Local Community Perceptions of Sustainable Tourism Development: Evidence from Kalam Valley, Swat, Pakistan

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Abstract

This paper discusses the views of the local population to sustainable tourism development in Kalam Valley, Swat, Pakistan. Sustainable tourism has been widely considered as a way of ensuring economic growth is balanced with environmental conservation and cultural preservation but its development is largely reliant on the involvement and participation of local locals. Although Kalam has a lot of natural and cultural attractions, there is not much information about how the community perceives the sustainability agenda in Kalam. To fill this gap, primary data was collected via a structured questionnaire which was given to 75 local respondents using a simple random sampling technique. The survey took the Likert scale with 20 items touching upon four major dimensions, namely: sustainability, environment, socio-economic benefits and cultural heritage. The SPSS 20.1 was used to analyze data to determine trends and patterns in community perceptions. Results indicate that the older residents were more concerned about sustainability as compared to young respondents and that most local business owners were not willing to adopt sustainable practices. In addition, the respondents pointed out lack of participation of local government in implementation of sustainable tourism policies. Nevertheless, the community recognized that sustainable tourism had the potential of providing economic

opportunities, cultural pride and environmental conservation in case it is managed well. The paper concludes that sustainable community participation, education, and collaborative governance of the valley may transform the Kalam Valley into a model of the sustainable tourism in Pakistan.

Keywords: Sustainable Tourism, Perception, Local Community, Tourism, Kalam Valley.

Introduction

Tourism is also among the fastest-developing industries of the modern world that can bring about significant economic, cultural, and social benefits. The WTTC (2023) estimates that in 2023, the sector alone contributed to 9.1 per cent of the global GDP, and over 330 million jobs. In the case of developing nations, such as Pakistan, tourism provides inexhaustible potential to stimulate the national income, open up jobs, and facilitate the spread of cultures (Ali and Ahmad, 2011; Malik, 2015). Nevertheless, the uncontrolled expansion tends to lead to environmental degradation, disruption of cultures and unequal distribution of the economy (Mowforth and Munt, 2008). These issues have resulted in the introduction of sustainable tourism, which can be explained as tourism that fulfills the demand of the current visitors and host communities and safeguard future prospects by conserving the environment, promoting socio-cultural heritage, and ensuring economic sustainability (UNWTO, 2015). The northern areas of Pakistan, especially, Swat Valley in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, are known due to their scenic beauty, forests, lakes, and covered snowy mountains. Kalam Valley is another excellent attraction site within Swat that welcomes thousands of tourists (local and foreign) each year (Saleem, 2022). Its ecological variety and cultural diversification make it quite popular, yet the growth of tourism has also caused such problems as deforestation, improper waste disposal, traffic jams, and the loss of respect towards the local customs (Berger, 2019; Arshad et al., 2017). Furthermore, informal development and poor governance has restricted the incorporation of the sustainability principles in the management of local tourism (Zia Ullah, 2021). The communities nearby are central stakeholders in the sustainable tourism, since their perception and engagement would define the acceptance and success of the initiatives (Gursoy, Jurowski, and Uysal, 2002). Active involvement guarantees fair benefit sharing, improved environmental stewardship and cultural identity (Stronza and Gordillo, 2008). Nonetheless, the literature on sustainable tourism in Pakistan has remained mostly silent on community standpoints with a lot of emphasis being put on infrastructure or policy aspects (Butler and Ruhanen, 2009). This paper fills this gap by investigating how the local people of Kalam perceive sustainable tourism development by the community. In particular, it will look at the knowledge levels of residents about sustainability operations, their perceptions about environmental conservation, and their perceptions about socio-economic and cultural effects of tourism. This study can help shape the strategies of policy development and creation that are more inclusive of the community by foregrounding their voices.
The article is informed by two research questions:

How do the local people perceive sustainable tourism development in Kalam Valley? What is the level of awareness of the residents on sustainable tourism practices and how do they view their contribution to tourism development?

It is anticipated that the results of this study would offer numerous insights to policymakers, tourism planners and development organizations. Knowledge of community perceptions will help in creating awareness building programs, promote participatory planning, and make tourism more sustainable. Finally, the Kalam Valley may set an example of sustainable tourism in Pakistan and show how the involvement of locals can balance the economic success with the environmental and cultural conservation.

