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# The Impact of a Short-Term Digital Marketing Campaign on Improving the Sales of Hotel Capacities

Milosav Dunjić<sup>A</sup>, Marija Cimbalević<sup>A\*</sup>

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## Abstract

*The subject of the research is the influence of a specific online marketing campaign through selected social networks on the improvement of the sales of accommodation capacities with the example of the hotel Putnik on Kopaonik. The application of the campaign should find a quick way to potential users and to encourage their interest. It is of great importance to plan and direct the marketing campaign because the wide distribution does not directly affect the results. Online marketing has shown to be a useful tool for fast group targeting to which the offer will be directed. Therefore, this paper aims to present an example of an active approach to the use of social networks as a part of marketing activities, to stimulate short-term capacity sales in specific terms. Also, the aim was to present preliminary short-term results of social media marketing activities combined with incentive pricing strategies on increasing capacity utilization and achieving higher business results. The data used in the paper are unpublished, acquired from the official business report of the hotel software "PROTEL". The marketing campaign gave good results and therefore hotels can carry out similar activities in order to achieve efficient hotel capacity filling.*

**Keywords:** Digital Marketing, Campaign, Social Networks, Hotel, Kopaonik, Serbia

## Introduction

Marketing, communication, and advertising channels have undergone significant transformation over the past decade as new technologies have enabled companies to contact customers more easily (Hongcharu, Eiamkanchanalai, 2009). New media such as the Internet and social networks are increasingly changing traditional mass media (Bruhn et al., 2012; Tešić et al., 2020) and enabling the development of digital marketing (Stankov et al., 2012). The most frequently mentioned advantages of digital marketing are affordability, speed and good visibility (Parvez et al., 2018). Although the potential of the Internet as a medium for advertising has proven to be successful, choosing the appropriate channel for conveying messages is a complex

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task for marketers both in theory and in practice (Kiang et al., 2000). Social media marketing is an integral part of a business in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Felix et al., 2017). Social network marketing can be defined as the process of “monitoring and facilitating interaction and participation in the consumer-to-consumer relationship across the Internet, to encourage positive engagement with the organization and its brand. Interaction can take place on the company website, social networks and other third-party sites” (Kalinić, 2018). Although hotel websites represent the main media for advertising, hoteliers are increasingly accepting the fact that the use of social networks in marketing policy is a prerequisite for success (Inversini, Masiero, 2014).

The results of a study conducted by Momany and Alshboul (2016) show a strong link between the reach of social networks and online sales with brand strengthening. Social networks (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, etc.) serve as bridges in marketing and promoting products (services) to various users, organizations and companies around the world, with the help of mobile phones (Parvez et al., 2018; Kalinić, Vujičić, 2019). Facebook is considered one of the most popular (Greenwood et al., 2016) and one of the most influential social networking platform (Stankov et al., 2018).

Although there are a lot of studies on social media marketing in the hotel industry sector, there is a lack of data on methodologies for measuring the effectiveness of social media marketing, mostly because hotels are still in the initial phase of using social networks as a marketing tool (Inversini, Masiero, 2014). Hoteliers confirm the increase in figures that accompany the advertising of the new offer. However, there are few written reports that contain quantitative data of the campaign on social networks, instead they are only declared as successful or unsuccessful (Michopoulou, Moisa, 2018). There are two approaches to using social networks as part of a marketing strategy in the hotel industry: passive and active. The passive method involves the use of social networks as a source of customer feedback (giving a voice to customers) (Parise, Guinan, 2008), while the active approach involves social networks as a means of communication, encouraging customer loyalty and stimulating direct sales (Bughin, 2007; Rathore, 2020). Buhalis and Mamalakis (2014) conducted a study in a hotel on the island of Rhodes in Greece, which states that the cost-effectiveness (ROI - Return of Investment) of advertising on social networks can be measured in two ways, financially and non-financially. In other words, the performance of advertising on social networks varies greatly and depends on the type of organization and the expected results.

Based on a years-long analysis of hotel operations on destinations expressing seasonality, there are possible periodic oscillations in capacity occupancy caused by the intensity of demand. The interest of tourists depends on several factors: the period of the season, weather conditions, the amount of snow, holidays, collective vacations, children's vacations etc. Based on the statistical analysis of business operations in the period of several consecutive years in the past, and considering the calendar of holidays, school vacations, and long-term weather forecast, it is possible to foresee the periods of full capacity with a quite good accuracy. Also, it is possible to predict in which periods the interest will be lower. Upon identification of such periods, it is necessary to plan long-term and short-term strategies to achieve the desired results in the periods of weaker demand. There are different types of marketing activities traditionally used to promote products, thus choosing the appropriate specific actions can lead to significant results. Advertising on social media can contribute to quick reactions during periods of low demand, due to their speed, affordability, and vast scope of coverage of potential customers, through short-term campaigns aiming at improving the demand in the target period.

The most commonly used method is to create a specific offer related to the target period with an apparent difference in price compared to the regular price in the same time-span. In addition to the difference in price, the hotel can supplement the offer with various benefits like special discounts for children, early check-in / late check-out, vouchers for the free use of additional hotel facilities such as spa services and massage, children's facilities, ski pass and other services that clients would regularly have to pay for (Ochenatu, Foris, 2019). This bundling technique allows hotels to sell their services at a unified special price (Dominique-Ferreira, Antunes, 2020). Flexible and dynamic pricing policy in the hotel industry plays a prominent role, leading to higher profits and better capacity utilization (Abrate et al., 2019). Although there are many pricing strategies, periodic targeted actions are considered the most prevalent (Dominique-Ferreira, Antunes, 2020).

The aim of this paper is to show the possible impact and results of the short-term marketing campaign based on the dynamics of capacity sales in the hotel Putnik, as well as whether prices of the services as a part of the marketing strategy, have an incentive for reservations.

## Data and methods

Hotel "Putnik" is one of the first hotels at Kopaonik mountain, built in 1985, renovated and reopened as a 4\* hotel in the 2018/2019 winter season. Before the renovation, hotel had 95 rooms, and the capacity to accommodate 280 guests. After the renovation, room numbers and structure has been modified, so now there are 116 rooms, and the capacity to accommodate 342 guests. The hotel is located in a mountain tourist centre. It has very seasonal character of work with specific emphasis on the winter season. The organizational structure of the hotel company, among other sectors, includes the sales sector, which deals with the organization of direct sales of accommodation facilities and cooperation with external sales agents (subagents) and online platforms for the sales of hotel accommodation (e.g. Booking). The hotel performs marketing activities through an external marketing agency, which deals with regular promotional activities (advertising on television, radio, through the website, social networks, online portals, printed promotional materials, etc.) and, if necessary, single targeted promotional campaigns (personal communication). One of the targeted short-term promotional campaigns was released just before the start of the 2019/2020 winter season.

The data regarding hotel occupancy (Table 1) are obtained from hotel software "Protel", which is used in hotel "Putnik". According to research conducted by Kokaz Pucciani and Murphy (2011) in 95 hotels around the world, the most widespread hotel software is Micros Opera, Micros Suite 8 (Fidelio) and Protel PMS. Research has shown that the Micros Opera is the most commonly used system in large high-end hotels, the Micros Suite 8 is most generally present in independent hotels, while the Protel PMS is utilized in all categories and all hotel sizes. In the complex hotel systems, with many different processes which need to be an integral part of the hotel business as a whole, some of the most prominent features of the hotel information system are modularity, scalability and "deep" integration with additional, "surrounding" technical and software systems (tools) (Moyeenudin et al., 2018). Although the Micros company is dominant on the market when it comes to hotel software (Kokaz Pucciani, Murphy, 2011), Protel has proven to be very flexible and more affordable for the needs of Hotel Putnik.

Due to lower intensity of capacity sales for the period between 21<sup>st</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> December 2019, the hotel prepared an informational advertising visual for the time-limited action of price reduction by 20% for the mentioned period. The visual was integrated into a recognizable for-



mat designed for promotional activities and branding of the Putnik hotel and placed through online advertising media with an appropriate budget so that the announcement reached as many potential hotel service users as possible. The visual was published on the social networks Facebook and Instagram, as well as on the official website of the hotel. Most of the followers and visitors of the hotels website and social media pages are from Serbia or neighbor countries, it might be concluded that campaign was mostly directed towards domestic and regional market of the neighbor countries (e.g. Montenegro, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Romania, Hungary).

Data about booking dynamics are obtained from hotel software "Protel". The analysis included data from the beginning of the campaign October 29<sup>th</sup> 2019 until December 15<sup>th</sup> 2019, when all the capacities for the period 21<sup>st</sup>-25<sup>th</sup> December 2019 were sold out.

## Results and discussion

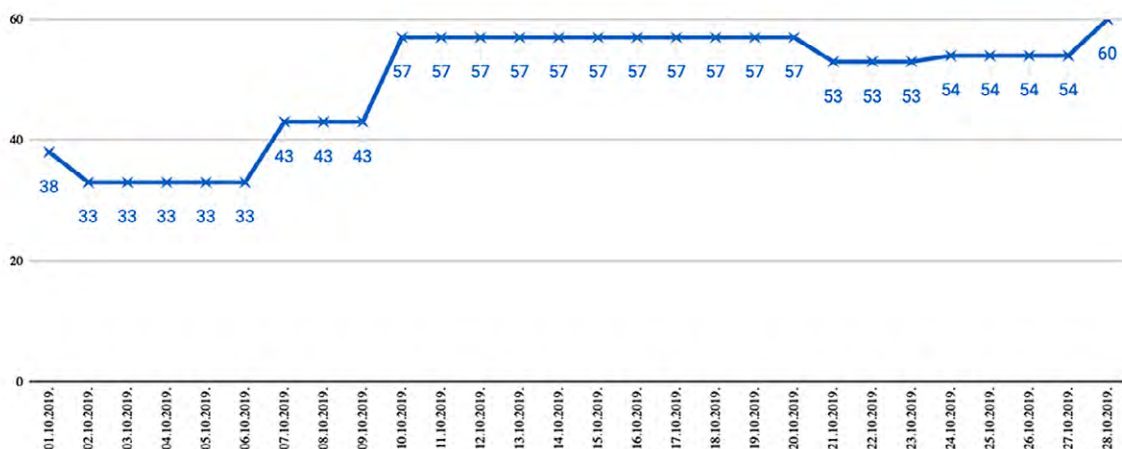
To adequately present the results of the short-term marketing campaign, the dynamics of capacity sales before activating the promotional campaign will be shown first. There are 2 columns in Table 1. The first column represents the growth of the number of daily reservations (per person) in the period between 1<sup>st</sup> October 2019 and 28<sup>th</sup> October 2019 when the campaign has not yet been placed, and the second column shows the growth in the period between 29<sup>th</sup> October 2019 and 15<sup>th</sup> December 2019 which was fully supported by an online marketing campaign.

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2019, there were 33 guests registered in the software, with reservations for the designated research period. Reservations were made in the period between 1<sup>st</sup> August 2019 (when the sale was open for the winter season) and 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2019. In the period from the October 2<sup>nd</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup>, 2019, there were no changes and no new reservations. There were 10 new reservations on the 7<sup>th</sup> October 2019, and the total number increased to 43. There was no change until the 10<sup>th</sup> October 2019 when there was an increase of 14 new reservations recorded. The total number of guests on that day was 57. Until the 20<sup>th</sup> October 2019, there were no changes which meant that there was no recorded booking for 10 days. In the period between October 2<sup>nd</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>, 2019, there were a total of 24 reservations recorded in 18 days, i.e. an average of 0.75 reservations per day. The conclusion is that there was no constant growth, given that 24 reservations were made in just two days, 10 reservations on the 7<sup>th</sup> October 2019, and 14 reservations on the 10<sup>th</sup> October 2019, indicating that guests have booked for the family or in small groups. On the 21<sup>st</sup> October 2019, there was a decrease in the number of reservations to 53, which indicated that four guests cancelled the reservation. On the 24<sup>th</sup> October 2019, there was only 1 reservation recorded, and then 6 new ones were registered on the 28<sup>th</sup> October 2019. The total number of reservations on the 28<sup>th</sup> October 2019 was 60, which represented about 15% of the full-scale hotel capacity (Figure 1). The management identified low interest for the period December 21<sup>st</sup> to 25<sup>th</sup>, 2019, compared to other periods and decided on the 29<sup>th</sup> October 2019, to announce a 20% discount on the price list from December 21<sup>st</sup> to 25<sup>th</sup>, 2019, to try to fill the capacities and avoid imbalances in business in the periods before and after the campaign. Similar price-lowering actions to fill the hotel capacity for the periods of less interest have been documented in the literature (e.g., Ochenatu, Foris, 2019) and are a part of standard practice in the hotel industry.

