

Agency-Curated Journeys: A Netnographic Account of Mediated Tourism and Digital Storytelling in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Aim of the Study: This netnographic study examines how tourist experiences in Northern Pakistan are produced as mediated and networked phenomena. It also focuses on how travel agencies and social media platforms collectively organize, shape, and stabilize particular ways of experiencing, interpreting, and narrating travel. Actor-Network Theory (ANT) provides the framework, enabling the study to trace interactions among human and non-human actors, such as tourists, tour guides, travel agencies, landscapes, itineraries, smartphones, and digital platforms.

Methodology: Drawing on ethnographic and netnographic design, the study adopts participant observation, in-depth interviews, and social media content for data collection. Fieldwork was conducted across key tourist sites, including Dolai Waterfall, Pir Chanasi, Ganga Choti, Mushkpuri Top, Nathia Gali, and the Pipeline Track in Ayubia National Park. A purposive sample of 31 participants was selected, from diverse backgrounds, who traveled through different travel agencies. The analysis followed thematic coding to identify key themes related to the lived experiences of tourists.

Findings: The findings reveal that tourist experiences are co-produced through interconnected online and offline networks. Travel agencies curate itineraries that guide embodied movement and perception, while social media translates these experiences into aestheticized digital narratives. Digital platforms enroll tourists into specific ways of seeing, moving, and storytelling, stabilizing representations of Northern Pakistan as scenic, peaceful, and aspirational.

Conclusion: The study concludes that tourism in contemporary Pakistan is a hybrid, affective, and technologically mediated practice. By applying the ANT lens, it reveals how tourist experiences emerge relationally through networks of mediation, challenging individualistic and place-bound understandings of travel.

Keywords: Digital Tourism, Travel Agencies, Mediation, Tourist Experience, Digital Storytelling, Northern Pakistan.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism in the contemporary world is no longer simply a matter of physical movement across space; it is a relational practice through which experiences, meanings, and identities are produced in interaction with people, technologies, and material environments (Hall, 2022). Anthropological scholarship has long shown that travel is embedded in processes of meaning-making, where encounters with place and others are mediated by cultural expectations, institutional arrangements, and representational regimes (MacCannell, 1976; Urry, 2002). Recent work demonstrates that tourism experiences are co-created through iterations with landscapes, technologies, and social contexts, reflecting the relational and mediated nature of contemporary travel (Huang, 2024; Rainoldi et al., 2025). In recent years, these mediations have intensified as tourism has become increasingly organized through travel agencies, influencers, and digital platforms that shape how journeys are planned, experienced, narrated, and circulated in digital spaces (Xiang et al., 2015; Du, Zhou & Li, 2024).

Travel agencies are intermediaries that plan, arrange, and book travel services, such as transportation, accommodation, guided activities, and packaged tours, on behalf of travelers who prefer not to organize these components independently (Safdar and Bibi, 2025; Garcia et al., 2022). As the travel industry has diversified, many agencies began specializing in niche markets, including adventure travel, luxury vacations, and eco-tourism. This specialization enables agencies to cater to the unique preferences of different traveler segments (Van Nuenen & Scarles, 2021). When tourists participate in these pre-planned, agency-curated trips, they do not merely follow a schedule; they actively interpret and internalize their experiences. Their motivations, cultural expectations, and prior imaginaries influence how they perceive and make sense of destinations, social interactions, and embodied encounters (Hsu et al., 2009; Lee & Kim, 2023; Salazar & Graburn, 2014).

Tourism has undergone a profound transformation in recent decades; no longer simply a matter of transporting visitors from one place to another, it has become a complex, mediated form of experience, meaning-making, and display. The increasing entanglement of tourism with digital technologies and intermediary organizations has meant that tourist experiences are shaped not only by the landscapes they traverse, but by the networks of human and non-human actors that assemble, interpret, and narrate these journeys (Latour, 1987). This study examines this mediated nature of tourism by focusing on the interconnected roles of travel agencies and social media in the context of Northern Pakistan, proposing that tourist experience, interpretation, and online narration are co-constructed through a heterogeneous network of actors.