Literature Review
The Sustainable Tourism Principles

Sustainable tourism is a model of development that seeks to strike a balance between environmental preservation, social and cultural conservation and economic gains (UNWTO, 2015). It focuses on fulfilling the current demands of tourists and host communities without denting the prospects of the future. Sustainable tourism is based upon three dimensions. To begin with, the environmental aspect emphasizes on the conservation of resources, safeguarding of biodiversity and reducing ecological footprints. Tourism usually leads to deforestation, poor waste management and pollution, which pose a threat to the ecological balance of a destination (Buckley, 2012). Such places as Kalam, are fragile mountains and it is important to maintain forests, rivers and wildlife in order to ensure that the destination remains attractive. Second, the socio-economic aspect emphasizes fair reallocation of the good, creation of jobs and reduction of poverty. Tourism is an effective contributor to both local and national economies, however, there are economic leakages when profits are captured by external investors, rather than host communities (Timothy & Boyd, 2003). The new business model should be inclusive and should focus on local employment and entrepreneurship to ensure a sustainable approach. Third, cultural aspect emphasizes on preserving culture, language and heritage. Tourism has the potential of fostering intercultural exchange but could also destroy the originality of cultures in case they are commercialized (Timothy and Nyaupane, 2009). The protection of native art, festivals, and traditions gives the community a sense of identity, as well as improving the experiences of visitors. Together, these principles constitute the basis of analysis of the effectiveness of sustainable tourism activities in the local setting.

Local Community Perceptions in Tourism Development

The image of community to the tourism projects is very important in the long-term success. The attitudes of residents define how much they accept, resist or actively engage in development initiatives (Gursoy, Jurowski, and Uysal, 2002). Favorable views are linked with an increased level of community support whereas unfavorable views may result in resistance that destroys sustainability. According to previous studies, communities appreciate tourism due to its economic benefits, including infrastructure development, employment and generation of income (Milman and

Pizam, 1988). Nevertheless, locals tend to complain about such adverse effects as traffic jam, pollution, and cultural interference. Indicatively, Liu, Sheldon and Var (1987) observed that the Hawaiian and Welsh inhabitants placed more emphasis on environmental preservation, rather than economic benefits, whereas the Turkish communities placed more emphasis on economic development, at the expense of the environment. These results indicate that there is a difference in perception based on the culture and developmental backgrounds. In Pakistan, there is scarcity of research that looks into the perceptions of the local people towards tourism. The studies have concentrated on the gaps in infrastructure, governance, or environmental factors (Arshad, Iqbal, and Shahbaz, 2017), paying little or no attention to the sentiment of host residents. This loophole highlights the necessity of exploring the community attitudes in the areas such as Kalam where tourism development is in conflict with the ecological vulnerability and cultural diversity.

Community Participation, Empowerment, and Awareness

It is a well-known idea that active community participation has been identified as one of the pillars of sustainable tourism (Murphy, 1985). Participation occurs in various ways, such as forced engagement with limited control over the decision-making process to voluntary engagement where communities dictate the process of planning and development (Rasoolmanesh, 2016). The increased levels of participation result in increased ownership of the community, greater economic value, and more sustainable results (Andereck et al., 2005). The process is boosted through empowerment where the residents are provided with the skills, knowledge and authority to develop tourism in ways that are more than mere mirrors of their values (Scheyvens, 2002). Communities, once empowered, will be more active in preserving their natural and cultural resources and also encourage responsible tourism. It is also important to raise awareness. Malaysia and El Salvador studies indicate that training and education are useful in developing positive views of communities towards tourism by explicating both the opportunities and the obligations (Jaafar et al., 2015; Guzmán, Cañizares, and Pavon, 2011). On the other hand, ignorance tends to lead to practices that are detrimental to the environment like deforestation and poor management of waste like in most rural regions of Pakistan. Creation of awareness in places such as Kalam is thus crucial to get the local practices in line with the principles of sustainability.