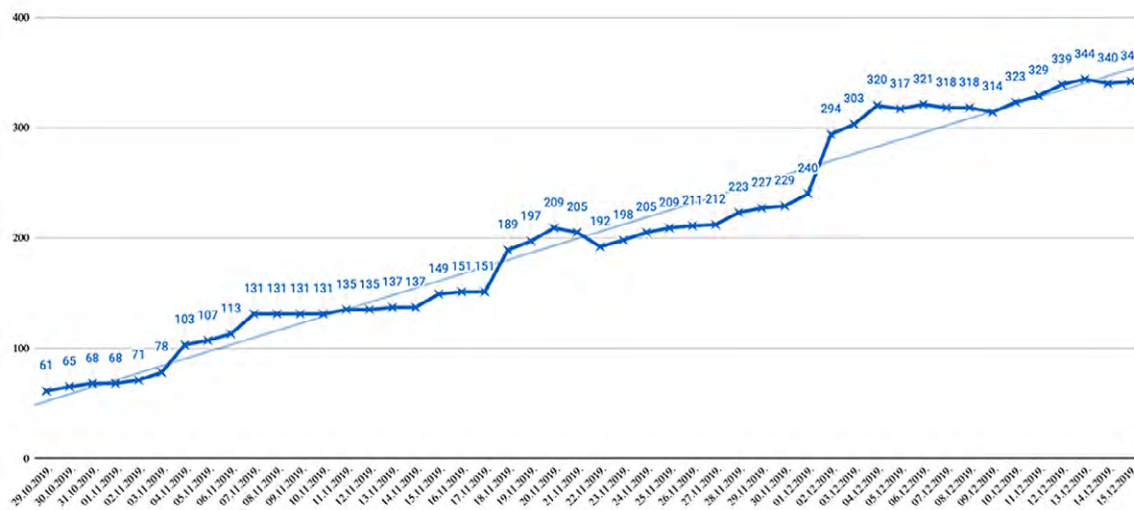
**Table 1.** The report of the hotel Putnik's capacity sale (for the period from 21 to 25/12/2019) realized in the period from 01 to 28/10/2019 (left column) and 29/10 to 15/12/2019 (right column)

Rel.: 1 October 2019 – 29 October 2019 Period: 21 December 2019 – 25 December 2019		Rel.: 29 October 2019 – 15 December 2019 Period: 21 December 2019 – 25 December 2019	
Rel. Occupied Date	Rm.	Rel. Occupied Date	Rm.
1.10.2019.	38	29.10.2019.	61
2.10.2019.	33	30.10.2019.	65
3.10.2019.	33	31.10.2019.	68
4.10.2019.	33	1.11.2019.	68
5.10.2019.	33	2.11.2019.	71
6.10.2019.	33	3.11.2019.	78
7.10.2019.	43	4.11.2019.	103
8.10.2019.	43	5.11.2019.	107
9.10.2019.	43	6.11.2019.	113
10.10.2019.	57	7.11.2019.	131
11.10.2019.	57	8.11.2019.	131
12.10.2019.	57	9.11.2019.	131
13.10.2019.	57	10.11.2019.	131
14.10.2019.	57	11.11.2019.	135
15.10.2019.	57	12.11.2019.	135
16.10.2019.	57	13.11.2019.	137
17.10.2019.	57	14.11.2019.	137
18.10.2019.	57	15.11.2019.	149
19.10.2019.	57	16.11.2019.	151
20.10.2019.	57	17.11.2019.	151
21.10.2019.	53	18.11.2019.	189
22.10.2019.	53	19.11.2019.	197
23.10.2019.	53	20.11.2019.	209
24.10.2019.	54	21.11.2019.	205
25.10.2019.	54	22.11.2019.	192
26.10.2019.	54	23.11.2019.	198
27.10.2019.	54	24.11.2019.	205
28.10.2019.	60	25.11.2019.	209
29.10.2019.	61	26.11.2019.	211
		27.11.2019.	212
		28.11.2019.	223
		29.11.2019.	227
		30.11.2019.	229
		1.12.2019.	240
		2.11.2019.	294
		3.11.2019.	303
		4.11.2019.	320
		5.11.2019.	317
		6.11.2019.	321
		7.11.2019.	318
		8.11.2019.	318
		9.11.2019.	314
		10.11.2019.	323
		11.11.2019.	329
		12.11.2019.	339
		13.11.2019.	344
		14.11.2019.	340
		15.11.2019.	342

Source: The report obtained from the hotel software "PROTEL"; personal communication



**Figure 1.** The number of reservations in the period before the start of the online action campaign on social networks  
 Source: Based on data in the report of the hotel software "PROTEL"; personal communication



**Figure 2.** The number of reservations at the start of the action campaign on social networks  
 Source: Based on data from the report of hotel software "PROTEL"; personal communication

On the first day of the campaign 29<sup>th</sup> October 2019, there were 61 reservations recorded in the software. Figure 2 shows that after the activation of the marketing campaign there was a noticeable daily increase in the number of reservations. On 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2019, there were 78 reservations recorded. One cannot say that the growth in the number of reservations is much higher compared to the period before the announcement of the campaign. However, it is possible to notice that the number of reservations increased every day, which was not the case before the campaign. Daily growth is the first positive indicator of campaign success. The reason for the relatively small number of bookings per day can be defined by the insufficient visibility of the campaign in the initial period. Even though the marketing campaign was accompanied by a paid promotion to increase visibility, one can conclude that it is necessary to implement the campaign in the period of a few days to be able to record its higher effects.

There were 103 reservations recorded on 4<sup>th</sup> November 2019, which meant that the accommodation was booked by 25 guests in one day for the promoted period from 21<sup>st</sup> to 25<sup>th</sup> December 2019. There is a possibility that a group of guests made the reservation on that day. There was a significant increase recorded in comparison to the previous period. On 17<sup>th</sup> November 2019 the number of reservations was 151, with a relatively evenly distributed constant growth compared to the preceding period. From the data mentioned above, one can conclude that the campaign started to deliver the desired results with a proper and timely distribution of growth. On 18<sup>th</sup> November 2019, the next significant increase of 38 reservations was noticed, which may also indicate a group reservation, resulting in the new balance of 189 reservations on that day. Until 20<sup>th</sup> November 2019, a total of 209 bookings were recorded, indicating that the trend of daily increase continued. In the next two days, it is possible to notice a decrease in the number of reservations, on the first day by 4 and the second day by 13, indicating that 17 reservations were cancelled during two days, so on 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2019, the numerical balance was 198 reservations. In the hotel business, the cancellations are treated as a commonplace occurrence because guests cancel their arrangements for various reasons. In this case, the number of cancelled reservations did not threaten to jeopardize the campaign, if we take into account that the results of the marketing campaign continue to improve the next day. Continuous growth is noticeable every day without large oscillations until 1<sup>st</sup> December 2019 when the numerical balance was 240 reservations. The next day, 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2019, additional 54 reservations were made, which could have been a group reservation again, leading to the number of 294 reservations on that day. Furthermore, the number of reservations displayed continuous daily increase until 15<sup>th</sup> December when it reached 342, which was the full-scale capacity of the hotel.

From the data mentioned above, one can conclude that the campaign was successful, well-designed and timely. It is important to note that there were 6 days left until the beginning of the promoted period, which indicated that the growth would most likely increase in the following days if the hotel had a larger capacity, because it was evident that there was demand driven by the campaign.

We should also keep in mind the price reduction of 20%, which was, by all means, a strong incentive for reservations. Price plays a significant role in all industries, including tourism and hospitality business (Moro et al., 2017). Prices of services, as an essential part of the marketing strategy, are reflected in the profitability of the company. There are many strategies that companies use to achieve targeted sales levels and a positive business image, and companies often use more than one specific pricing policy strategy. Price is the only element of the marketing mix that has a direct impact on a company's profits (Al-Qarni et al., 2013). Therefore, given the sensitive market for services in the hotel industry, pricing policy and strategy must be flexible and easily adaptable to respond to market changes (Chen, Chang, 2012; Dominique-Ferreira, Antunes, 2020). Namely, lowering the price of the arrangement, especially for large families, can bring significant savings, so this kind of incentive should not be disregarded. Therefore, it can be concluded that an adequate pricing policy together with appropriate marketing activities can lead to quick positive business results.

## Conclusion

The results presented in the article represent one-time marketing activity aimed at delivering the message on the product discount to the target audience in the short period, thus contributing to the filling of the hotel capacity in the designated period. The delicacy and unpredictabil-



ity of the hotel industry market are particularly visible with hotels on distinctive destinations characterized by the distinguishable seasonality of business operations and the higher price levels of services. It altogether highlights that these marketing activities are of great importance. The significance of the flexible pricing policy has been proven and represents the traditional approach to hotel management. The development of the innovative technologies and channels of communication enables swift reactions so that the sensitivity to changes can be reduced to a certain extent to the benefits of both hotel business and the clients. Here, new technologies and digital marketing are gaining importance precisely because of their possibility to share messages fast, which can directly affect the sale of the released hotel capacities, leaving the hotel and cancelling customers with minimum problems.

This paper presents short-term marketing campaign, which had a positive effect on filling the hotel capacity in the critical period. The limitation of this work emerges from the short period which has been taken into account for the analysis of the campaign results. However, this case study presents preliminary results which tend to be extended in the future research. The following are the suggestions for future research:

- An extended period for monitoring and identifying periods of lower demand and evaluate the potential of digital marketing campaigns,
- More detailed reports and analytics, which would provide insight into where booking customers were informed about the actions and determine which is the most useful advertising channel,
- The level of investment in marketing campaigns and its cost-effectiveness.

From this research, it can be concluded that the short-term marketing action can provide a real and measurable effect on the hotel business results. While social networks have proven to be very useful and quick response marketing tool in the promotion of hotel offers and campaigns. The conducted campaign is the initial research that is subsequently going to be expanded and applied to different facilities in the future. As the mentioned marketing campaign gave good results and can be considered successful, similar activities can be expected in the future, when there is a need for an efficient hotel capacity filling.