Traditionally, tourism research emphasized the direct encounter between the tourist and the destination, focusing on concepts such as physical mobility and the tourist gaze (Urry, 2002). However, more recent work highlights that tourist experiences are increasingly mediated through a range of intermediaries, including brochures, websites, travel agencies, smartphone apps, online reviews, and social media content, which pre-configure expectations and shape perceptions of place (Tao et al., 2023). As algorithmic and social media platforms proliferate, tourists not only consume tourism-related content but also become producers of narrative and imagery themselves, co-constructing destination meanings through user-generated media (Bai et al., 2023). In this sense, tourism is not merely a movement through geographic space, but a movement through a network of representations, mediations, and performances that shape how places are imagined, experienced, and circulated (Seeler, & Schänzel, 2020).

As of early 2025, approximately 7,062 travel agencies are operating across Pakistan, ranging from small, family-run operations to medium-sized businesses and more established companies that serve both domestic and international tourists. According to business listings data, only about 2,108 agencies have their own websites, while a majority (around 4,954) lack a dedicated digital presence, indicating that much of the travel sector functions via traditional networks, personal referrals, and offline contact, especially in smaller cities and rural areas. Meanwhile, Punjab accounts for the largest share (around

4,327 travel agencies), followed by Sindh (1,056), and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (820), reflecting the uneven geographical distribution of travel businesses across the country's provinces (Rentech Digital, 2025).

Beyond core travel agencies, the broader tourism and travel support ecosystem in Pakistan is considerably larger, encompassing lodging, rentals, and hospitality services, and seasonal operators that collectively extend well beyond the agency count, reflecting the sector's extensive informal and formal enterprise base. The travel and tourism industry in Pakistan is also experiencing rapid economic growth, with the market projected to generate over USD 4 billion in revenue by 2025 and to continue expanding through the decade (The News International, 2025). The increasing appeal of organized and packaged travel, especially among families and youth, and the growing influence of social media platforms such as Instagram and YouTube in shaping destination visibility are among the key drivers of this expansion, encouraging more travelers to explore destinations like Murree, Hunza, Swat, and Skardu through travel agency-organized tours. In Pakistan, the value of digital and social media in boosting tourism cannot be exaggerated. Today, a significant number of bloggers, vloggers, and tourist organizations are highly active in contributing to a rebranding of Pakistan as an attractive destination, spreading a favorable impression of the country while encouraging both domestic and international tourism (Afzal et al., 2024).

Thus, the digitalization of tourism has fundamentally transformed how travel agencies interact with customers, shifting service provision toward real-time communication, algorithmically informed personalization, and continuous engagement across digital platforms (Sinanan & Ritter, 2024; Xiang et al., 2015). Contemporary tourism scholarship demonstrates that agencies increasingly operate through digital-mediated ecosystems, including booking systems, apps, social media, and user-generated content, collectively structuring decision-making and experience design (Latour, 1987).

1.1 Research Questions

Guided by ethnographic fieldwork, this research asks: How do travel agencies, digital platforms, and material infrastructures interact to shape tourists' experiences in Northern Pakistan? How are these experiences interpreted, narrated, and stabilized through tourists' embodied practices and social media storytelling?