Lessons from Other Developing Countries

The opportunities and the challenges of sustainable tourism have been witnessed in other developing countries. In Malaysia, community-based tourism has given the rural people more power through better livelihoods and conservation of cultural heritage (Jaafar et al., 2015). In Latin America, tourism programs like the Flowers Route in El Salvador have generated income and occupation and enhanced conservation of the environment and the involvement of women (Guzmán et al., 2011). Likewise, in Peru, how delicate heritage sites can be preserved without going bankrupt in the process has been demonstrated by adhering to a management of Machu Picchu through carrying

capacity control alongside conservation regulations (Chilman, 2022). According to these cases, the key success factors are community participation, good governance and enforcement of regulations. They however, also disclose that unless there is a fair distribution of benefits, communities can be opposed to tourism development and this results in conflict and unsustainable practices.
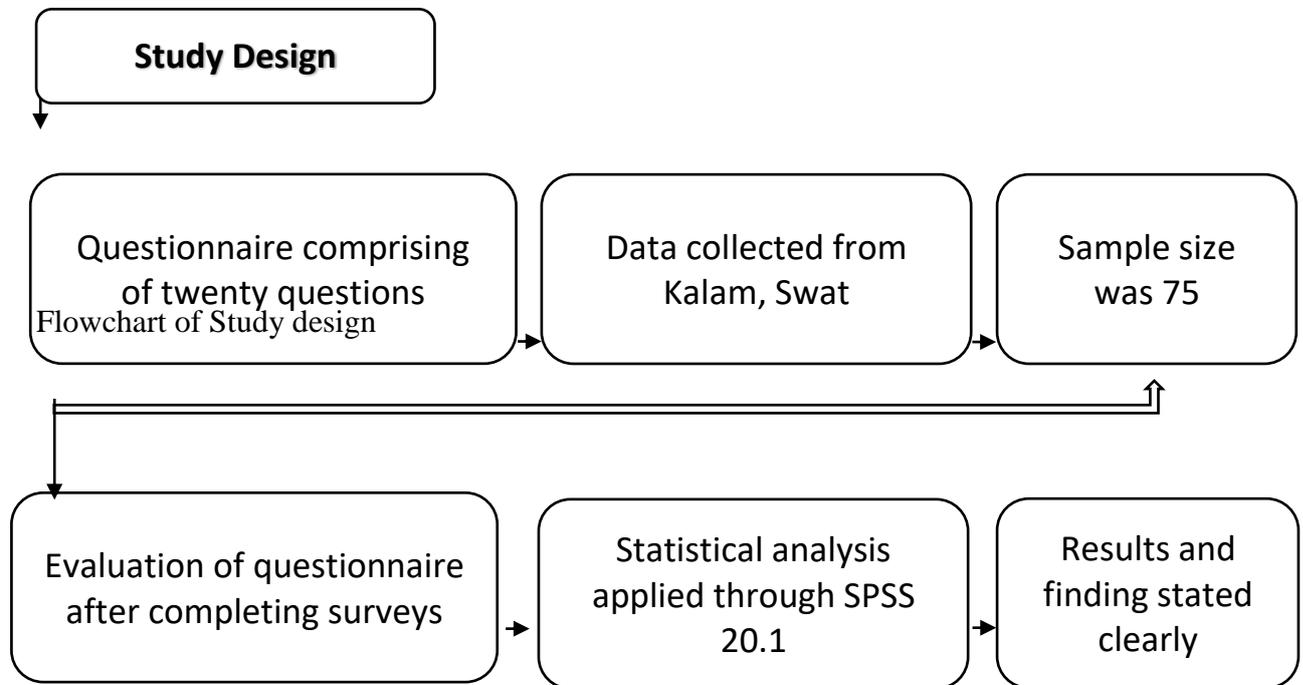
Research Gap and Contribution

Although literature on sustainable tourism globally emphasizes the role of community perceptions in sustainable tourism, there is limited and scattered research on the same in Pakistan. The literature discusses the economic potential or the infrastructural deficit of tourism (Butler and Ruhanen, 2009; Arshad et al., 2017), but it does not consider the views of the host populations. This is noteworthy bearing in mind that the local residents are the ones directly affected by tourism and who are central to both environmental care and cultural conservation. This paper is part of bridging this gap as it dwells on how the community of Kalam Valley view's sustainable tourism. It assesses the resident's perception and reactions to environmental, socio-economic and cultural aspects of sustainability. The study illuminates the issue of implementing sustainable tourism in the mountain areas of Pakistan by recording their perceptions and sheds light on the limitations and prospects of the implementation process. The results can guide policymakers, planners and tourism stakeholders to develop inclusive policies that will support development objectives with the needs and values of the community.