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# Tourism Development in South Asia Region: Challenges and Opportunities

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## Abstract

*Tourism development in the South Asian region has gained a significant attention in recent years due to its potential to contribute in economic growth, poverty reduction and regional integration. However, this region faces several challenges including political instability, security concerns, insufficient infrastructure and limited coordination among stakeholders. The aim of this paper is to deliver an in-depth assessment of the challenges and opportunities for the progress of tourism industry in South Asia. This paper uses the SWOT model and a derived matrix for sustainable growth in the South Asia tourism industry. The data sources for the study are related literature reviews, field observations, interviews with professionals and questionnaires distributed to 100 international travellers. The internal strengths and weaknesses as well as external opportunities and threats of the country's tourism industry were identified, followed by strategic planning based on the SWOT matrix and weighted decision matrix. The findings concern the use of the SWOT technique as a research method and an evaluation of South Asia's tourism potential. The findings of the analysis reveal that, tourism development strategies have to implement includes promoting travel as a driver of economic expansion and job creation, establishing public-private partnerships and integrated marketing campaigns, collaborating on human resource development, improving the quality of facilities and infrastructure, promoting places of interest on a continuous national and international scale, as well as developing various tourist attraction products with the participation of independent contractors, small-scale tourism service providers. Overall, this study can provide valuable insights into the region's potential for growth and collaboration, helping to promote economic development and cultural exchange across the region.*

**Keywords:** SWOT Analysis, Tourism, Tourism Development Strategy, Weighted Decision Matrix

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## Introduction

Tourism is a highly laborious industry with significant employment potential (Williams, Hall, 2000). Tourism is regarded as a significant economic sector that can connect persons to nature, cultures, livelihood, and entertainment by inspiring their lives. Recreation, catering, lodging, transportation, and services are the primary components of the travel and tourism industry (Petrescu, 2011). The demand as well as tendency for tourism is rapidly growing around the world with different recreation and pilgrimage, increasing income, improved leisure times, new life attitudes etc. Inbound tourism has grown to be world's most important trade sector. International tourist arrivals are 1465 million in 2019 and 917 million in 2022 (WTTC, 2022). Because of Covid -19 tourism industries suffer from heavy loss in 2020 and 2021. International visitor numbers grew by 172% from January to July 2022 over 2021 but were still 43% lower than in 2019 (WTTC, 2022). South Asia received over 28 million international tourist arrivals in 2019. Richardson and Robert (2014) indicated that, the development of tourism is increasingly seen as a crucial strategy for fostering economic growth, reducing poverty and advancing food security. The tourism capacities include the ability to enhance the environment, provide financial resources for the protection of cultural, historical, and natural heritages, and impose limits based on sustainability. Regional cooperation can help with cross-border marketing and the creation of a global tourism cluster (Hjalager, 2007; Jackson, 2006). South Asia has enormous potential for the development of the tourism industry, which annually attracts millions of tourists due to its rich cultural, natural, and historical heritage. However, the region faces numerous challenges and obstacles that hinder its progress towards sustainable tourism development. These challenges include poor infrastructure, safety concerns, political instability, inadequate funding, socio-cultural issues and natural disasters. Despite these challenges, the region presents significant opportunities for growth and development in the tourism sector. There are also several opportunities for tourism development in the region, including growing demand for cultural and heritage tourism, adventure tourism and medical tourism. Saini and Joshi (2019) identify and analyze the key factors that influence tourism development in South Asia, while Rahman and Uddin (2016) investigate the challenges and opportunities for tourism development in Bangladesh, with a particular focus on the Kuakata tourist center. Nepal and Nishimura (2017) also investigate the impact of tourism on economic growth in South Asia, using panel data analysis. This paper aims to explore the challenges and opportunities of tourism development in the South Asian region because potential for tourism development in South Asia is still huge, though destinations must adapt to a changing business environment and increasing competition.

## Literature Review

A comprehensive review of literature on tourism development in the South Asia region reveals a complex landscape marked by both challenges and opportunities. Scholars emphasize the significance of tourism as a potential economic driver and a catalyst for regional development (Ritchie, Crouch, 2003; Dwyer et al., 2004). However, the sector faces multifaceted challenges that require strategic attention. One notable challenge is the susceptibility of South Asian countries to geopolitical tensions and security concerns, which can deter potential tourists (Hall, Williams, 2000). Additionally, infrastructural inadequacies, ranging from transportation to accommodation facilities, hinder the region's ability to fully exploit its tourism poten-

tial (Ghimire, 2001). Environmental sustainability concerns, exacerbated by unchecked tourism growth, further complicate the development landscape (Saarinen, 2006). On the other side, South Asia boasts diverse cultural and natural assets that can be leveraged for tourism development (Telfer, Sharpley, 2002). The rich history, vibrant traditions, and picturesque landscapes provide a unique selling proposition for the region (Bandyopadhyay, 2008). Furthermore, fostering regional cooperation is essential for creating a unified approach to tourism development (Ruhanen, Cooper, 2004). In conclusion, while the South Asia region holds immense tourism potential, a balanced approach is required to address challenges and harness opportunities. A strategic and collaborative effort involving governments, local communities, and the private sector is essential for sustainable tourism development in the region.

## The Study Area

South Asia is acknowledged as a separate region with an extensive connected landmass. There are various physical features that contribute to the region's attractiveness, including swamps, deserts, grassland, forestland, coastal zones, mountains, numerous natural resources, scenic beauty and rivers and many different climatic conditions (Rasul, Manandhar, 2009). South Asia is made up of 8 nations India, Bhutan, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, Afghanistan and Maldives. These are independent nations and divided based on the religious and linguistic difference. South Asia is densely populated with approximately 1.9 billion individuals from numerous racial and cultural groups. The region is the birthplace of Hinduism and Buddhism, two of the world's major faiths, but it also includes significant Muslim communities and big populations of devotees of several other religions. South Asian countries are being compelled by globalising forces to develop a trading network and carry out economic strategies among themselves.

## SWOT Analysis

Strength, Weakness, Opportunity, and Threat is referred to by the abbreviation SWOT. SWOT Analysis is the most popular tool for assessing and evaluating a tourist destination's overall strategic position. It entails determining which internal and external factors are favourable and unfavourable to the destinations. Strengths and weaknesses are internal to the entity being evaluated, whereas opportunities and threats are external to the entity's operating environment (Lawhead et al., 1992). SWOT analysis is a useful tool for assessing the competitiveness of destinations in the tourism industry. The field-based original data and existing data were combined with the help of the SWOT analysis and allowed for the identification of future development directions.

## Aim and Objective

South Asia is one of the highly populated and politically unstable region. There is need to explore opportunities for regional development and regional integration. Tourism is one of the major economic activity in the region. Therefore, the aim of the research work is to explore tourism development possibilities in South Asia region. Hence the objective of the paper is to assess the major challenges, current status and opportunities for tourism development in South Asia region using SWOT analysis.

## Methodology

This paper investigates the current status and prospects of tourism in South Asia. The purpose of this paper is to recognise the role of SWOT analysis in the construction of destination tourism development strategies. SWOT analysis was used more systematically in this study area. To assess strategic factors for decision making, the internal factor evaluation matrix (IFEM) and external factor evaluation matrix (EFEM) were combined with the SWOT approach in this study. IFEM assesses internal factors like service quality, infrastructure and marketing effectiveness etc. Weighted scores reveal a tourism entity's strategic strengths and weaknesses. EFEM evaluates external factors like political conditions, public private partnership and investments etc. Weighted scores highlight opportunities and threats in the tourism industry, aiding strategic planning for sustainable growth.

The survey employs a random purposive sampling approach, targeting international tourists who have visited more than three countries within the South Asian region. The inclusion of these tourists is deliberate, as their perspectives are deemed more relevant and representative. Based on secondary data, research paper and after discussion with the expert's, questionnaires have prepared. South Asia's most visited world heritage sites including Taj Mahal, Agra Fort, Red Fort Complex, Qutub Minar and its Monuments, Humayun's Tomb and Jaipur City, India (Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, 2019) were selected for the survey. Primary data were gathered through structured interviews with 100 travellers from different countries in December 2021- January 2022. The questionnaire was divided into four sections: strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the South Asia tourism industry. These SWOT were identified through a comprehensive review of the literature, interviews with professionals and empirical observations by the author in various tourist destinations.

Interviewees were requested to rate their level of agreement or disagreement with questionnaires questions based on five-point level of agreement likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree or disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree). Vagias and Wade (2006) proposed a likert-type maximum possible score of 5. To calculate IFEM and EFEM for South Asia tourism, ten experts average score value was calculated for respective category then weightages are assigned by calculating experts average score value divide by total of experts average score value. The 100 tourist's average score was computed and weighted rate has obtained by multiplying weightage and tourist's average score. Lastly, country wise SWOT analysis for South Asia region has calculated with the help of weighted decision matrix. In the weighted decision matrix, total score is calculated by multiplying weighted rate and respective country score. Both library and field methods are used to obtain data and are used in the process to create a descriptive and analytical presentation.

## Results

### Internal Factor Evaluation Matrix (IFEM) – Tourism in South Asia

**Table 1.** *Tourism strengths in South Asia region*

Nº	Strengths	Experts Average Score Value	Weightage	Tourists Average Score	Weighted rate
1	Rich historical and multi-cultural heritage	4.8	0.19	4.71	0.89
2	Price competitiveness of the destination	3.8	0.15	4.54	0.68
3	Some member countries have widespread English language capability	3.5	0.14	3.63	0.51
4	63 entries in UNESCO World Heritage sites	4	0.16	3.66	0.59
5	Diverse natural attractions	4.5	0.18	4.27	0.77
6	Presence of wellness tourism like yoga, Ayurveda, naturopathy and low cost of advance medical services	4.2	0.17	4.36	0.74
	Total	24.8	1		4.18

Source: *Compile from the survey*

The internal strengths result of IFEM has summarized in Table 1. The weight allotted for 6 strengths ranges between 0.14 and 0.19. Rich historical and multi-cultural heritage received the highest priority. The tourism destination under consideration exhibits a rich tapestry of strengths, making it a compelling choice for travellers. Boasting a robust historical and multi-cultural heritage with a commendable weighted rate is 0.89, it stands out as a reservoir of cultural significance. The destination's price competitiveness, scoring 0.68, adds another layer of appeal, making it an economically attractive option. Moreover, the widespread English language capability in certain member countries contributes to a seamless experience for tourists, earning a score of 0.51. The presence of 63 UNESCO World Heritage sites, with weighted rate of 0.59, underscores the destination's commitment to preserving and showcasing its cultural and natural treasures. Diverse natural attractions, scoring 0.77, further enhance its allure, catering to a wide range of preferences. Additionally, the incorporation of wellness tourism, featuring yoga, Ayurveda, and naturopathy, coupled with the affordability of advanced medical services, attains a noteworthy score of 0.74. In aggregate, these strengths have impressive, weighted rate of 4.18. The country wise strengths result is calculated by using weighted decision matrix has summarized in Table 2. This strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats have a weighted rate which is valued by experts. The overall average rating for all strengths is highest for India (3.57), followed closely by Sri Lanka and Nepal. India has the highest rating for strengths are higher historical heritage sites, rich multi-cultural society, medical and wellness tourism and price competitiveness, while Maldives is rated highest for its beaches and aquatic activities.



**Table 2. Country wise tourism strengths for South Asia region weighted decision matrix**

№	Strengths	Weighted rate	*Countries															
			AF	Total	BA	Total	PAK	Total	BH	Total	IN	Total	NE	Total	SR	Total	ML	Total
1	Higher historical heritage sites	0.89	3	2.67	3	2.67	3	2.67	4	3.56	5	4.45	3	2.67	4	3.56	2	1.78
2	Rich multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multilingual yet harmonious society	0.89	4	3.56	3	2.67	4	3.56	2	1.78	5	4.45	3	2.67	3	2.67	2	1.78
3	Home of diverse landscapes like Himalayan ranges for adventure destination	0.77	4	3.08	2	1.54	3	2.31	4	3.08	4	3.08	4	3.08	3	2.31	1	0.77
4	World's finest beaches, coral reefs, leisure, aquatic activities and unique model of island development	0.77	NA	NA	3	2.31	3	2.31	NA	NA	4	3.08	NA	NA	4	3.08	5	3.85
5	Price competitiveness of the destination	0.68	4	2.72	5	3.4	4	2.72	3	2.04	5	3.4	5	3.4	4	2.72	2	1.36
6	Endowed with a rich variety of biodiversity	0.71	2	1.42	3	2.13	3	2.13	4	2.84	4	2.84	3	2.13	4	2.84	3	2.13
7	Medical and wellness tourism	0.74	1	0.74	1	0.74	2	1.48	4	2.96	5	3.7	4	2.96	4	2.96	3	2.22
Average				2.37		2.21		2.45		2.71		3.57		2.82		2.88		1.98

Source: Compile from the survey  
\*Abbreviation for countries - Afghanistan (AF), Bangladesh (BA), Pakistan (PAK), Bhutan (BH), India (IN), Nepal (NE), Sri Lanka (SR), Maldives (ML)

**Table 3.** *Tourism Weaknesses in South Asia Region*

Nº	Weaknesses	Experts Average Score Value	Weightage	Tourists Average Score	Weighted rate
1	Highly seasonal use of facilities and labour	4.2	0.17	4.18	0.71
2	Safety and security are not consistent	3.9	0.16	4.39	0.7
3	Inefficient quality of services in South Asia as compared to other regions in the world	4	0.16	4.25	0.68
4	Marketing campaigns are not integrated in South Asia region	3.8	0.16	4.32	0.69
5	A few qualified and competent workforce at the key function	4.2	0.17	4.11	0.7
6	Unstable political conditions in some countries	4.4	0.18	4.31	0.78
	Total	24.5	1		4.26

Source: Compile from the survey

The internal weaknesses result of IFEM has summarized in Table 3. The weight allocated for 6 weaknesses ranges between 0.16 and 0.18. Unstable political conditions in some countries received maximum weight. Despite its notable strengths, the tourism destination faces a set of challenges that merit attention. One significant weakness is the highly seasonal use of facilities and labour, receiving an average score of 0.71, reflecting potential fluctuations in the availability of resources. Safety and security concerns, with a score of 0.7, present another challenge, indicating an inconsistency that may impact tourists' confidence. The inefficient quality of services in South Asia relative to other global regions, scoring 0.68, signals an area requiring improvement to enhance the overall visitor experience. Furthermore, the lack of integrated marketing campaigns in the South Asia region, with a score of 0.69, suggests a need for cohesive promotional strategies. The scarcity of qualified and competent workforce at key functions, earning a score of 0.7, highlights a human resource challenge that may affect service delivery. Lastly, the presence of unstable political conditions in some countries, scoring 0.78, adds an element of uncertainty. In aggregate, these weaknesses resulting weighted rate of 4.26. The country wise weaknesses result is calculated by using weighted decision matrix has summarized in Table 4. The country wise overall average rating for all weaknesses is highest for Afghanistan (3.5), followed closely by Pakistan and Bangladesh.