By foregrounding everyday interactions and mediated practices, this study contributes to the anthropology of tourism by showing how travel experiences are co-produced through assemblages of people, technologies, and places. In doing so, it offers an ethnographically grounded account of tourism as a lived, relational, and digitally mediated phenomenon in contemporary Pakistan.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employs Actor-Network Theory (ANT) as the theoretical framework to examine the role of travel agencies and social media in shaping, interpreting, and narrating tourists' experiences in Northern Pakistan. ANT was proposed by French philosopher Bruno Latour in the 1980s, along with Michel Callon and John Law. He argues that human behavior and experiences are always influenced and shaped by a network of relationships, and it is not only between people but also between people and material things. He explains that scientific and technological outcomes are not simply produced by individuals or institutions but are the result of complex networks that include both human and non-human actors (Latour, 1987). ANT provides a perspective that recognizes the interconnectedness of both human and non-human actors in the production of social realities (Latour, 2005). Rather than treating tourism as a human-centered activity, ANT emphasizes that meaning and experience emerge through networks consisting of tourists, tour guides, travel agencies, landscapes, itineraries, smartphones, and social media platforms, all functioning as agents that influence one another. From this perspective, tourist experiences are produced through assemblages that include travel agencies, tour guides, vehicles, itineraries, landscapes, digital devices, social media platforms, and tourists themselves. These actors interact to enroll participants, translate interests, and stabilize particular meanings of place, authenticity, and experience. Tourism, therefore, is understood not as a bounded activity but as an emergent and relational process

shaped by ongoing negotiations among material, social, and digital elements. By mapping these dynamic networks, the study reveals tourism as a co-produced phenomenon, where travel agencies and social media collaboratively mediate how journeys are lived, represented, and valued.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts an ethnographic research design to capture tourism as a lived, relational, and digitally mediated phenomenon unfolding across physical and online spaces (Paoli, 2022), exploring how tourist experiences in Northern Pakistan are produced through networks of human and non-human actors, including travel agencies, digital platforms, material infrastructures, and tourists' embodied and performative practices (Franklin, 2004; Jóhannesson, 2024; Bærenholdt, et al., 2017).

Ethnographic fieldwork focused on tourists' everyday experiences during agency-curated group tours, their interactions with fellow travelers and tour organizers, and their engagements with digital media before, during, and after travel. Participant observation formed the core method, enabling close attention to how itineraries, time management, landscapes, and group dynamics shaped tourists' perceptions, emotions, and narratives. The researcher participated in multiple organized tours managed by different travel agencies, allowing direct observation of how agency practices and material arrangements mediated tourist experience in situ (Götsch & Palmberger, 2022). To ensure variation in organizational styles and modes of mediation, formal permission was obtained from several travel agencies operating tours to Northern Pakistan. This multi-agency approach made it possible to compare how different itineraries, guiding practices, and logistical arrangements enrolled tourists into particular ways of seeing, moving, and narrating place.

Data collection combined participant observation, in-depth interviews, and netnography to capture both the offline and online dimensions of tourism assemblages (Kozinets, 2024). Participant observation was conducted during organized group tours to destinations including Dolai Waterfall, Pir Chanasi, Ganga Choti, Mushkpuri Top, Nathia Gali, and the Pipeline Track in Ayubia National Park. Observations focused on tourists' embodied practices (walking, resting, photographing), social interactions, affective responses, and informal conversations, as well as the role of non-human elements such as vehicles, itineraries, weather, and digital devices. Field notes documented moments of coordination, tension, excitement, and reflection, tracing how experiences were collectively produced in real time. In-depth interviews were conducted primarily after the completion of trips to avoid disrupting tourists' leisure activities. In-depth interviews were conducted and explored participants' motivations, expectations, emotional engagements, interpretations of place, and practices of digital sharing. Particular attention was given to how tourists reflected on agency-curated experiences and how they translated embodied encounters into stories and images for online audiences. Interviews lasted between one hour and longer, depending on participant engagement and narrative depth.

Netnography was employed to examine the digital circulation of tourism narratives and representations (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024). Publicly available content produced by travel agencies and tourists, such as promotional posts, reviews, photographs, videos, captions, and comments on Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, was analyzed to trace how experiences were framed, aestheticized, and stabilized in digital spaces (Kozinets, 2024). This method enabled the study to follow tourist experiences beyond the physical journey, capturing how social media platforms and their affordances acted as mediators in the production of meaning.