Methodology
Research Design

The research design chosen in this study was a quantitative research design to survey on the perceptions of sustainable tourism development in Kalam Valley of the local communities. Attitudes and perceptions in larger populations can be measured fairly well using quantitative methods, and a generalization and statistical comparison may be made (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). The main data collection instrument selected was a structured survey since it allows the standardization of responses, eases analysis, and minimizes bias of the researcher.

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│  Study Design   │
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│ Questionnaire    │   │ Data collected   │   │ Sample size      │
│ comprising of    │──▶│ from Kalam, Swat │──▶│ was 75           │
│ twenty questions │   │                  │   │                  │
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│ Evaluation of    │   │ Statistical      │   │ Results and      │
│ questionnaire    │──▶│ analysis applied │──▶│ finding stated   │
│ after completing │   │ through SPSS     │   │ clearly          │
│ surveys          │   │ 20.1             │   │                  │
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Flowchart of Study design

Study Area

The study took place in the well-known tourist site of Kalam Valley in the upper swat of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in Pakistan. Kalam is widely known due to its natural scenic location of 2,000 meters, alpine meadows, rivers, and lakes but also due to its cultural richness and friendliness (Saleem, 2022). The valley is a significant income earner through tourism, and the unplanned development has emerged as a cause of environmental and socio-cultural issues (Arshad, Iqbal, and Shahbaz, 2017). Kalam due to its increasing popularity and environmental sensitivity is a good location to explore how sustainable tourism is perceived locally.

Location of the study area- Kalam in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan.

Sampling and Respondents

The simple random sampling methodology was used to get a representation of the different community members. The survey was conducted among 75 local inhabitants that included shopkeepers, hotel owners, transport providers, students, and other members of the community that have direct or indirect exposure to tourism. The sampling was selected randomly to reduce the selection bias and represent the diverse views among the community members (Bryman, 2016).

Data Collection Instrument

A structured questionnaire was used to collect data that consisted of 20 close-ended questions measured on a five-point Likert scale with a 1 strongly disagree/5 strongly agree. The questionnaire was based on four thematic dimensions based on the literature (1) sustainability awareness, (2) environmental impacts, (3) socio-economic benefits, and (4) cultural heritage preservation. To guarantee the instrument clarity and reliability of items, a small sample of respondents was pre-tested as part of the best practices in a survey research (Dillman, Smyth, and Christian, 2014).

Data Analysis

The data obtained were analyzed by the use of SPSS version 20.1. To summarize the demographic profile and attitude of respondents towards sustainable tourism, descriptive statistics like frequency distributions and percentages were used to summarize the responses. The trends and patterns in perceptions were illustrated by using graphical representation in terms of bar and pie charts. This methodology facilitated easy visualization of results and general interpretation of the attitude of the community on the subject of sustainability.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were followed to the letter when undertaking the study. The study involved a voluntary participation of the respondents and informed consent was given before the administration of the survey. Confidentiality of the data was guaranteed through anonymity of data and its use limited to academic purposes. These were taken so that the rights and dignity of the participants could be honored in totality, as per the set ethical standards of social research (Israel and Hay, 2006).

Results

The demography of the respondents used in this study is as follows. The survey consisted of 75 local managers in the Kalam Valley. As Figure 1 indicates, the highest percent of the participants were in the 1830 age category (33.3%), then 31-45 years (26.7%), 46-60 years (24%), and over 60 years (16%). This proves that young people are the majority in the community, yet there are older generations who can share at least some useful insights into sustainability.

On education levels, the respondents indicated various levels of education. Two out of five (20 percent) had a bachelor's degree, 26.7 percent had completed secondary school, 20 percent had a master's degree or higher and 13.3 percent had not obtained

any formal degree, as shown in the middle of Figure 1. This distribution shows that there is a moderately educated population that can grasp the concept of sustainability with the right type of engagement.