**Table 4. Country wise tourism weaknesses for South Asia region weighted decision matrix**

№	Weaknesses	Weighted rate	*Countries															
			AF	Total	BA	Total	PAK	Total	BH	Total	IN	Total	NE	Total	SR	Total	ML	Total
1	Insufficient investment in tourism sector	0.78	5	3.9	5	3.9	5	3.9	3	2.34	4	3.12	3	2.34	4	3.12	2	1.56
2	Poor safety and security of the tourist	0.7	5	3.5	3	2.1	4	2.8	3	2.1	3	2.1	3	2.1	3	2.1	3	2.1
3	Deficient in promotional and marketing activities of tourism	0.69	5	3.45	5	3.45	4	2.76	2	1.38	3	2.07	3	2.07	3	2.07	2	1.38
4	Inefficient quality of basic services like accommodation, transport network	0.68	5	3.4	4	2.72	4	2.72	3	2.04	4	2.72	4	2.72	3	2.04	2	1.36
5	Low quality of hygiene and health services	0.76	4	3.04	4	3.04	4	3.04	3	2.28	3	2.28	4	3.04	3	2.28	2	1.52
6	A few qualified and competent workforce at the key function	0.7	5	3.5	4	2.8	4	2.8	3	2.1	3	2.1	4	2.8	3	2.1	2	1.4
7	Unstable political conditions in some countries	0.78	5	3.9	3	2.34	4	3.12	2	1.56	3	2.34	3	2.34	4	3.12	3	2.34
Average				3.5		2.9		3.0		2.0		2.4		2.5		2.4		1.7

Source: Compile from the survey

\*Abbreviation for countries - Afghanistan (AF), Bangladesh (BA), Pakistan (PAK), Bhutan (BH), India (IN), Nepal (NE), Sri Lanka (SR), Maldives (ML)

## External factor evaluation matrix (EFEM) – Tourism in South Asia

**Table 5.** *Tourism Opportunities in South Asia Region*

Nº	Opportunities	Experts Average Score Value	Weightage	Tourists Average Score	Weighted rate
1	Develop Integrated web marketing	4.2	0.16	4.4	0.7
2	Establishment of centralized tourism department in South Asia	4	0.15	4.33	0.65
3	Establish theme-based tourist circuits for future development	4.8	0.18	4.35	0.78
4	Increase public private partnership	4.7	0.18	4.64	0.84
5	Business conferences and international student exchange programs	4.4	0.16	3.97	0.64
6	Development in tourism research to attract more tourist and for making favourable tourism policies	4.7	0.18	3.68	0.66
	Total	26.8	1		4.27

Source: *Compile from the survey*

The external opportunities result of IFEM has summarized in Table 5. The weight allotted for 6 opportunities ranges between 0.15 and 0.18. Increase public private partnership received the highest priority. The tourism destination reveals promising opportunities that, if strategically capitalized upon, can elevate its appeal and sustainability. With a commendable average score of 0.7, the development of integrated web marketing emerges as a key opportunity, reflecting the potential to enhance the destination’s online presence and reach a broader audience. The proposition of establishing a centralized tourism department in South Asia, scoring 0.65, signifies a chance to streamline and coordinate efforts for more effective tourism management across the region. The creation of theme-based tourist circuits for future development, with a high score of 0.78, suggests a pathway to diversify attractions and cater to varied interests. Furthermore, opportunities lie in fostering increased public-private partnerships, earning a score of 0.84, and leveraging business conferences and international student exchange programs, scoring 0.64, to stimulate tourism growth. Lastly, the emphasis on developing tourism research, scoring 0.66, underscores the potential for informed policymaking and attracting a more diverse range of tourists. Collectively, these opportunities resulting in a commendable weighted rate of 4.27. Pursuing these strategic avenues could position the destination for sustained growth and competitiveness in the global tourism landscape. The country wise opportunities result is calculated by using weighted decision matrix has summarized in Table 6. The country wise overall average rating for opportunities is highest for India (3.11) followed closely by Maldives and Bhutan.

**Table 6. Country wise tourism opportunities for South Asia region weighted decision matrix**

№	Opportunities	Weighted rate	*Countries															
			AF	Total	BA	Total	PAK	Total	BH	Total	IN	Total	NE	Total	SR	Total	ML	Total
1	Beach cleanliness and adventure sports, development in cruise ships	0.81	NA	2.43	3	2.43	3	2.43	NA	NA	5	4.05	NA	NA	5	4.05	5	4.05
2	Establish theme-based tourist circuits for future development	0.78	3	2.34	4	3.12	3	2.34	5	3.9	5	3.9	5	3.9	4	3.12	3	2.34
3	New investment to improve tourism infrastructure and services	0.62	2	1.24	3	1.86	3	1.86	4	2.48	4	2.48	4	2.48	3	1.86	4	2.48
4	Develop Integrated web marketing	0.7	3	2.1	3	2.1	3	2.1	4	2.8	4	2.8	3	2.1	3	2.1	4	2.8
5	Business conferences and international student exchange programs	0.64	2	1.28	2	1.28	3	1.92	3	1.92	4	2.56	3	1.92	3	1.92	3	1.92
6	Productive public-private dialog and action planning	0.84	2	1.68	3	2.52	3	2.52	3	2.52	4	3.36	3	2.52	3	2.52	4	3.36
7	Research and development for making favourable tourism policy	0.66	2	1.32	3	1.98	3	1.98	3	1.98	4	2.64	3	1.98	3	1.98	4	2.64
Average			1.66	2.18		2.16	2.60	3.11	2.48	2.51	2.80							

Source: Compile from the survey

\*Abbreviation for countries - Afghanistan (AF), Bangladesh (BA), Pakistan (PAK), Bhutan (BH), India (IN), Nepal (NE), Sri Lanka (SR), Maldives (ML)



**Table 7. Tourism Threats in South Asia Region**

Nº	Threats	Experts Average Score Value	Weightage	Tourists Average Score	Weighted rate
1	Fragmented nature of tourism trade (no big tourism centre is influencing the direction towards growth)	4.1	0.18	4.06	0.73
2	Insufficient access to finance	4	0.17	4.45	0.76
3	Economic crisis or economic slowdown	3.8	0.16	4.6	0.74
4	High levels of global competition in tourism sector	4.1	0.18	4.51	0.81
5	Global warming, climate change and natural disasters	3.3	0.14	3.56	0.5
6	Threat of crimes and terrorist attacks	4	0.17	4.16	0.71
	Total	23.3	1		4.25

Source: Compile from the survey

The external threats result of IFEM has summarized in Table 7. The weight given for 6 threats ranges between 0.14 and 0.18. High levels of global competition in tourism sector received maximum weighted rate is 0.81. The tourism destination confronts a set of formidable threats that necessitate careful consideration and proactive mitigation strategies. The fragmented nature of the tourism trade, scoring 0.73, poses a challenge as there is no dominant centre influencing growth direction, potentially hindering cohesive development efforts. Insufficient access to finance, with a score of 0.76, emerges as a significant threat, impacting the ability to invest in necessary infrastructure and promotional activities. The threat of economic crises or slowdown, scoring 0.74, introduces an external risk that could adversely affect tourism trends. High levels of global competition in the tourism sector, with a score of 0.81, signify the need for distinctive offerings and effective marketing to stand out. Environmental concerns, including global warming, climate change, and natural disasters, with a score of 0.5, underscore the vulnerability of the destination to external ecological factors. Finally, the threat of crimes and terrorist attacks, scoring 0.71, poses a risk to the safety and security of tourists. Cumulatively, these threats result a weighted rate of 4.25. Addressing these challenges and implementing strategic measures is crucial to fortify the destination against potential setbacks and ensure its resilience in the face of external uncertainties. The country wise threats result is calculated by using weighted decision matrix has summarized in Table 8. The overall average rating for threats is highest Afghanistan (3.16) followed closely by Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

**Table 8. Country wise tourism threats for South Asia region weighted decision matrix**

№	Threats	Weighted rate	*Countries															
			AF	Total	BA	Total	PAK	Total	BH	Total	IN	Total	NE	Total	SR	Total	ML	Total
1	Global and national economic crisis	0.74	5	3.7	3	2.96	4	2.96	3	2.22	3	2.22	4	2.96	4	2.96	3	2.22
2	Threat of terrorist's attacks and frequent communal riots	0.71	5	3.55	3	2.84	4	2.84	2	1.42	3	2.13	3	2.13	4	2.84	2	1.42
3	Environmental degradation, climate change and disasters	0.5	3	1.5	4	1.5	3	1.5	3	1.5	3	1.5	4	2	3	1.5	3	1.5
4	Social problems and fraudulent exploitation of tourists	0.69	4	2.76	3	2.76	4	2.76	2	1.38	3	2.07	3	2.07	4	2.76	3	2.07
5	Absence of sufficient trained safeguards in the beaches	0.76	NA	NA	4	3.04	4	3.04	NA	NA	4	3.04	NA	NA	3	2.28	2	1.52
6	Fragmented nature of tourism trade	0.73	5	3.65	4	2.92	4	2.92	3	2.19	3	2.19	3	2.19	3	2.19	2	1.46
7	Insufficient access to finance	0.76	5	3.8	3	3.04	4	3.04	3	2.28	3	2.28	4	3.04	4	3.04	2	1.52
Average				3.16		2.72		2.38		1.83		2.20		2.40		2.51		1.67

Source: Compile from the survey

\*Abbreviation for countries - Afghanistan (AF), Bangladesh (BA), Pakistan (PAK), Bhutan (BH), India (IN), Nepal (NE), Sri Lanka (SR), Maldives (ML)

## Discussion

The South Asia region is a treasure of civilizations, culture, arts, and architecture, boasting a special place in the world due to its rich history and cultural heritage. This includes Sri Lanka's 2000-year-old cultural and historical monuments, Nepal's status as the birthplace of Lord Buddha, and Pakistan's historical gems like Mohenjo-Daro from the Indus River Valley civilization and the architectural marvels of the Mughal era. Notably, South Asia proudly claims 63 entries in UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Geographically, South Asia is characterized by its unique and diversified features, encompassing land, oceans, mountains, valleys, forests, and deserts. This diversity makes it a distinctive and varied region on a global scale. Furthermore, the region offers highly competitive prices for general commodities, air travel, lodging, and food at tourist destinations. An efficient network of roads, railways, and rivers enhances transportation, while some member countries boast widespread English language capability, significantly impacting English language learning dynamics. Traditional treatment methods such as Ayurveda, Yoga, Ayush, Siddha, Unani, and Naturopathy are widely available in South Asia. The post-COVID-19 era has witnessed a notable shift in the wellness industry, with a heightened focus on health. Indian wellness tourism, with its diverse offerings, holds significant potential for rapid growth in the post-pandemic landscape.