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants capable of providing rich, experience-based insights into agency-curated tourism (Bryman, 2016; Etikan, 2020). The sample included solo travelers, couples, families, and youth groups from Lahore, Islamabad, and Rawalpindi, reflecting diverse social backgrounds and travel motivations. Sampling continued until data saturation was achieved, indicated by the repetition of themes and the absence of new analytical insights (Rahimi, 2024).

All research activities adhered to established ethical guidelines. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and pseudonyms of interlocutors and travel agencies were used to protect anonymity. Photographs and visual materials were collected only with explicit permission, and sensitive information was treated confidentially (Huang et al., 2023). Reflexive field notes were maintained throughout the research to document ethical dilemmas, positionality, and moments of insider–outsider negotiation. Given the researcher’s professional engagement with the tourism sector, sustained reflexivity was essential to minimize bias and maintain analytical rigor (Abidin & De Seta, 2020). The study faced several limitations. Balancing participation and observation during busy tour schedules occasionally constrained the depth of real-time data collection. Some participants, particularly women, preferred not to be audio-recorded, necessitating reliance on detailed handwritten notes. Fieldwork was conducted primarily during the winter off-season, resulting in shorter, one-day tours that limited prolonged immersion. Additionally, the researchers’ familiarity with the tourism field required continuous reflexive engagement to avoid over-familiarity and to sustain critical distance.

4. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Tourist experiences in Northern Pakistan are best understood as networked assemblages, in which multiple human and non-human actors — travel agencies, digital platforms, transportation infrastructures, itineraries, landscapes, and tourists’ embodied practices — interact to co-produce meaning (Huang, 2024). Following an Actor-Network Theory (ANT) perspective (Latour, 1987), these actors are not passive components but actively shape the experience, expectations, and narratives of tourism. Tourist engagement emerges as an effect of relations across nodes rather than solely from individual preferences, revealing how Northern Pakistan’s tourism is socially, digitally, and materially mediated (Latour, 2005).

4.1 *Travel Agencies as Mediators of Experience*

Travel agencies in Pakistan function as central nodes in the tourism network, shaping both logistics and cultural encounters. They organize itineraries, coordinate activities, and manage transportation and guides, effectively structuring the embodied and social experiences of tourists. Talha, an employee from Lahore, highlighted the role of agencies and digital platforms in facilitating travel:

“Nowadays, there is a trend of travel agencies for traveling. I heard about a travel agency from my friend and went with him. I followed them on Instagram, and later I went with them with my family too. It was an amazing and smooth journey.”

Talha’s account exemplifies the convergence of peer influence, digital mediation, and professionalized services in shaping travel behavior. Historically, domestic travel in Pakistan was informal and self-planned, but the rise of agencies signals a shift toward commodified, mediated tourism, where convenience, safety, and curated experiences are central (Butler & Hinch, 2007). The notion of a “smooth journey” underscores how agency-managed itineraries stabilize tourists’ affective expectations and narrative experiences.

Agencies also perform translational work, transforming destinations into consumable experiences. They highlight “Instagrammable” locations, structure group dynamics, and curate activities to maximize enjoyment and content creation. From an Actor-Network Theory perspective, the agency functions as a mediator, assembling humans, digital platforms, infrastructure, and landscapes into a coherent tourism network (Latour, 2005).

Talha’s reference to Instagram underscores the transformative power of visual media and peer validation in shaping travel practices and tourism behavior. Social media platforms such as Instagram serve as sites of visual persuasion where curated images, testimonials, and hashtags construct compelling narratives of exotic destinations, comfort, and trust. Digital media now play a central role in shaping travel imaginaries and practices (Munar, 2014). For young urban professionals in Pakistan, Instagram functions as both inspiration and verification before committing to a travel plan. Talha’s decision to engage with a travel

agency after seeing their content – and following a friend’s recommendation – illustrates the layered process of trust-building based on peer networks and media aesthetics.

