SHADOWS OF VIOLENCE: DEPICTIONS ON SOCIAL MEDIA THAT INFLUENCE DYNAMICS OF TOURISM IN PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the influence of violent depictions on social media platforms in Pakistan's tourism sector. Social media forms the crux of tourism sector promotion, but very often exaggerates news regarding events such as terrorist attacks, political tensions, or civil unrest, which affects people's perceptions of Pakistan's tourist destinations. The approach used in this research is mixed methods in nature, combining a qualitative content analysis of social media posts and a quantitative survey of international tourists and local tourism stakeholders. The findings indicate that depictions of violence are factors that massively deter tourists, mostly first-time travelers, from visiting Pakistan because the perceptions created were about safety concerns in the country. However, social media strategies that focus on cultural richness and beautiful landscapes can reduce such negative impacts. This study provides practical recommendations to tourism authorities, social media influencers, and policymakers for managing the narrative of safety in Pakistan and displaying pleasant attributes related to this nation more effectively.
Keywords: Social media, Violent depictions, Tourism, Pakistan, Safety concerns, terrorist attacks, strategies, Negative impacts

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is one of the most significant economic industries in which a country's growth depends, especially for developing nations such as Pakistan, which has multiple cultures, landscapes, and historical sites (UNWTO, 2018). It has exciting potential for tourism, as it boasts a unique combination of ancient civilizations, scenic beauty, and cultural variation (Bhatti & Hameed, 2019). Pakistan has several natural and cultural attractions, but tourist traffic into this nation has not been easy over the years because of security threats, political instability, and violent acts that often get wide coverage on various social media sites (Mansfeld & Pizam, 2006). Although the respective platforms may provide an opportunity for marketing tourism, they tend to focus more on violent events that deter international travelers from venturing into the country (Papathanassis, 2017).

Social media applications, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube, have become of great significance in creating destination images (Buhalis & Law, 2018; Papathanassis, 2017). These sources provide real-time and user-generated information, including reviews, photos, and videos, that have a strong effect on the perception of actual travelers (Buhalis & Law, 2018; Kim & Fesenmaier, 2017). Pakistan has been demonstrated, on these forums, to hold violent material that makes the

country look insecure, thereby discouraging local and foreign tourist attractions (Hanif & Brohi, 2019). The past two decades have not gone without terrorist attacks in Pakistan, civil unrest, and even political turmoil, all of which make the country risk prone (Shaikh & Hannan, 2020). Traditional media, which periodically promotes violence in Pakistan, have now become folklore on social media, where all violent activities can spread rapidly (Hanif & Brohi, 2019). The more this hate content goes viral on social media, the more it instills fear and inhibits people from visiting the country. According to Zillmann (2006), people who experience fear of the media are far less likely to visit places of interest.

Further, the availability heuristic, as first conceptualized by Tversky and Kahneman (1973), further describes how social media might contribute to such perceptions. This cognitive bias leads to the thinking that the events one has encountered in the recent past are more likely to occur than they are. For instance, violent visual exposure to tourists on social media makes them judge the country as riskier than it might be (Gurtner, 2007). This kind of negative image can be especially damaging to a destination in the case of first-time visitors who consider what they have read or seen in the media about its safety.

Many studies have proven that negative images are damaging to tourism. Tourists tend to shun destinations and locations where activities such as violence and politically induced unrest are happening quite regularly, as they view such locations as risky (Gurtner, 2007). What makes this even worse is when such violent acts are dramatized on social media without sufficient background information (Shaikh & Hannan, 2020). In addition, social media disseminates images of violence, but also constructs a broader narrative that depicts Pakistan as a dangerous country, which undermines the country's tourism agenda (Kazmi, 2021).

However, violent social media portrayals and tourism are not strictly linear. Some adventure- or cultural-experience-seeking tourists could be less impacted by images of violence. Papathanassis (2017), using a tourist perspective, calls attention to the fact that for some tourists, this, or that politically unstable or conflict-affected destination is an "off-the-beaten-path" adventure. For them, tourists would be more resilient to negative social media reports and would not visit Pakistan at any cost.