However, safety and security remain major challenges in South Asian countries, with terrorism posing a significant barrier to development and regional stability. Particularly risky areas for visitors include Kashmir and southern Pakistan, as well as tribal areas on the northwest frontier. Widespread corruption further hampers economic growth, and the region grapples with issues of human and drug trafficking. Basic sanitation challenges persist in South Asian countries, exacerbated by rapid population growth and inadequate infrastructure. Marketing campaigns are often fragmented, and the region faces diverse political dynamics, contributing to numerous challenges. Poverty is a complex issue, particularly affecting countries like Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan. The tourism trade in South Asia is fragmented, lacking a centralized influence for growth. High levels of global competition pose a significant threat, and security concerns impede competitiveness. Internal community riots, terrorist attacks and social problems further hinder tourism. External events, such as pandemics and disasters, make the industry vulnerable. In 2022, South Asia faced unprecedented challenges, including an economic crisis in Sri Lanka, catastrophic floods in Pakistan, a global economic slowdown, ongoing crises in Afghanistan, and lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, the region grapples with the degradation of natural resources and environmental issues due to fulfilling the needs of the population and economic activities such as tourism. Food scarcity and stagnant economic growth are devastating impacts of advancing climate change in South Asia.

Despite these challenges, South Asia is emerging as one of the world's rapidly growing regions, with immense potential to attract tourists. Efforts towards regionalization aim to develop intra-regional tourism while presenting the entire area as a tourist destination. Various tourism products, including eco-tourism, coastal, historical, religious, and medical tourism, can be developed. To foster proper development in the tourism sector, there is a need for a centralized tourism department in South Asia. Private-public partnerships must increase, and the public sector's role in supervision and control is crucial. Business conferences, international student exchange programs, and the development of themed tour circuits are potential avenues to boost tourist arrivals and lengthen their stays. South Asia's rich human resources, particularly its young population, highlight the need for focused tourism research to attract more

visitors and formulate favourable tourism policies. The impact of automation and digitalization on the tourism and travel sector is significant, transforming communication, marketing, and service delivery. Integrated web marketing, leveraging modern technology, proves to be an effective option for both globalization and tourism development.

## Conclusions

South Asia is one of the highest population region having tremendous tourism potential. Despite this potential, the current share of regional tourism is comparatively low. Recognizing tourism as a catalyst for employment generation, economic expansion, and regional development, it is crucial to explore the strengths and opportunities inherent in the industry through a comprehensive SWOT analysis. The outcomes of the study reveal several key areas for strategic focus. Firstly, tourism development strategies must prioritize the promotion of travel to stimulate economic growth and create employment opportunities. This involves not only attracting international tourists but also fostering domestic tourism to harness the full spectrum of benefits. Integrated marketing campaigns emerge as a critical component of successful tourism development. By presenting a unified and appealing image of South Asia as a tourist destination, countries in the region can collectively enhance their global visibility and attract a larger share of international travellers. Such collaborative efforts require effective public-private dialogue and action planning to ensure a cohesive and impactful approach. Human resource development emerges as a shared responsibility that necessitates collaboration between countries. By pooling resources and expertise, South Asian nations can collectively invest in training and skill development within the tourism sector, ensuring a high standard of service and experience for visitors. Furthermore, the study emphasizes the importance of implementing strict environmental regulations. Sustainable tourism practices are crucial to preserving the natural beauty and cultural heritage of the region. By prioritizing environmental conservation, South Asia can appeal to responsible and eco-conscious travellers, contributing to the longevity of the tourism industry. Additionally, technological and infrastructure development are highlighted as essential elements for increasing tourist numbers. Investments in modern infrastructure, such as transportation networks and accommodation facilities, coupled with the adoption of innovative technologies, can enhance the overall tourism experience and attract a broader range of visitors. The SWOT analysis underscores that tourism can serve as a powerful tool for initiating and strengthening the cooperation process within South Asia. By recognizing shared opportunities and addressing common challenges, countries in the region can forge a collaborative path towards sustainable tourism development. In conclusion, the findings of this study provide valuable insights for decision-makers and potential investors in the tourism sector. By understanding the existing challenges and identifying realistic and timely measures, South Asian nations can pave the way for a sustainable and mutually beneficial tourism industry, contributing significantly to regional development and integration.

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# Research of Service Quality of Hotels in Belgrade by Analysis of Guest Reviews on Facebook

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## Abstract

*The growth of the Internet has brought about a notable change in the way that information is accessed by users. Rather of relying just on the provider of tourism services, users may now obtain information from one another. The distribution of information is done word-mouth-WOM, but not in a traditional way, but through the use of Web 2.0 applications (eWOM). Hotels' social media profile are becoming an increasingly important source for consumers when collecting information about hotel products. Social networks make up one network platform for connecting people around the world, enabling them to download information freely through audio-visual, audio and text-based information. Successful communication through social networks today is almost no longer an issue of choice, but is one of the most important tools of business for every hotel and tourist company that contributes to achieving better business results. The aim of this research was to identify if there are differences in perception of service quality in selected hotels. The tested variables were gender and origin of guests and hotel category (number of stars). The results of research showed that there are no differences in perceptions of service quality according to gender and origin of guests. Hotel category proved to be a factor of differences in the perceptions of the guests.*

**Keywords:** Reviews, Social Media, Facebook, Service, Quality, Hotels

## Introduction

In the contemporary era, hotel operations are unimaginable without their presence on the Internet. The Internet represents the main source of information that serves customers and is an important tool based on which hotels can analyze and improve their business. Increasingly well-informed guests with refined needs and wishes imposed the need for hotels to constantly fulfill their wishes and adapt to the requirements of the modern market. With the development of the Internet, there has been an accelerated development of social networks. Apart from social networks becoming another way of booking accommodations, they represent one of the best,

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fastest, and most constant communication methods. Social networks are a favorite form of communication and information sharing, that is, living in augmented reality. About 1.6. billions of users in the world testify to this (Krapac, 2016). Social media is being used to spread an unprecedented number of Internet-based messages in the twenty-first century. According to Blackshaw (2006), social media are internet-based applications, that provide user-generated content that is pertinent to past experiences, any source, or online informational concerns. To spread knowledge about goods and services, customers produce this content on their own, based on their own experience with the goods and services (Xiang, Gretzel, 2010). They can be viewed as an extension of word of mouth (WOM), which is a very potent strategy for influencing the purchasing decisions of consumers. Research on the various effects of social media on tourism and hospitality has been conducted from both management and customer viewpoints (Law et al., 2014; Leung et al., 2013). Customers benefit from social media because it provides unique, in-depth and customer-generated content through interaction with other customers (Wang, Fesenmair, 2004). Many studies examined these contents as a resource for decision-making and a platform for sharing experiences (e.g. Pantelidis, 2010; Sparks, Browning, 2011; Kim et al., 2016). Customers' need to use social networks in different stages of travel planning and realization can vary in accordance with demographic and cultural characteristics (Knežević et al., 2014). Therefore, in general, the Internet and especially social networks, are used in the phase preceding the sale (for information about contents, prices, activities etc.), in the phase of the realization of the trip and after the end of the stay in accommodation facilities (Barjaktarović, 2013).

## Literature review

Information obtained from sites such as Booking.com or TripAdvisor can be quantitative (review score) and qualitative (text review accompanying the review score). Following the example of travel portals, social networks like Facebook have also introduced this option. Numerous empirical studies in different industries have also investigated the impact of the number of reviews on organization performance (e.g. Dellarocas et al., 2007; Ghose, Ipeirotis, 2011). In the context of the hotel industry, significant progress has been made in understanding the impact of the number of reviews on various outcomes such as hotel revenue (Kim et al., 2015) and hotel sales and booking volume (Ye et al., 2009). Customers who book a hotel based on its ratings have an expectation of the level of service that the hotel will provide (Zeithaml et al., 2009). Customers will be happy and satisfied if the hotel service meets their expectations. Customer service expectation, according to Beard (2013), is a belief about service delivery that serves as a standard or reference against which performance is measured. Understanding hotel customers' expectations as a result of the hotel's rating is the first and most important step in providing a quality service, and misjudging what customers expect can lead to customers leaving for competitors (Kim-Soon et al., 2014). This implies that any discrepancy between consumers' expectations and their actual experiences has an impact on their level of satisfaction (Po-Hsuan et al., 2014; Kim-Soon et al., 2014; Al-Ababneh, 2013; Razi et al., 2012). In their study, Gavilan et al. (2018) emphasized the influence of positive and negative ratings on decisions about hotel reservations in the first stage of the decision-making process. The results showed that customers trust lower ratings more than higher ones. Despite this, customers tend to shortlist those hotels that have better and more favorable ratings.

When it comes to gender, there are gender-related differences between the affective and cognitive aspects of service quality (Chiu, Wu, 2002; Chiu, 2002). The authors claimed that

among females, the affective rather than the cognitive determinants of service quality perceptions are more potent. According to Furrer et al. (2000), service quality perceptions differed across cultural groups. Authors explicitly mapped the relationship between service quality perceptions and cultural dimensions positions. Tsaur et al. (2005) found significant differences in perceptions of all dimensions of service quality among three cultural groups.

Razi et al. (2012) claimed that the determinants of service quality differ depending on the size of the hotel. In addition to this, Kim et al. (2013) determined that customer's ratings towards perceptions of quality of several operational factors such as personal service, friendliness, standards and tangibles differ depending on the size of the hotel. When guests have certain feelings and attitudes during their hotel stay, they form perceptions of service quality in the hotel industry (Boon-Liat, Md. Zabid Abdul, 2013). In other words, depending on the services provided and the experiences they have had, guests will have different perceptions of the quality of hotel services (Kim et al., 2013).

## Methodology

This research aimed to identify if there are differences in the perception of service quality in selected hotels. From the aspect of guests' characteristics, differences concerning guest gender and country of origin were examined. The hotel category implies a certain level of quality. From this, it follows that the perception of service quality differs depending on the category. For this reason, the hotel category as a variable was included in the research. Based on this, three hypotheses were set:

H<sub>1</sub>: There are differences in perceptions of hotel service quality depending on the gender of the guests.

H<sub>2</sub>: There are differences in perceptions of hotel service quality depending on the origin of the guests (domestic and foreign guests).

H<sub>3</sub>: There are differences in perceptions of hotel service quality depending on the category of hotel (number of stars).

## Results

The research was focused on selected hotels with 5\*, 4\* and 3\* in Belgrade, which have a Facebook profile and allow their guests to post reviews about their experiences during their stay. Concretely, the sample was made up of two five-star hotels, four four-star hotels and four three-star hotels. The reviews were collected in November 2022. To collect an equal number of reviews from each hotel, the first 50 reviews that appeared were downloaded. If there were fewer reviews available, all available reviews were collected. A total of 499 reviews were collected. Only reviews which contained information on gender and country of origin were collected. Since the identity of the hotel is known, the category of the hotels was determined based on that. Table 1. shows the representation of reviews according to the gender of guests. A slightly higher percentage of guests are female, 51.1%, while the percentage of male guests is 48.9%.

**Table 1.** Gender of reviewers

Gender	Frequency	Percent
Male	244	48,9%
Female	255	51,1%

Source: results of research

Table 2. shows the distribution of guests who wrote reviews according to their country of origin. Based on the results presented in Table 2, the diversity of the origin of the guests of the observed hotels can be seen. The majority of guests originate from the Republic of Serbia (21,8%), followed by guests from Greece (7,4%), Germany (6,6%), Israel (5,8%), Turkey (5,4%) and the USA (4%). All other countries have a share of less than 4% of guests in the total number of reviews. The least number of guests are from Mexico (0,2%) and the UAE (0,2%). For the sake of simplification and further analysis, the guests are divided into two groups: domestic (guests from Serbia) and foreign (guests from all other countries).