Word-of-mouth remains a highly trusted form of advertising in Pakistan, especially where formal accountability structures are weak or inconsistent (Artigas et al., 2017; Abbasi et al., 2022; Donthu et al., 2021). Relational trust built through friends and family often substitutes for institutional guarantees. As Latour’s Actor-Network Theory emphasizes, a travel agency is an active node in a web of influences, encompassing the agency’s Instagram posts, reviews, communication technologies, booking platforms, and even tour guides and transportation (Yu et al., 2021). These heterogeneous actors collectively shape tourists’ experience, demonstrating that services, platforms, and devices actively shape the tourist rather than merely facilitating travel (Latour, 1987).

Talha’s narrative reflects a broader transformation in how travel is imagined, planned, and executed in Contemporary Urban Pakistan. His experience is not only about the pleasant trip, but it also exemplifies how digital technologies, peer networks, and commercial tourism services intersect to create new cultural scripts for leisure. These scripts emphasize comfort, trust, social media validation, and status performance, marking a shift in both the social and symbolic dimensions of domestic tourism.

4.2 Digital Media and the Co-Constitution of Travel

Digital platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, WhatsApp, and YouTube function as active nodes within tourism networks. They operate simultaneously informational, transactional, and performative infrastructures, guiding, shaping, and amplifying tourist behavior. Rida, a BS Media Studies student, described her selective but strategic engagement with digital content:

“I use the internet a little bit just to check weather conditions and posters of travel agencies to stay updated. If they are advertising a trip where I want to go, I just contact them on Instagram and WhatsApp to confirm my booking.”

Rida’s practice illustrates digitally mediated delegation, where decision-making is partially outsourced to agency-curated content, while online infrastructures such as WhatsApp facilitate transactional coordination. Visual aesthetics, peer testimonials, and immediacy of contact collectively enroll tourists into pre-structured ways of seeing, moving, and narrating destinations. The interaction of these digital and material nodes directly reflects how tourist experiences are produced as networked assemblages, addressing how tourism experiences are co-constructed (Xiang, 2010). Similarly, Raffay, a student at the University of Central Punjab (UCP), emphasized the centrality of social proof:

“The experiences and reviews of other travelers that the travel agency shares on social media, such as group pictures and clips of travelers enjoying the trip, make me feel confident that they are honest and that I will have a good trip.”

Raffay’s narrative exemplifies trust-building through digital mediation. Electronic word of mouth (eWOM) significantly influences travel decision-making (Donthu et al., 2021). Social media functions simultaneously as an instrument and actor, shaping perceptions of credibility in the absence of formal regulatory mechanisms. Positive online reviews, group photos, and testimonials operate as peer-validated nodes, producing relational trust and legitimizing tourism practices. In Pakistan’s developing tourism economy, where formal oversight is limited, these digital representations are central to stabilizing the perceived authenticity of destinations, particularly in Northern Pakistan, which is portrayed as scenic, culturally rich, and accessible (Yu et al., 2021).

A striking aspect of Rida’s account is the influence of visual advertisements (posters) in shaping her travel behavior. Here, “posters” refers not to physical flyers, but digitally curated content shared via Instagram, Facebook, and other platforms - colorful, emotionally-driven, and aesthetically designed. In Pakistan, where formal tourism infrastructure and destination marketing organizations are weak or nonexistent, private travel agencies have emerged as the primary advertisers. They rely on low-cost, high-

impact methods such as Instagram Stories, Facebook pages, and WhatsApp broadcast lists. These methods are particularly effective among university students like Rida, who passively scroll and consume visual content, converting interest into action (Abbasi et al., 2022).

A compelling image of snowy mountains, a cozy bonfire, or a discounted “students-only” trip posted on Instagram can quickly trigger engagement. Rida’s instant decision to contact the agency after seeing such a poster illustrates the persuasive and emotionally compelling power of digital marketing in the tourism industry. Her experience highlights the pivotal role of visual content, emotional marketing, gendered trust mechanisms, and informal communication channels in shaping the travel choices of young urban women. In the absence of strong institutional frameworks, advertising constructs desire, shaping perceptions, and facilitates action, functioning as both a trigger and a substitute for in-depth research.