The respondents were also of varied professional backgrounds. Students were 33.3 percent, business owners (26.7%), people who worked in the tourism industry (20%), and other people, including farmers and household workers (20%). This combination also guaranteed diversity in thinking about the effects of tourism.
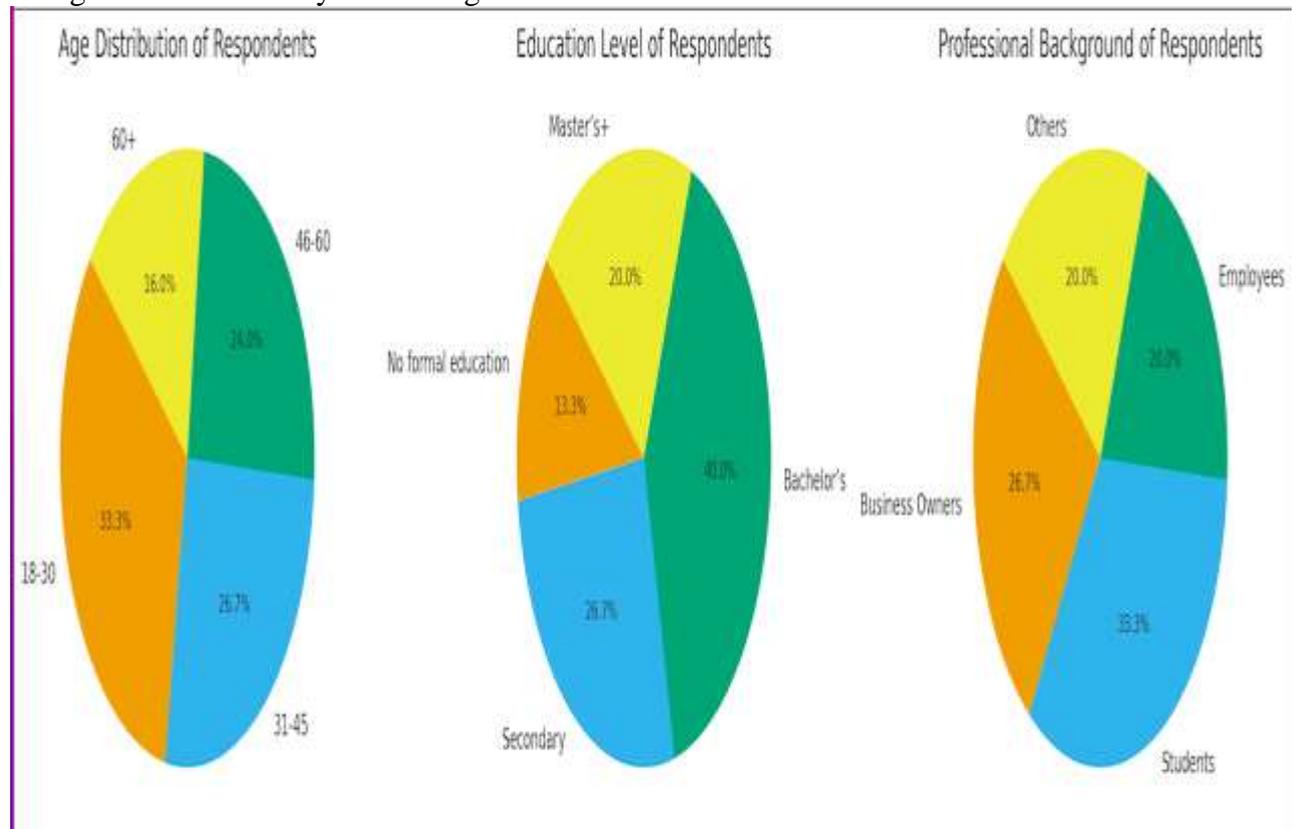
Figure 1: Demographic Characteristic of the Respondents.