**Table 2.** Country of origin of reviewers

Country	Number of reviews	Percentage
Serbia	109	21.8
Sweden	15	3.0
Greece	37	7.4
Israel	29	5.8
USA	20	4.0
Brasil	5	1.0
UK	9	1.8
Bosnia and Herzegovina	12	2.4
Netherlands	6	1.2
Albania	2	0.4
Switzerland	12	2.4
Russia	15	3.0
Mexico	1	0.2
UAE	1	0.2
Germany	33	6.6
Romania	14	2.8
Australia	4	0.8
Italy	16	3.2
Turkey	27	5.4
Spain	18	3.6
Macedonia	24	4.8
Croatia	26	5.2
Montenegro	5	1.0
France	6	1.2
Austria	5	1.0
Bulgaria	12	2.4
Slovenia	8	1.6



Country	Number of reviews	Percentage
Ukraine	5	1.0
China	7	1.4
Hungary	9	1.8
Norway	7	1.4
Total	499	100.0

Source: results of research

### Results of t-test

T-test of independent samples according to gender (Table 3) did not show statistically significant differences in ratings, which means that males and females, users of Facebook, have the same perception towards service quality in selected hotels in Belgrade. These results did not provide support for  $H_1$ .

**Table 3.** T-test according to gender

Gender	N	Mean	T	p
Male	244	4.5615	-0.240	0.811
Female	255	4.5804		

Source: results of research

The results of t-test according to the origin of guests (Table 4) did not confirm statistically significant differences in ratings obtained from guests from Serbia and other countries (foreign guests). Although foreign guests give a higher average rating, it is not significantly higher than the ratings of domestic guests. Based on obtained results, it can be concluded that  $H_2$  is rejected. The average ratings of both domestic and foreign guests from the investigated hotel can be characterized as higher average ratings because they exceed the value of 4.

**Table 4.** T-test according to country of origin

Origin of guests	N	Mean	T	p
Domestic	109	4.4587	-1.510	0.132
Foreign	390	4.6026		

Source: results of research

### Results of analysis of ANOVA

The results shown in Table 5 indicate that out of three selected categories of hotels, 4-star hotels are the best rated. The ANOVA variance results according to the hotel category showed that there are statistically significant differences depending on the hotel category ( $F=3.464$ ,  $p=0.032$ ). LSD post-hoc test showed that there are statistically significant differences in perceptions of service quality between 4-star and 3-star hotels. It can be seen that the perception of service quality in 4-star hotels is higher compared to the service quality in 3-star hotels. It is assumed that this is because services are often limited in three-star hotels, which often causes dissatisfaction among guests whose expectations were different. While in four-star hotels,

there is a wider range of services that are offered, which means that the guests are more satisfied. These results provide support for H<sub>3</sub>.

**Table 5.** ANOVA by hotel category

Hotel category	Number of reviews	Mean	F	LSD post-hoc	p
5*	99	4.5556	3.464	2>3	0.032
4*	200	4.6900			
3*	200	4.4600			

Source: results of research

## Conclusions

The key element in the modern management, organization or operation of any business entity is quality. Quality, if properly understood and used by management, can become one of the best competitive assets in the international market. It is important to manage quality. Dealing with quality means dealing with the consumer at the same time. Modern information technologies have led to significant changes in the field of tourism and hotel management. There have been major changes in the way of doing business, especially when it comes to communication with users and the distribution of various services to guests, i.e. consumers. This had a direct impact on the operations of hotel companies due to numerous specifics in the service provision process (intangibility, the impossibility of storage, etc.). Internet distribution systems and social media played a big role in all of this, whose dynamic development and increasing application led to major changes in user behavior.

For the creation of successful marketing strategies, it is crucial for hotel managers to comprehend potential gender effects in the evaluation of service quality. Examining these relationships is important because managers run the risk of making poor decisions in the absence of reliable information and guidelines. If there are gender-based differences, ignoring them could be problematic, while in the absence of differences between male and female customers, a gender-sensitive approach may become even more problematic (Karatepe, 2011). Gender differences have been discovered in numerous studies (Chiu, Wu, 2002; Chiu, 2002; Yelkur, Chakrabarty, 2006). As it has been confirmed that women have higher expectations than men (Yelkur, Chakrabarty, 2006), it was assumed that the results of this research will go in that direction as well. On the contrary, the obtained results showed that there are no significant differences in the perception of service quality depending on the gender of the guests, which rejected H<sub>1</sub>.

Although in many previous studies cultural background was identified as a factor of differences (e.g. Mey et al., 2006; Ngai et al., 2007), results of this research showed that there are no differences in perception of service quality according to the origin of guests. This rejected H<sub>2</sub>.

Service quality has a great influence on guests' satisfaction. Quality assurance contributes the most to the quality of services in the hotel industry (Blešić et al., 2014). Since the hotel category represents a verified quality rank (Kosar, 2008), and therefore a certain guarantee of quality, numerous studies have shown that certain hotel attributes are valued differently depending on the hotel category. Based on the obtained results, we have seen that initial H<sub>3</sub> has been proven: The perception of service quality differs statistically significantly depending on the accommodation facility - hotels included in the sample. The proof of this hypothesis was expected, considering the diversity of the offer of hotels included in the research.

This research is not without limitations. First of all, not all officially categorized hotels have profiles on Facebook. This led to the fact that not all hotels could be included in the research, which made the sample limited. Second, only 10 Belgrade hotels were included in this research, which is why no general conclusions can be drawn. This leaves room for further research and sample expansion. Future research could include variables related to the length of stay, the type of room in which the guest stays, and the price since these variables can affect the perception of service quality. In addition to this, full and limited-service hotels should be examined separately, due to the difference in services delivered to guests.

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# Revisiting and Integrating Residents' Perceptions Towards Tourism Development in Urban Areas

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## Abstract

*This study sought to determine residents' perceptions of tourism development and the subsequent impacts of tourism in South Africa. Tourism's impacts on residents have been a topical issue in existing literature given that they can offer guidance for planners in terms of development trajectories. This is because tourism is widely associated with both negative and positive impacts on residents, depending on the destination's life cycle and other factors. Thus, Soweto, as South Africa's most visited township and a place where tourism is seen as a strategic tool for socio-economic development, was selected as an ideal case study for this research. A positivist, quantitative research approach was employed in targeting residents (n=241) using a systematic random sampling method. Data was analyzed through IBM SPSS 24, and key findings revealed that, on the whole, residents are involved directly or indirectly in tourism and generally support its development. Additionally, it was found that residents have largely positive feelings towards tourism and its development in the area although nuances were there regarding tourism recently highlighting the economic gaps between the poor and the rich. The government was also criticized for failing to increase education about tourism among residents so that they could effectively benefit from it. It was also suggested that tourism compromises the authenticity of heritage and cultural activities in the area whilst also resulting in the increased prices of goods and services for locals.*

**Keywords:** *Tourism development, tourism impacts, residents' perceptions, sustainable development, South Africa.*

## Introduction

The tourism sector is recognized as a significant participant in world trade and the global economy, making it one of the most prominent sectors globally (Ambalao et al., 2022; Halim et al., 2022; World Travel and Tourism Council, 2020; Harilal, Nyikana, 2019; Strydom et al., 2019). The growth and development of the sector are demonstrated by its socioeconomic contribution to the global market in the form of increasing foreign exchange earnings, investment

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opportunities, and increasing social cohesion between stakeholders, among others (Pham et al., 2019; Nengovhela et al., 2017; Nyikana, Sigxashe, 2017; Cardenas-García et al., 2015). As a result, many developing and underdeveloped governments, particularly in Africa, use tourism as a tool to alleviate poverty due to the sector's ability to stimulate and revitalize the economy (Nyikana et al., 2021; Nwokorie, Adeniyi, 2021; Rogerson, Rogerson, 2020; Scheyvens, Hughes, 2019; Lekgau, Tichaawa, 2019). Similarly, Rogerson and Rogerson (2020) observe that less privileged communities are encouraged to engage and participate in tourism activities as means to stimulate economic activity and growth in their communities. Halim et al. (2022) concede that tourism has proven to be a sustainable local economic development (LED) tool, thus many governments have taken active and proactive decisions to develop the sector for the benefit of their citizenry. The importance of the sector has been illustrated despite the recent effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, with the sector continuing to contribute positively to the global economy (León-Gómez et al., 2021).

Tourism activities take place in both rural and urban destinations where tourism has the potential to be strategically developed and thus play an important role in combating some of the prevalent societal issues observed in such spaces (Bartis, Madlwabinga, 2020). Halim et al. (2022) claim that tourism acts as a catalyst for community-based transformation and development. Over and above that, tourism development is an important aspect of tourism and society because it brings forth change for communities that participate in tourism activities. Tourism development in some countries like South Africa for instance, has led to the emergence of new niche markets such as township tourism (Rogerson, Rogerson, 2020). Although globally, the concept has been investigated and often termed "slum tourism", township tourism within South Africa has become an important component in growing the country's tourism industry as well as developing the townships themselves (Rogerson, Rogerson, 2020). The growing focus on township tourism development has thus transformed several townships into attractive tourist destinations owing to the unique experiences and activities offered by these areas (Sloan, Simons 2015). As a direct consequence of this popularity, the notable growth of tourism within townships affects the local communities where tourism is being developed both positively and negatively based on numerous factors (Leonard, Dladla, 2020) which will be presented in the literature review.

In the existing literature on township tourism in the South African context, much of the research focus has oftentimes been skewed towards supply-side considerations of township tourism (Letuka, Lebambo, 2022; Rogerson, Rogerson, 2020). Others sought to explore the perceptions and attitudes of residents regarding township tourism generally, relating to their support or non-support of township tourism (see for example Bartis, Madlwabinga, 2020; Ncube, Kruger, 2018; Nkemngu, 2015; George, Booyens, 2014). A summary of such studies shows that there is a need to constantly keep track of the perceptions and attitudes of residents towards township tourism, as such perceptions are constantly changing and evolving. Moreover, given the volatility and uncertainty of tourism, consistently eliciting perceptions around tourism, particularly from residents is an important exercise. Canavan (2013) argues that residents' perceptions are not static, rather they tend to change over time and can be triggered by different circumstances such as the recent COVID-19 pandemic in this case. More importantly, there is a unique relationship between tourism and residents of communities that develops over time (Gursoy et al., 2019; Nunkoo, Ramkisoon, 2007). The objective of this study is to get a better understanding of the relationship dynamics between tourism and residents, especially in the context of Soweto - the current research study area and one of South Africa's largest and most visited townships.

## Literature review

### Overview of township tourism in South Africa

Township tourism in South Africa has grown to be one of the most popular forms of niche tourism in the country (Rogerson, Rogerson, 2020; Auala et al., 2019; Ncube, Kruger, 2018; George, Booyens, 2014; Butler, 2010). It has become a major source of revenue for some South African townships which positively contributes to the local economic development (LED) in those townships (Rogerson, Rogerson, 2020). Existing studies have outlined various definitions for township tourism which highlight the different reasons that tourists have when interested in this form of special interest tourism. For example, Auala et al. (2019) define township tourism as a type of tourism that encourages tourists to visit underdeveloped areas in order to observe the different lifestyles that exist in the townships such as run-down homes. In contrast, Rogerson (2013) suggests that it is a type of urban tourism linked to tourism activities within a township that provides leisure to tourists and visitors. On the other hand, Ramchander (2007, p.7) as well as referred to township tourism in the context of South Africa as tourism that “involves traveling for the purpose of observing the cultural expressions and lifestyles of black South Africans”. For the purpose of this study, a summary of the above definitions is adopted, wherein township tourism is considered, an all-inclusive industry characterised by the travelling to, staying in, and engaging with tourist activities within townships. Leonard and Dladla (2020) posit that most South African townships represent political freedom and tell stories of political struggles, and visits to such destinations are therefore part of the new trend of special interest tourism linked to heritage and political history. This is evident in the increase of international tourists that South African townships such as Soweto, Langa, and Khayelitsha among others receive each year (Ndzumo et al., 2021; Booyens, 2021; Hoogendoorn et al., 2020; Ncube, Kruger, 2018; Koens, Thomas, 2015).