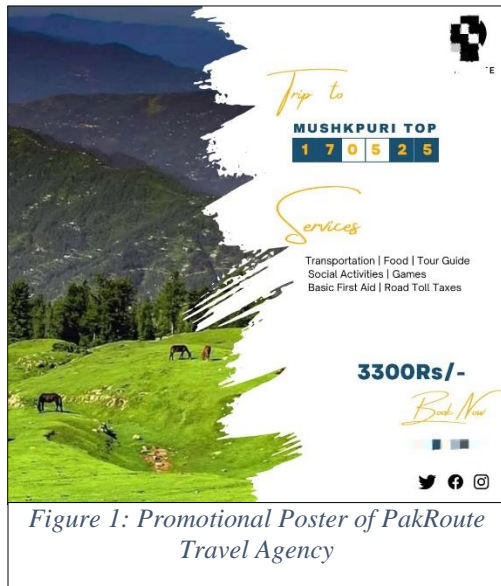


Figure 1: Promotional Poster of PakRoute Travel Agency

One promotional poster for a trip to Mushkpuri Top exemplifies this approach. The lush green meadows with grazing horses create an immediate sense of peace and natural beauty, ideal for destination promotion. The price (3300Rs/-) is prominently displayed, and the services - transportation, food, a tour guide, social activities, games, first aid, and toll taxes - are clearly listed, fostering transparency and trust. While the poster’s white space could be utilized with brief testimonials, mini-itineraries, or frequently asked questions (FAQs), its aesthetic appeal targets young, adventurous travelers seeking affordable and scenic escapes.

Social media also enables real-time interaction and feedback, further building credibility. agencies can respond to inquiries, customize packages, and create a personalized customer experience, while promoting niche tours, such as adventure, eco-tourism, or cultural heritage trips to relevant audiences. This approach enhances inclusivity and makes travel more relevant for diverse groups, including women, families, and solo travelers, effectively co-constructing the travel experience through a network of human and non-human actors.

4.3 Embodied, Aesthetic, and Emotional Dimensions

Tourism experiences are not produced solely through agencies and digital platforms but are also deeply embodied, affective, and performative. Tourists engage with landscapes through their senses, emotions, and bodily movement, while simultaneously translating these experiences into digital forms. Jamshaid, a travel blogger, reflected on the transformative role of capturing and sharing travel moments:

“When I travelled first time with a travel agency, I captured a lot of beautiful clips of Dolai Waterfall and Pir Chanasi Top. After my trip, I made an Instagram Reel, and it

went viral. I started frequent travel and posting on Instagram. I love to share my experiences with others; also, in this way, I am making memories and preserving the moments.”

Jamshaid’s narrative illustrates how travel experiences are layered and performative, integrating personal memory-making, aesthetic curation, and public self-expression. The act of photographing and posting does not merely document the journey; it actively reconfigures the experience itself. Through this process, individual travel becomes entangled with social validation, algorithmic visibility, and aspirational identity-making (Govers, 2009). Posting content enrolls Jamshaid into broader digital networks, where his embodied encounters are translated into visual narratives that circulate beyond the trip itself.

Destinations such as Fairy Meadows, Attabad Lake, Pir Chanasi Top, and Dolai Waterfall are not encountered as neutral landscapes but are aesthetically framed and narratively stabilized through repeated visual conventions. ANT helps illuminate how landscapes, smartphones, editing tools, reels, and captions, audiences act together as co-actors in producing tourist meaning. Feedback mechanisms on Instagram — likes, shares, comments, and followers growth create effective loops that reward certain visual styles and emotional tones, incentivizing repetition and further travel (Latour, 2005). In this way, tourists become informal co-creators and promoters of destinations and travel agencies alike (Huang, 2024).