Awareness of Sustainable Tourism

The awareness of Sustainable Tourism is concerned with the fourth issue. When questioned on the definition of sustainable tourism, there was a mixed awareness of the same. According to a report made in Figure 2, there were about 60 percent high awareness, 26.7 percent moderate awareness and 13.3 percent low awareness. The respondents who were educated, especially those who had bachelor or master degrees, had a better understanding of sustainability principles. As compared to the uneducated participants, those who had some form of education tended to tie sustainability to economic benefit alone. This shows that there is a necessity of community education that focuses on the environmental and cultural aspects of sustainability.
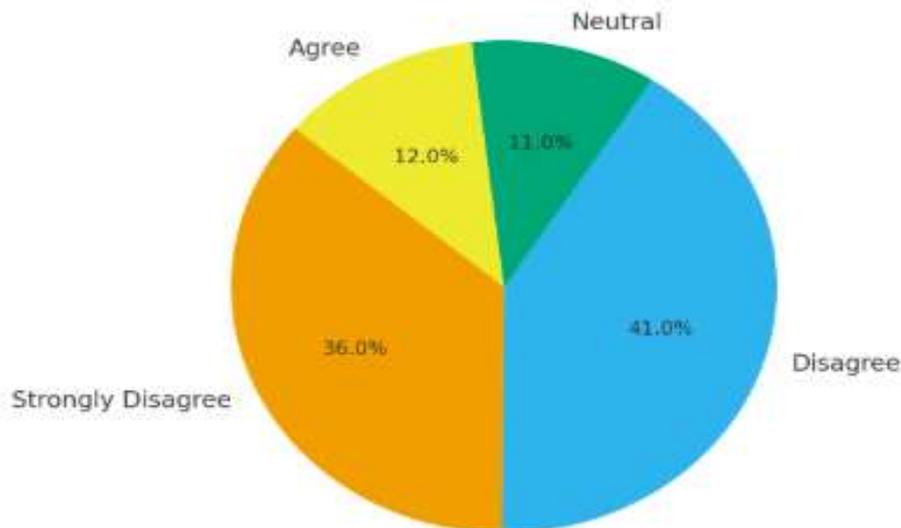
Figure 2: Awareness of sustainable tourism

Perceptions of Environmental Impacts
4.3 Impression of Environmental Effects. Respondents were very vocal about issues on the environment. Figure 3 showed that 69.3 percent were concerned, 20 percent neutral, and 10.7 percent not concerned about the environmental impacts of tourism. The most widely mentioned problems were deforestation, problems with waste disposal, and pollution caused by uncontrolled tourism. The older residents insisted on the evident alterations in the forest cover and the quality of the water in the past decade because they were observed, and the changes were noticeable over a longer period of time by them in the valley.
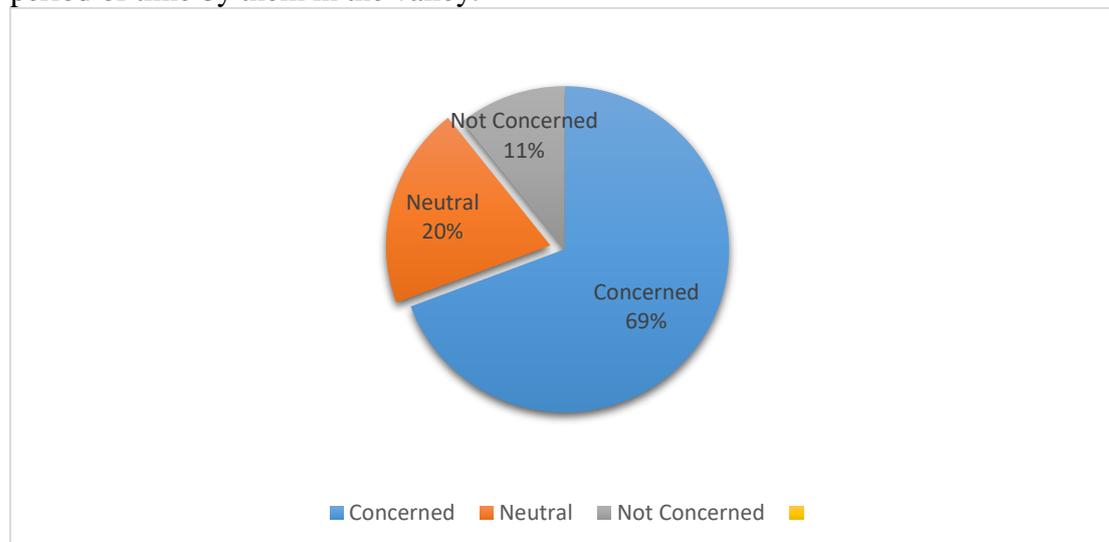