The strategic policies and frameworks implemented by the South African government have also contributed to the growth and development of township tourism. For instance, the government formulated the 1996 White Paper on the Development and Promotion of Tourism in South Africa which focused on the promotion and inclusion of previously disadvantaged communities in the tourism development agenda (South Africa, 1996). More than two decades later, township tourism is still being used as a strategic development tool that allows previously disadvantaged communities to directly benefit from the tourism industry. Despite the growth and development of the niche sector, there are still ongoing debates in existing literature regarding the ethicality of this type of tourism (Pereira et al., 2022; Ndzumo et al., 2021; Huysamen et al., 2020; Cardoso et al., 2019; Auala et al., 2019; Lekaota, 2018; Frenzel, 2014). These studies have argued that township tourism operates on a thin ethical line and if it is not developed sustainably as well as responsibly, it may create negative socio-cultural impacts and unintended negative long-term implications for host communities. Koens and Thomas (2015) argue that these negative impacts may cause conflicts between residents and tourists and that, more importantly, the impacts could alter the perceptions of residents regarding township tourism altogether.

### Impacts of tourism on host communities

The global growth and development of the tourism industry generates positive impacts that can be perceived as a contribution to the growth of host destinations and negative impacts that may potentially harm host communities (Giampiccoli, Saayman, 2018; Halim et al., 2022).

Bakri et al. (2014) state that tourism impacts manifest in different ways and across different dimensions including the economic, socio-cultural, and environmental. This section outlines some of these impacts and contextualizes them within the current research study.

### Economic impacts of tourism

The tourism industry has contributed significantly to the expansion of several economies across the globe (Nyikana et al., 2021; Danish, Wang, 2018). According to Mishra et al. (2018), the tourism industry can positively impact the per capita income of a country, as it tends to enhance the export of goods and stimulate foreign currency exchange. More crucially, tourism encourages entrepreneurship ventures in local communities (Mishra et al., 2018). The tourism industry creates direct and indirect employment opportunities for local communities which contributes to the overall economic impact of tourism to local areas. The growth of the tourism industry encourages governments to further develop infrastructure and transportation systems thus bettering conditions in local areas and creating further growth opportunities inherently linked to tourism (Nyikana, Sigxashe, 2017; Geethika, Gnanapala, 2015). George and Booyens (2014) reported for example, that the City of Cape Town receives roughly 1.35 million tourists annually and approximately 25% of the international tourists participate in township tourism. Despite the positive economic implications of tourism, the sector can also have negative impacts if not managed responsibly. As an example of the negative implications of tourism, and township tourism in this context, the tourism sector can contribute to an increase in inflation due to the excessive taxes imposed on local citizens (Chang, 2021). Resultantly, these high inflation rates cause an increase in the cost of living which makes it difficult to alleviate poverty, especially in low-income communities (Tussyadiah, Sigala, 2018) such as those in South African townships. Since it has been argued that tourism creates employment opportunities, some scholars have also argued that the tourism job market is unsustainable (see for example Dogru et al., 2020; Danish, Wang, 2018). The authors argue that the seasonality patterns of the tourism industry cause job insecurity, especially for the local workforce who depend on tourism during peak seasons. Consequently, the negative economic impacts of tourism have an adverse effect on the social livelihoods of residents.

### Socio-cultural impacts of tourism

According to Bello et al. (2017), globally, the tourism industry is considered a development driver. Therefore, the growth and development of the industry encourage infrastructure development, improves transportation systems, and promotes service delivery. These impacts have a positive effect on society as they promote stability in society. Bartis and Madlwabinga (2020) posit that destinations tend to attract tourists from different social and cultural backgrounds. As a result, socio-cultural impacts are more likely to occur in both a positive and negative manner. According to Zhuang et al. (2019), socio-cultural impacts are tourism impacts that affect human lives and cause a change in the quality of life or the traditional values of residents at the tourist destination. Bartis and Madlwabinga (2020) as well as Choiriyah (2017) argue that the tourism industry provides benefits such as increased social cohesion, and the betterment of residents' standard of living as a result of increased employment opportunities which improves the overall well-being of residents. More significantly, in recent times, many destinations are using tourism as a strategic tool for achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (World Travel and Tourism Council [WTTC], 2020). One of the SDGs (SDG 5) that tourism

helps to achieve, particularly in the context of Soweto, is gender equality by providing employment opportunities to both men and women thus promoting equality within the community (Letuka, Lebambo, 2021). In this regard, township tourism is an important focus area for government and researchers. In particular, it is critical to understand the views about the sector's contributions to strategic objectives in this context.

The tourism industry encourages cultural diversification and in return, stimulates cross-cultural interactions between tourists, visitors and community members (Bartis, Madlwabinga, 2020; Choiriyah, 2017; Shahzalal, 2016; George, 2015). The authors further highlight that community-based tourism contributes to the preservation of local cultures and traditions and is more likely to attract attention to the destination's unique heritage as well as cultural practices. Tichaawa and Moyo (2019) posit that the promotion of cultural and heritage values increases the pride of locals. Despite the positive socio-cultural impacts of tourists, there are also negative impacts generated by the sector as well. These impacts include an increase in criminal activities in host destinations where tourists become targets of petty crimes such as pickpocketing (Fletcher et al., 2013). Thus, this study considers that in a context such as Soweto, such impacts of tourism should be constantly measured as a proactive management activity that seeks to ensure a steady tourism industry from which locals and tourists alike enjoy the benefits. Despite the importance of regular monitoring of residents' perceptions about tourism in their local areas, and the need to integrate such perceptions into the planning and management activities, there has arguably been a neglect of this exercise. This research addresses this neglect.

### Residents' perceptions towards township tourism development

As previously discussed, tourism activities have an impact on the host communities, and these impacts, whether positive or negative, affect residents' perceptions of tourism development generally. Residents' perceptions of tourism have been reported to be influenced by factors such as economic improvement, community involvement and engagement, as well as the environmental consciousness of tourism activities (Obradović et al., 2021; Roosilamanesh et al., 2017). In line with the social exchange theory (SET), residents are more likely to be involved in tourism activities if they believe that the benefits of tourism far outweigh the costs of tourism development (Sharpley, 2014; Fredline, Faulkner, 2000). This further suggests that the level of tourism impacts experienced by locals will influence the perceptions and decisions of locals to support tourism and thus play a key role in sustainable tourism development. Some scholars (see for example Baker, Ramaprasad, 2021, Kusherdyana, 2021; Obradović et al., 2021), posit that residents' perceptions of tourism have a direct impact on the sustainable growth and development of the sector in local communities. Local community members have been identified to be one of the most important stakeholders directly involved in the growth and development of community-based tourism such as township tourism (Bartis, Madlwabinga, 2020; Acha-Anyi, 2016 Acha-Anyi, 2016). Chan et al. (2021) concur that residents are an important part of tourism development as they are primary stakeholders who should be actively involved in the tourism development process, although in reality they are often neglected or ignored. Hence, it is important to have the support and buy-in of residents for tourism, particularly township tourism, in order to be successful (Halim et al., 2022).

Scholtz and Slabbert (2018) note that residents in developing countries, like South Africa for instance, generally have different views on tourism, owing to the belief that the socioeconomic benefits of tourism do not exist if they do not directly benefit from it. As a result, most residents do not participate in tourism if they are unable to actively receive the benefits of tour-

ism (Scholtz, Slabbert, 2018). According to Bartis and Madlwabinga (2020), residents will also have negative perceptions and attitudes towards tourism if they are excluded from development plans or decision-making processes. Similarly, Aref (2011) notes that when residents do not benefit from tourism development, they tend to be resentful towards tourists and anything tourism related. One of the main reasons for such perceptions is that tourism development in local communities, particularly South African townships, has historically excluded locals from participating in tourism decision-making processes. As a result, most South Africans residing in townships do not fully comprehend the promotion of tourism development since they cannot see the tangible effects of tourism. Bartis and Madlwabinga (2020) suggest that the negative impacts of tourism are a contributing factor to residents' perceptions of tourism development. Thus, the argument in this paper is that the existing views of tourism amongst the residents should be evaluated and, where possible, made critical components of future development plans and the overall sustainable management of tourism in Soweto.

## Methodology

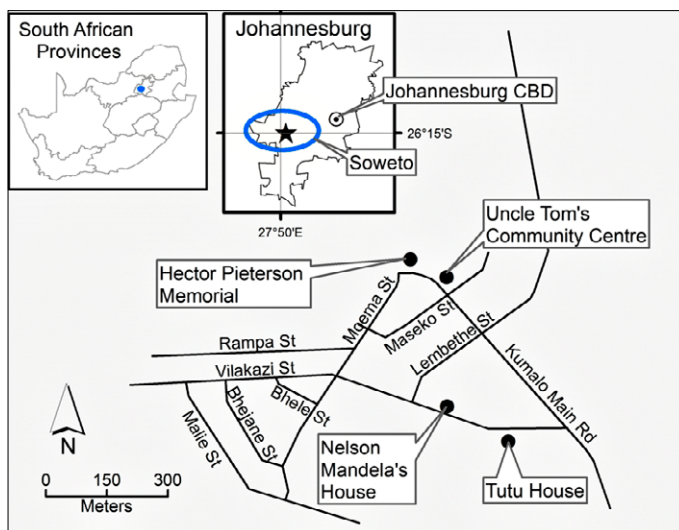
This empirical study was conducted in Soweto (see Figure 1 below) - a township area located in the City of Johannesburg in South Africa. Formally known as the South Western Townships, Soweto is one of South Africa's largest and busiest townships. Within Soweto, the tourism industry has experienced immense growth in the last two decades, largely due to the unique historical and cultural attractions found in the township (Letuka, Lebambo, 2021). As an example, the Vilakazi Street Precinct is located in Orlando West in a renowned area in Soweto where the majority of the City of Johannesburg's tourism takes place. The precinct houses some of the most popular cultural and heritage sites such as the Nelson Mandela Residence, the Hector Petersen Memorial Museum, and Archbishop Desmond Tutu's house. The prominence of these attractions and their popularity amongst tourists coupled with their proximity to residential areas where tourism impacts could be observed, all made the precinct an ideal study area for the current research.

A positivist research design, through quantitative data collection techniques, was employed in order to achieve the primary aim of the research. Firstly, a comprehensive literature review was conducted (see Table 1 below for a summary of the studies consulted), from which research questions for the development of the research instrument were established. Through the literature search, similar studies were identified, and their research instruments were used as a guide for the current study's instrument. Consequently, the data was collected using a survey distributed to residents who live in and around the Vilakazi Street Precinct, given its prominence in terms of tourism activity. A systematic simple-random technique was adopted. Where the first resident was approached, thereafter, an interval was adopted where every fifth resident was approached by the fieldworker. The survey consisted of closed-ended questions that were developed with the assistance of a statistician. The surveys were designed to acquire data such as respondents' place of residence, level of involvement and interest in tourism, and residents' perceptions of tourism impacts. A sample of  $n=387$  was identified, using a sample size calculator in order to reach a confidence level of 95%. However, when the data collection period ended, a total of 241 surveys were collected in the Vilakazi Street Precinct between the period of August and September 2022. The data collected was analysed using the software IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences [SPSS] 24. Simple descriptive statistics and frequencies were conducted in analysing the data collected. The findings of this study are presented in tables in the subsections below.



**Table 1.** Summary of studies consulted for the methodology

Overview of studies	Reviewed literature
Residents' perceptions of tourism development	(Acha-Anyi, 2016; Ambalao et al., 2022; George, Booyens, 2014; Halim et al., 2022; Mgiba, Chiliya, 2020; Nwokorie, Adeniyi, 2021; Shen et al., 2022)
Residents' involvement in tourism development	(Aleshinloye et al., 2021; Bakri et al., 2021; Slabbert et al., 2021)
Impacts of tourism development on local communities	(Bartis, Madlwabinga, 2020; Bello et al., 2017; Shahzalal, 2016; Slabbert et al., 202; Tichaawa, Moyo, 2019; Zhuang et al., 2019)



**Figure 1:** Map of Soweto

Source: Hoogendoorn et al. (2020)

## Results and Discussion

### Respondent's place of residence

The first section of the questionnaire sought to investigate the place of residence of the respondents who were participating in the survey. The study was conducted within a 5 km radius of the Vilakazi Street Precinct. According to Ncube and Kruger (2018), residents are an important stakeholder group in township tourism development, and tourism activities that take place in their communities directly affect them. Thus, it was important to ascertain the place of residence of the respondents to determine their perceptions of township tourism activities. The findings (Table 2) revealed that a vast majority of the respondents (80.6%) who participated in the survey were from the immediate precinct in the different subsections of Soweto such as Orlando West, Orlando East, Diepkloof, Pimville, Jabulani, Orlando, Dobsonville, and Jabavu. While other respondents (19.4%) were from other areas of Soweto, beyond the Vilakazi Street Precinct area, but found themselves at the precinct at the time the surveys were administered.



