not need outsiders help to create tourism business for them. They know how to attract and engage people. Even I first told inclined to take a tour to Hunza Valley after talking to a local Hunza boy on Facebook plus the pictures are so beautiful who would not want to visit such a beautiful place”.

The Locals of Hunza Valley are using the development communication means by using social media networks to welcome more people into the valley. The direct communication pays the way of comfortable exchange of views thus leads more people to visit the beautiful tourism spot.

Social Media as the Marketing Heaven for Tourism Business

The Social Media handles are working as marketing heavens for the tourism Industry. All of the respondents have shared a common belief that tourism in Hunza Valley could not have worked without the marketing it on social media. The tour and travel companies have further told that they upload about the trip details on their Facebook and Instagram pages to promote and do marketing of their companies.

The tours and trek guides of Hunza Valley are working on the same strategy. Tour packages and details of beautiful sites of Hunza Valley are marketed through the mediums of Facebook pages, Instagram accounts and Whatsapp groups. This marketing strategy works best for the tourism industry of Hunza Valley.

Hafiz Asad of the Traveling Hawks said:

“Hunza Valley is very attractive product which is sold by the local people and tour companies on various internet platforms. The people from urban cities and foreigners are much fond of visiting Hunza Valley”

The Marketing of tourism in Hunza Valley is mainly done by social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, twitter and Instagram. The latest means of communication serve the best purpose in ensuring development in the region.

Hoteling Business and Tourism

The Hotel business in Hunza Valley is completely dependent on tourism. These two businesses work hand in hand for each other's promotion and development. While answering a question about hoteling and tourism Mian Nouman of Traveling Hawks said

“There will be no need of hotels if tourists stop visiting Hunza Valley. We tour guides have our own favourite hotels where we have strong ties with the management. We work to benefit each other as the profit and development is mutual for us”

In an answer to question about the impact of social media on local vendors and hotel managers Nawab Khan the hotel owner of Hunza Penorama said:

“Most of our business is dependent on visitors from the urban cities of Pakistan. If you ask about the role of social media now nothing I can tell you this business cannot run without it. We upload different packages for “on season” and “off season to attract more people. 25 percent of our business is completely run on the packages we introduce on our FB pages. The other promotion is done through whatsapp groups and personal contacts. We make sure to provide maximum comfort to people who come and stay at our hotel so that they don't have to look for other options.”

He further told that foreigners bring good business as well. He said hoteling is an integral part of tourism industry you cannot separate these two from each other. The hotel owner of “The Home” said social media is the key to operate business in tourist's spots.

“The more people share about my hotel the more customers I will have. Now it is a fashion to put check in of places on Facebook so the name of my hotel is appearing on other people's timeline. Without Facebook young girls and boys in Lahore for say would have no idea there is a hotel named “The Home” in Hunza Valley but now a lot of people know it. They call to ask about rates and packages. Our business has started thriving due to internet”

However, most of the hotel managers complained that internet service is slow in Hunza and 4G has just arrived in the area.

Nawab Khan the hotel owner said:

“I like communicating with people from Urban cities. They negotiate rates with me and I also reduce rates for them just to make them my customers. It is now easy to talk on Facebook.”

While answering the question about the locals of social media platform he further told:

“We are good in communication whether it is with a fellow Pakistani or a foreigner we like showing our beautiful valley to people no matter who it is”

The Local vendors and Hotel managers are facilitated by social media platforms which aids in grabbing more customers leading to better economic development of the Hunza Valley. The means of development communication such as the social media platforms have played a vital role in the development of Tourism business in Hunza Valley.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, researcher made an attempt to find out the loss of tourism receipts due to lesser local and foreign tourist arrivals caused by terror incidents in Hunza valley located in the northern part of Pakistan. This study also explored that after restoration of peace, how social media has influenced the local and global visitors to visit the Hunza valley. The results reveal that due to terrorist activities in a country reduces the flow of local and foreign tourists and tourist activities. Results also revealed that terrorism has put significant negative effect on tourism activities in this area. The findings of the research support that Social Media has become a powerful tool for the development of Tourism Business especially in the far and remote areas such as Hunza Valley. The intimation and awareness created by social media has encouraged many people to start traveling to Hunza Valley. Taking the advantage of this technology the travel and tour companies have been established due to social media. The platforms such as FB, twitter, Instagram and WhatsApp has helped small businesses to flourish by attracting the customers from within and outside the country. The tourism business of Hunza Valley is very much dependent upon the current and popular social media sites as people approach the valley by the means of social media networking sites. The travel companies, local vendors and the hotel managers have told that social media has played vital role in reviving tourism in Hunza Valley and throughout Pakistan. The urban population and millennials from all over the world are now becoming more interested in traveling to Hunza Valley after witnessing its beauty and hospitality on social media sites. The social media has played a vital role in developing and promoting better and soft image of Pakistan globally. This happened because of the internet as Forbes magazine entitled Pakistan as number one tourist destination of the year 2020. Last year many famous international travelers such as Eva Zu beck, Drew Binsky and Alyne visited Pakistan and Hunza Valley. The videos and vlogs made and uploaded by them on social media attracted and encouraged many more foreign tourists to visit Pakistan and explore the amazing tourist spots of Pakistan such as Hunza Valley.

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