Figure 3: Perception of Environmental impact

Socio-Economic Benefits

Tourism was well known as a means of livelihoods in the locality. Figure 4 shows that 74.7% felt there were positive socio-economic benefits, 16% neutral, and 9.3% negative. The respondents emphasized the importance of tourism in the generation of seasonal employment, the growth of local businesses and the generation of income. Emphasis was placed on employment opportunities by students, business owners talked about the demand that is consistent in terms of hospitality and retail services. Nonetheless, other participants also cited economic leakages, where profits tend to favour external investors and not the local population.
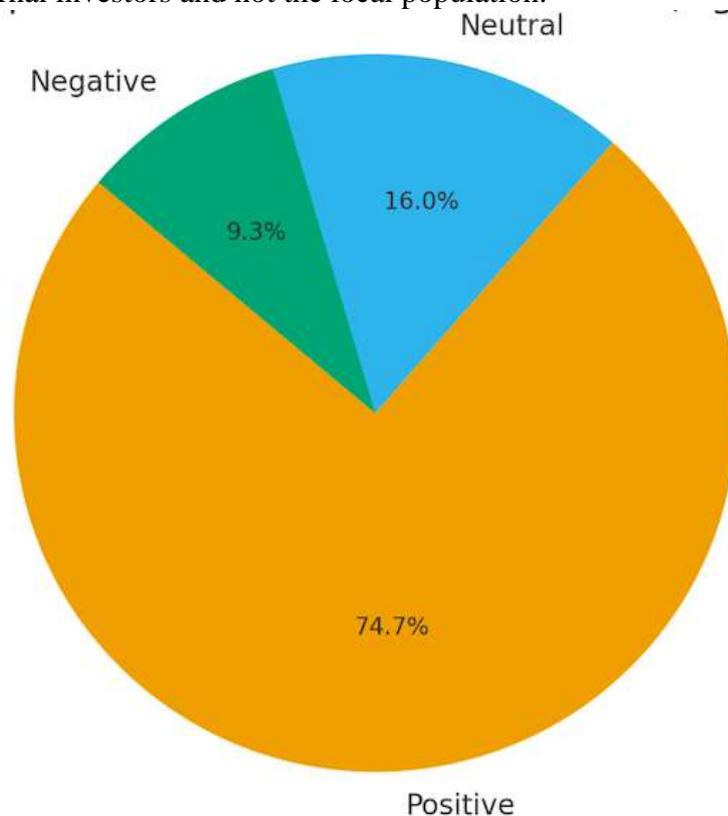

Figure 4: Socio-Economic Benefits

Cultural Heritage Perceptions

Tourism has a role to play in the formation of cultural heritage that resulted in both the positive and the negative perspectives. Figure 5, 65.3 percent of the respondents described positive effects, 20 percent were neutral and 14.7 percent said they had negative effects. Respondents on the positive side explained that tourism has a positive effect of reviving the traditional festivals, handcrafts and cultural pride. Conversely, the elderly respondents warned about a loss of culture as they were afraid of increasing commercialization at the expense of the traditional values. Residents

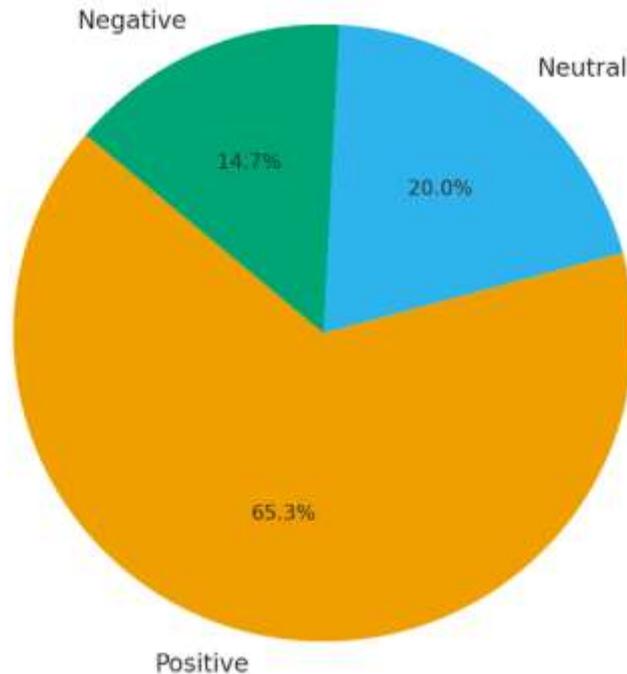who are younger were more positive and thought of tourism as a means of cultural exchange.

Figure 5: Cultural Heritage Perceptions

Discussion

This part explains the findings of the research, which relate them to the literature on sustainable tourism in general. The discussion focuses on community awareness, socio-economic benefits, environmental impacts and cultural heritage perceptions, where the opportunities and challenges to sustainable tourism development are discussed in Kalam Valley.