The Pakistan Tourism and Development Corporation (PTDC) efforts, along with activities from some powerful social media influencers, attempted to balance the negative stories written about Pakistan with a focus on its cultural richness and historical landmarks Kazmi, 2021). Influencers and popular travel bloggers are key players in perception change because they share their successful experiences and continue to inspire others to visit Pakistan. However, these positive portrayals usually fail to gain mileage in the light of violent viral content, which fetches more attention on their respective social media platforms.

Many studies have examined the effects of violent content on social media on the perception of Pakistan as a beautiful destination for tourists, whether campaigns of positive messages through social media can have any role in reducing negative perceptions, and, finally, what steps tourism stakeholders in Pakistan have undertaken to manage the narrative on social media to improve the image of the country as a safe and attractive destination for travelers.

Literature Review
1. Theoretical Framework: Cultivation Theory and Media-Induced Fear
Cultivation theory, first postulated by Gerbner and Gross (1976), assumes to task regarding its assumption that long-term exposure to a medium modifies the viewer's perception of reality. In tourism, the heavy habitual use of violent ingredients on social media cultivates the perception of Pakistan as an unsafe destination to visit. The hypothesis behind this is that the more media violence one consumes, the more one believes in a dangerous world. In Pakistan, the portrayal of violence on social media leads to exaggerated perceptions of danger, which deters potential tourists (Baker et al., 2020).

From cultivation theory, Zillmann's (2006) concept of media-induced fear explains how increased exposure to fear-provoking media content relates to increased perceptions of danger. Violent posts about Pakistan on social media tend to make their minds fearful, compelling them to think that the country is too risky for visitation (López & Sánchez, 2021). Conversely, most scenes of violence can be graphic and heighten the situation by establishing the notion

that Pakistan is a dangerous country (Mansfeld and Pizam 2006).

2. Social Media and Tourism: A Double-Edged Sword

Social media has transformed the tourism industry to arm destinations with the opportunity to present their products directly to potential travelers (Papathanassis, 2017). According to Buhalis and Law (2018), social media enables customers to access user-generated content for which they are perceived as more authentic and trustworthy than other marketing information. Some of the most popular destinations associated with inspiration and decision-making for travel include Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter among many others. However, this democratization of content has both negative and positive effects (Chen & Rahman, 2020).

In Pakistan, social media has become a double-edged sword for tourism. On the one hand, travel bloggers and influencers have displayed the subcontinent's beautiful landscapes, rich cultures, and amiability towards visitors (Kazmi, 2021). However, gruesome accounts of terrorist attacks, political violence, and civil unrest have tarnished the otherwise image that Pakistan's unsafe destinations (Hanif & Brohi, 2019). This duplicity explains the necessity of the proper management of social media to ensure that the positive characteristics of tourism destinations in Pakistan are not eclipsed by violent events.

3. Availability Heuristic and Risk Perception

The availability heuristic, coined by Tversky and Kahneman (1973), refers to a type of cognitive bias that affects how people perceive travel risks. Individuals can easily relate to similar events, which gives them the sense that it is going to happen that way (Ruan et al., 2022). Repeated exposure to violent incidents associated with Pakistan on social media may increase the risk level of potential tourists, as incidents may not be frequent (Hanif & Brohi, 2019). Social media contain viral elements that keep these incidents visible long enough to create an impression of a higher frequency than exists (Gurtner, 2007).

The study claims that the face of violence on social media has a massive impact on tourist perceptions of Pakistan (Hanif & Brohi, 2019). Most have come to associate the nation with terrorism and political instability, drawing such thoughts from highly publicized incidences that may or may not have any impact on tourist destinations. Therefore, the availability heuristic explains why tourists may attribute dangers associated with isolated incidents to the entire country and negatively impact tourism activities (López & Sánchez, 2021).

4. Role of Social Media Influencers in Combating Negative Representations

Thus, influencers can be effective change agents in altering the narratives of Pakistan's tourism prospects. Several influencers, travel bloggers, and vloggers have pointed out the bright aspects related to the country, including its natural beauty, cultural festivals, and historical landmarks (Kazmi, 2021). By sharing their firsthand experiences, these influencers reduce the negative portrayals that inundate social media outlets (Buhalis & Law, 2018). The credibility of social media influencers often far surpasses that of traditional media sources because of their direct engagement with the audience and a shared experience that lends itself authenticity (Ruan et al., 2022). Case studies in Pakistan indicate that influencers have successfully marketed Hunza and Skardu as safe destinations for adventure tourism (Kazmi, 2021). Simultaneously, sensationalized violent content often occupies a larger space on social media because it tends to generate more engagement and attention (Chen & Rahman, 2020).