**Table 2.** Respondents' place of residence (n=241)

Place of residence	Percentage (%)
Orlando West	36.8
Other	19.4
Orlando East	10.9
Diepkloof	10.3
Pimville	7.6
Dobsonville	4.6
Jabulani	5.3
Orlando	3.0
Jabavu	2.1

### Level of interest and involvement in tourism

According to Slabbert et al. (2021), residents choose whether to be actively involved in tourism; passively involved or they can choose not to participate in tourism altogether. Their involvement would be determined by their level of interest in tourism and its development in their local area. To establish the residents' level of interest in township tourism within Soweto, the respondents were asked to indicate it on a Likert scale of 5 levels that ranged from 'extremely interested' to 'not interested at all'. An overwhelming majority of the respondents (92.1%) expressed an interest in tourism and its activities, albeit at different levels of the scale as is illustrated by Table 3 below.

**Table 3.** Residents' level of interest and involvement in tourism (n=241)

Level of interest	Percentage (%)
Extremely interested	29.5
Very interested	33.5
Moderately interested	16.8
Slightly interested	12.3
Not at all interested	7.9
Level of involvement	
Actively (directly) involved	29.1
Passively (indirectly) involved	32.1
Unsure	7.2
Not involved	31.6

After establishing the respondents' level of interest in tourism, this study sought to ascertain the respondents' level of involvement in tourism. Given that this study was conducted within a 5km radius of a popular tourist area, the expectation was that there would be some involvement noted in tourism among participants. Accordingly, a Likert Scale with the following options; 'actively involved', 'passively involved', 'not involved', and 'unsure', was used to investigate this phenomenon. The results presented in Table 3 indicate that the majority of respondents (61.2%) indicated that they were either actively (29.1%) or passively (32.1%) involved in tourism in the area. It is worth noting, however, that a notable number of respond-

ents (31.6%) were not involved in tourism indicating that they did not participate or engage in any tourism activities. Bakri et al. (2014) argue that tourism is usually an unanticipated element that encourages locals to participate unknowingly in tourism development activities and initiatives. This implies that the residents who are unsure about their involvement in tourism may possibly be involved indirectly or may have previously participated in tourism without being aware.

In the follow-up questions, the respondents were asked to respond “yes” or “no” to two sets of questions regarding tourism development. The first question was related to whether tourism could be used to improve the image of the township. The second question was related to whether the money invested in township tourism can be used to address social issues. It was interesting to note that many respondents (84.9%) felt that tourism could be used as a tool to improve the image of the township. Despite this important observation, there were many others (63.4%) who argued that the money which is invested in tourism could be redirected to address other pressing social services and issues. Nonetheless, it is evident from the results that the majority of respondents are both interested and involved in the tourism industry, which could be as a result of them benefiting from tourism in one way or another in the area. The results mirror the findings of other literature (see for example Aleshinloye et al., 2021) in that local participation is important in tourist locations. In that regard, local participation ensures that the benefits of tourism are equally distributed, and it meets the needs of the community.

### Perceptions of tourism impacts on the host community

To understand how residents perceive tourism and how it may affect their daily lives, the respondents were provided with a series of impact statements regarding tourism in Soweto. Respondents were asked to respond to the statements on a five-point Likert scale where ‘1’ was strongly agree, ‘2’ was agree, ‘3’ was neutral, ‘4’ was disagree, and ‘5’ was strongly disagree. For ease of interpretation, the presentation of the findings consists of merged percentages for those who strongly agreed and those who agreed. The same approach was also applied to those who indicated that they disagreed and strongly disagreed. The findings are presented in Table 4 below. Some of the key findings indicate that a vast majority of respondents (79.1%) concur with the statement that tourism contributes to the economy of Vilakazi Street, which may be a result of the thriving tourism sector in the precinct. According to Mgiba and Chiliya (2020), the Vilakazi Street Precinct receives a large number of tourists yearly, especially international visitors and as such, in this study, it was important to gauge respondents’ perceptions on whether tourism supports the local economy.

In order to further assess this contribution, respondents were asked whether tourism influences locals to start new business ventures in and around the Vilakazi Street precinct. To this assertion, 79.1% of the surveyed population agreed. There are several informal businesses in and around the precinct that offer products and services to tourists who visit the Vilakazi Street precinct, which supports the notion of economic contributions made by tourism, particularly through informal tourism business activity. The above results appear to indicate that tourism inspires locals to open new businesses as a way of capitalizing on the opportunities presented by tourism. The result is also linked to the notable view (69.4%) of tourism contributing to employment opportunities in the area. On a more contrasting note, the results also reveal that despite township tourism creating employment opportunities and inspiring locals to start new ventures, over half of the respondents (59.9%) felt that township tourism only ben-

efits bigger businesses. Similarly, over half (54%) of the residents surveyed suggested that tourism resulted in increased prices of goods and services in their area. In this way, the overall feeling was that the locals were struggling to keep up with the increases in goods and services in their area as tourism resulted in inflated prices from service providers.

**Table 4.** Residents' perceptions of tourism impacts (n=241)

Statements	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Economic impacts</b>					
Tourism contributes positively to the economy of Vilakazi Street	50.6	28.5	10.0	8.4	2.5
Township tourism drives economic development in Vilakazi Street	43.9	36.0	12.1	5.0	2.9
Township tourism encourages people to start new businesses (entrepreneurship) in Vilakazi Street	42.7	36.4	10.0	44.2	6.7
Tourism creates job opportunities	36.8	32.6	14.6	9.2	6.8
Township tourism only benefits bigger businesses	28.8	23.9	19.7	15.9	11.7
Prices of goods and services increase because of tourism in the local area	27.6	26.4	21.8	13.8	10.4
<b>Socio-cultural impacts</b>					
Township tourism causes overcrowding in the local area	10.3	24.4	16.8	18.1	30.4
Township tourism encourages cross-cultural interactions between visitors and residents	25.1	29.3	20.5	8.4	16.7
Township tourism increases the level of inequality in the local area	18.0	18.8	25.1	13.8	24.3
Township tourism causes excessive noise levels, which annoys residents	8.8	14.2	22.2	19.7	35.1
Township tourism increases resident's community pride	43.1	32.2	14.6	3.3	6.8
Township tourism promotes women's empowerment in my local area	10.0	12.1	23.0	26.8	28.1
Township tourism is an important tool for youth empowerment and development in my local area	6.7	5.9	18.8	32.6	36.0

The study also sought to determine the perceptions linked to the socio-cultural implications of tourism in Soweto. Subsequently, the respondents were required to respond to a statement on whether township tourism fosters cross-cultural interactions between locals and tourists who visit the precinct. The results revealed that just more than half of the respondents (54.4%) indicated that as a matter of fact, they do develop relationships with visitors that visit their communities. This result supports the assertion by Slabbert et al. (2021) that suggests that tourism encourages interactions between locals and visitors from different social and cultural backgrounds. Surprisingly, the findings relating to tourism contributing to women's empowerment in the area reveal that over half of the respondents (54.9%) dispute the assertion that township tourism drives women's empowerment. Equally, similar nuances surfaced relating to whether township tourism contributes to youth empowerment where 68.6% of the respondents disagreed with the notion that it acts as a tool for youth empowerment. These results suggest that there is a lack of participation and involvement of women and young people in township tourism development in the area - a worrying finding when considering the potency of tourism in addressing these critical issues when developed and managed effectively and strategically. The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) (2019) emphasise that it is crucial that women and young people are empowered since they contribute to the growth and success of nations. The results from this study indicate that township tourism in Soweto does not achieve SDG 5 which seeks to ensure that there are equal opportunities for both genders. Shen et al. (2022) suggest that governments, specifically local governments, should

increase residents' participation in decision-making processes, especially for marginalized groups. Another concern that was raised in follow up questions amongst the residents was the issue of inauthentic experiences. In this regard, a majority of the surveyed residents (68.5%) felt that township tourism currently compromises the authenticity of heritage and cultural products and offerings. The suggestion is that in recent times, due to the high demand for unique cultural experiences, there has been an increase in the commodification and staging of cultural experiences. Finally, an overwhelming majority of the respondents (93.2%) stressed the need for the government to do more in terms of educating local people about tourism and the opportunities that it presents for economic development. In this regard, they felt that many of them do have a keen interest in capitalizing on tourism opportunities, but lack the necessary "know-how" and skills to engage in the sector.

## Conclusion and Implications

This study sought to determine residents' perceptions towards tourism development and impacts in the Vilakazi Street Precinct with a view to suggest ways in which these perceptions can be integrated into the tourism development agenda. The study's findings reveal that most of the local residents are generally interested in tourism, and to a large extent involved and participating in tourism activities around the Vilakazi Street Precinct. Similarly, the study found that township tourism in the area is largely associated with positive impacts on the community which is consistent with similar studies on tourism impacts in local communities (see for example Bakri et al., 2014; Bartis, Madlwabinga, 2020; Geethika, Gnanapala, 2015; Halim et al., 2022). Particularly, the findings suggest positive socio-economic contributions from township tourism. However, nuanced views were observed in that it was noted that not all residents benefit from tourism growth and development. This can be an expected result as it is not possible to effectively involve everyone in the tourism process. In fact, some of the residents felt that tourism benefits were skewed towards established formal businesses, particularly the big ones as opposed to the smaller businesses. In this respect, they suggested that tourism is fuelling inequalities within the community. This is further supported by the general sense felt by residents, that township tourism is arguably failing to address the key issues of women empowerment and youth empowerment. Such findings highlight Harilal and Nyikana's (2019) argument on the need for socio-economic transformation for tourism small, medium, and micro enterprises (SMMEs) in host communities. In doing so, it will create opportunities for residents, and this increases the chances of residents participating in tourism development. The implication therefore is that there is an uneven distribution of tourism benefits in the Vilakazi Street Precinct. A previous study by Xue and Kerstetter (2018) argues that residents are the rightful owners of tourism resources at destinations, and therefore should benefit even more from tourism activities. This study, therefore, suggests that the local government that oversees tourism development in Soweto should develop strategies that seek to ensure equal distribution of tourism benefits in the precinct, if not an approach that is inclusive as a way of achieving representativeness. A further recommendation is made for the more purposeful inclusion of women and young people in tourism. This can include equipping them with the necessary skills and opportunities to participate in tourism development since it was found that there was an overwhelming desire for more education and training for local residents, especially women and youth. Similarly, Harilal and Nyikana (2019) echo the same sentiments on the importance of ensuring that there are equal opportunities for small tourism enterprises. The implementa-

tion of such programmes would also assist in the pursuit of achieving the equal distribution of tourism benefits. Given that effective implementation of any programme largely rests on a collaborative effort, fuelled by trust amongst stakeholders in tourism, the local government and community members working together would ensure mutual benefits, and cooperation in realizing common goals for township tourism development.

From a theoretical point of view, the study makes a modest contribution to scholarship through providing fresh perspectives on tourism impacts and local community involvement in tourism. This is on the basis that, given the recent COVID-19 pandemic and the devastating impact it had on the tourism industry, empirical research is needed in order to revisit residents' perceptions of tourism development and its subsequent impacts, particularly for historically neglected areas with great tourism potential. Thus, this paper adds to the body of knowledge on sustainable tourism development, through the integration of residents' views on this process. From a policy perspective, the study also makes a contribution towards local economic development strategies that inform national policies linked to tourism development. In this regard, this study argues that local municipalities should adopt a more active approach in their strategies for tourism development in townships. Arguably, local municipalities should incorporate the views of locals and their experiences of township tourism in their packaging and subsequent management of the sector such that it has the desired impact on the local economy. To achieve this, a constant dialogue between government authorities from the local municipality and the residents should be established and sustained. Through such dialogue, education, training and awareness raising about the potential of tourism to contribute to the socio-economic well-being of residents will be achieved. As such, optimal benefits for all parties involved may be achieved and the positive impacts of tourism optimized, while collectively reducing the negative implications.

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