Demographic Influences

The demographic report of the respondents showed that younger residents (1830 years old) were the most numerous ones, but older participants were more concerned with sustainability. The discovery is similar to Buffa (2015) who adds that younger adults are usually less interested in sustainable tourism practices, whereas older people are more focused on the protection of the environment and preservation of the resources on a long-term basis. Education was also a factor as respondents who had the highest qualifications showed better understanding of the idea of sustainability. This reinforces Chatterjee et al. (2018) as they emphasize the power of education to develop the perceptions, but the level of awareness is not homogeneous among populations.

Sensitivity to Sustainable Tourism

The research has discovered varying degrees of awareness, where 60 percent were highly aware and 13.3 percent had low levels of understanding whereby sustainability was only synonymous to economic gains. This echoes Guzmán, Cañizares and Pavon (2011) who believe in the need to create awareness to match the attitudes of communities with sustainable practices. The result also echoes Moscardo (2008) who highlights the need to provide specific education in order to empower communities when it comes to tourism planning. Sustainable tourism will continue to lose its holistic development paradigm to the narrow understanding that it is an income generating activity except that there are regular awareness campaigns.

Environmental Concerns

The most common worry (69.3% of all respondents) was the effect of tourism on the environment, which they cited through deforestation, problems of waste disposal and water pollution. Buckley (2012) raises the same concerns as he sees uncontrolled tourism as a major environmental risk. Specifically, older residents pointed to the visible environmental changes in the last 10 years, and they highlighted the sustainable consequences of uncontrolled development. These findings are in line with those of Arshad, Iqbal and Shahbaz (2017) who observe that poor governance and lack of enforcement contribute to the worsening of environmental degradation in the Pakistani north. To reduce these negative effects therefore, effective policy interventions, community engagement and environmentally friendly initiatives are essential.

Socio-Economic Benefits

Tourism was commonly known to be a source of livelihood, and 74.7% of them reported positive socio-economic effects. The areas that the respondents highlighted are employment opportunities and business growth which is in line with Milman and Pizam (1988) who define tourism as a job generating activity. These fears about the economic leakage that is, profits are made by external investors replicate the arguments of Timothy and Boyd (2003) that equitable benefit-sharing is essential in supporting the community. Such results are also in line with Goodwin (2011), who points out the prospective of community-based tourism to empower local people by spreading economic benefits more evenly.

Cultural Heritage Perceptions

There was the view that tourism had both positive and negative effects to the culture. Although 65.3% felt that tourism helps in revitalizing culture by way of festivals and handicraft, 14.7% were also worried about culture erosion because of commercialism. This duality is also aligned with Timothy and Nyaupane (2009) who indicate tension between commodification and cultural preservation in the developing settings. The optimism of the younger respondents towards intercultural exchange is congruent with Smith and Robinson (2006) who state that tourism gives people a chance to appreciate each other and to feel cultural pride. Nevertheless, the issues raised by the

older respondents highlight the importance of using policies that support authenticity, although encouraging cultural tourism.

Conclusion

In general, findings indicate that there is cautious optimism among the residents of the Kalam Valley on sustainable tourism. Community is aware of the economic and cultural gains and complains about environmental degradation, revenue leakages and unequal awareness. These observations are consistent with Stronza and Gordillo (2008), who believe that the support of sustainable tourism in the community should be based on fair benefits and environmental protection. As a way of solving the current issues, the policymaking process must focus on raising awareness, fair distribution of benefits, and joint governance. Kalam Valley can also be a model in sustainable tourism in Pakistan with better community engagement.

Limitations of the Study

There are some limitations of this study. The study used a relatively small sample size of 75 respondents in Kalam valley that limits the extrapolation of the results to the rest of Swat region. There is also a limitation of the capacity to record seasonal changes in tourism impacts due to the geographical orientation on one valley and the limited amount of time available to conduct data collection. In addition, the research was based on self-reporting, which can be influenced by personal biases and the social desirability factor. The insufficiency of secondary data further limited the ability to compare results with real-life tourism data and the omission of other significant stakeholders including government officials, non-governmental organizations, and the participant of the private sector implies that the results were a predominantly biased depiction of perceptions held by local residents and not a holistic tourism development in Swat.

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