5. Tourism Resilience in Risk Destinations

Whereas such violent imagery destroys tourism using social media, in some destinations, it has led to resilience in possible reducing strategies (Gurtner 2007). The tourism resilience concept suggests that destinations with histories of conflict or instability are still able to attract tourists and take measures at perceived risks (Baker et al. 2020).

Adventure tourism still prevails in northern Pakistan given that social media perpetuates all negativity (Kazmi, 2021). Tourists seeking adventure and off-beat experiences are least deterred by violent descriptions and more likely to visit areas that they consider safe, although the overall risk in the country may be apparent. Resilience is achieved by segmenting the tourist market and targeting those who have lower levels of risk aversion (López & Sánchez, 2021).

Methodology

This study is a mixed-method pursuit that uses both qualitative content analysis and quantitative survey data concerning the impact of violent depictions on social media in Pakistan's tourism sector. The mixed-method design allows both the content presented through social media posts and the perceptions among tourists and other stakeholders to be grasped.

Qualitative Content Analysis

This qualitative part is based on a content analysis of violent incidents in Pakistan using social media posts. A total of 500 posts on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook were gathered and analyzed from January 2022-July to 2023. Online posts were chosen because of their high engagement rates, such as likes, shares, comments, and relevance toward violent incidents, such as terrorist attacks or a mishappening of political unrest in Pakistan. The content analysis focused on identifying common underlying themes of concern that relate to most cases, such as terrorism, political instability, and civil disturbances, as well as how these themes are presented.

The posts were coded thematically to trace patterns in the story of violence. The most outstanding themes included "terrorism," "conflict," and "insecurity." The most frequently shared content were images and videos of violent events. The study also investigated the framing of these events, with many posts sensationalizing violence, as well as the danger of visiting Pakistan.

Quantitative Survey

The quantitative component of this study entailed a survey of 300 international tourists and 50 domestic tourism stakeholders, including tour operators, hotel managers, and representatives from the Pakistan Tourism Development Corporation (PTDC). The survey aimed to gauge respondents' perceptions of Pakistan as a tourist destination, and how such perceptions were affected by violent messages on social media. Some of the questions included the following.

Safety concerns regarding visiting Pakistan.

The probability of visiting Pakistan has been brought about by the depictions of violence.

Impact of social media on opinion formation in the country

Efficacy of positive social media campaigns in countering adverse portrayal of Pakistan

The questionnaire was web-based, and the answers were processed using SPSS software. Descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and regression analysis outlined trends and the impact of exposure through social media on attitudes towards visiting Pakistan.

Sampling and Data Collection

The content analysis and surveys were based on a purposive sampling strategy. For these selections, relevance to violent incidents within the state and engagement through social media were targeted. Local stakeholders who experienced the tourism industry first and international tourists who were familiar with Pakistan were selected for the surveys. International tourists who had considered visiting Pakistan and local tourism stakeholders who had firsthand experience within the country's tourism industry received surveys.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data from the content analysis were coded and analyzed thematically to identify trends in violence depictions. The quantitative data from the survey were analyzed using descriptive statistics to provide an overview of the respondents' perceptions, and a regression analysis was conducted to determine the relationship between exposure to violent depictions on social media and tourists' willingness to visit Pakistan.

Results and Analysis

The results of the study showed a link between the reporting of violence on social media and the notion of Pakistan by tourists as a tourist destination. Content analysis showed that social media posts are commonly involved in violent incidents, such as terrorist attacks, civil unrest, and political instability. Most of these posts included graphic images and videos, sensationalizing violence and thus making Pakistan a dangerous place to visit.

Table 1: Common Themes in Social Media Depictions of Violence in Pakistan (2022-2023)

Theme	Frequency (%)
Terrorism	35%
Political Unrest	28%
Civil Disturbances	20%
Natural Disasters	10%
General Crime	7%

As can be seen in Table 1, the most frequently presented theme of terrorism was 35% of the violent representations made on social media. Political unrest and civil disturbances were also well represented, with 28% and 20% representing these themes. Less frequently but contributing to the negative image of Pakistan in general, was the presentation of natural disasters and general crime.

The survey found that 65% of international visitors showed second thoughts about visiting Pakistan after consuming violent depictions on the social media platform. The main reason for this change of mind in decision-making among tourists was that 72% of the respondents said they felt Pakistan was unsafe due to violent imagery presented online.

Table 2: Survey Results on Perceptions of Pakistan as a Tourist Destination (n=350)

Perception	Percentage (%)
Trust in Social Media Depictions	80%
Perceived as Unsafe	72%
Willingness to Visit After Exposure	20%
Effectiveness of Positive Campaigns	35%

As shown in Table 2, fully 72% of respondents said they would never visit Pakistan again after exposure to violent portrayals on social media, and, for example, 80% rated their trust in the viability of social media portrayals as high. Only 35% of respondents felt that positive campaigns in social media would help in opposing the negative depiction of violence.

Based on the findings of the regression analysis, there was an indication that exposure towards violent representations through social media was negatively correlated with tourists' intention to visit Pakistan; $r = -0.68$, $p < 0.01$. It indicates that as exposure towards violent representations increases, tourists' probability of visiting Pakistan decreases marginally. The campaign also identified to some extent the damage that negative depictions of violence may be causing, but at the same time indicated that there were some strategies which would improve Pakistan's image. Suggestions from respondents included more targeted social media campaigns to reflect the country's natural beauty, historical sites, and cultural experiences as ways to compensate for

the damage caused by negative depictions of violence.

Conclusion

This research explores how violent images affect Pakistan's tourism industry through social media. From the observation, it is apparent that social media normally depicts Pakistan as a nation where the people run distinct types of dangers and instability due to constant images of violence such as terrorism and political unrest within civil disturbances. The negative portrayals have much more drastic effects on tourists' perception of safety because 72% of polled tourists think Pakistan is not safe after viewing violent content online.

The findings indicate that while social media can function as an effective tool for the promotion of tourism, it can also create noise and amplify what would otherwise be minor events, which deters tourists from visiting. As to how travelers have an exaggerated overestimation of the risk of going to Pakistan after viewing violent depictions on social media, the availability heuristic is proposed. The

cultivation theory further supports the notion that protracted exposure to such depiction's shapes tourists' perception of Pakistan as being a destination with elevated risk.

At the same time, the study also hints at the potential strategies to counter this influence. Social media influencers and tourism boards can be effective in altering the narrative as they market positive aspects of Pakistan, among which are cultural richness, historical landmarks, and its breathtaking scenic beauty. Positive social media campaigns may still work against negative appeals of violence if used appropriately; though currently, they remain within niches.

Recommendations

Future studies should investigate whether such campaigns can affect behaviour and see how adventure tourists, for example, would react differently as they are less averse to violence. An understanding of how these tourists perceive risk might thereby help in devising targeted tourism promotion, where such high-risk destinations as Pakistan can benefit through proper study.

1. Pakistan's tourism authorities, such as PTDC, must invest more in an integrated and well-coordinated social media campaign that pays attention to the country's positive features, including its beauty cultural heritage and history. The campaigns should create more balanced, thought-provoking discourse to drown out the violent narratives.

2. Partnering with Influencers Tourism boards can collaborate and align with local and international travel influencers who have explored Pakistan and had a wonderful experience. Such influencers can prove to be an effective agency against the distorted images of violence being presented on social media.

3. Most of Pakistan's regions are free from violence. There is an appeal to promote tourism in those regions, particularly northern regions, which can be marketed for adventure tourism. Promoting these free regions would shift the narrative on Pakistan's natural and cultural riches.

4. There should be official sources for all real-time safety information for all tourists. These may include information on the security status, travel advisories, and reviews from other tourists who recently visited the country.

5. There should be a comprehensive crisis communication strategy devised by Pakistan's tourism sector to mitigate the effects of violent events. The strategy would require swift responses to negative stories on social media and the promotion of positive stories that could create a sort of balance in the narrative.

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