Figure 2: Girl capturing the nature during travel with Agency

An Instagram Reel posted by “PakRoute Travel Agencies” further demonstrates this process. The video shows a woman capturing moments on her phone while travelling toward a destination. Rather than focusing on the destination itself, Reel centers on the traveler’s embodied engagement with movement, anticipation, and personal memory-making. The agency is subtly positioned as the facilitator of this experience, suggesting that meaningful moments become possible through its services. By foregrounding an apparently authentic, everyday moment rather than staged tourism imagery, the agency constructs an image of trust, intimacy, and emotional credibility.

The background audio for the Reel - the song “Sanji Ray” – adds another layer of affective mediation. As a trending song at the time, it carries cultural familiarity, nostalgia, and deep emotional resonance. Its

soft and reflective tone amplifies the sensory appeal of the visuals and invites viewers to emotionally imagine themselves within the journey. The choice of a trending track also reflects strategic platform literacy, aligning the content with algorithmic visibility while simultaneously producing emotional connection.

From a branding perspective, PakRoute Travel Agency employs a soft marketing approach. Rather than overt advertising, the traveler’s visible enjoyment functions as an implicit endorsement. This strategy resonates strongly with younger audiences, particularly millennials and Gen Z, who tend to value authenticity, emotional connection, and lived experience over traditional advertising. The Reel feels less like an advertisement and more like a personal recommendation, thereby strengthening trust and affective attachment to the brand (Abbasi et al., 2022). Visually, the Reel adopts a casual, natural style. Natural lighting, candid camera angles, and minimal editing create a sense of effortlessness and realism. By showing the traveler in transit rather than already at the destination, the video generates anticipation and emotional momentum. The focus remains on the traveler’s affective state rather than on spectacular scenery alone, reinforcing the idea that tourism is as much about feeling and becoming as it is about seeing. The emotional themes communicated through this Reel frame travel as a transformative and empowering experience. Featuring a woman traveler subtly communicates narratives of independence, confidence, and self- exploration, aligning with contemporary cultural discourses around women’s mobility and empowerment in Pakistan. Travel here becomes a space for personal growth and emotional renewal, not merely leisure.

Similar affective dynamics are visible in a Facebook review shared by “PakRoute Travel Agency”, from a traveler named Sania Fatima. In her review, Sania describes the trip as “the most enjoyable” and “well managed,” emphasizing both emotional satisfaction and organizational competence. She highlights the kindness and helpfulness of the team, pointing to the importance of interpersonal care and professionalism in shaping positive travel memories.



Figure 3: Review of the client

Accompanying her written review is a photograph of Sania with her friends. This image adds emotional depth and credibility, visually anchoring her narrative in lived social relationships. The photo communicates that her trip was not just about visiting places, but about shared moments, friendship, and collective joy. By expressing excitement for future trips, “cannot wait to do next trip with PakRoute,” Sania’s review also signals loyalty, transforming a single experience into an ongoing relationship with the agency (Yu et al., 2021).

Experiences such as Sania’s demonstrate how well-managed, emotionally supportive travel can contribute to personal growth, trust, and a sense of belonging. Traveling with friends, forming new social connections, and being cared for by organizers shape enduring memories that extend beyond the trip itself. These experiences encourage tourists to view the world as an accessible and welcoming, while also reinforcing values such as cooperation, gratitude, and companionship. In this way, embodied, emotional, and aesthetic engagements become central to how tourism in Northern Pakistan is lived, remembered, and reproduced.

4.4 Gendered Dimensions and Social Norms

Tourism experiences are deeply social and gendered, reflecting broader socio-cultural norms, moral expectations, and structural inequalities. In Pakistan, women’s mobility has historically been constrained by concerns over safety, respectability, and family approval. Within this context, digitally mediated tourism has emerged as a critical space through which women negotiate mobility, visibility, and agency. Social media platforms, particularly Instagram, enable women to access peer networks, observe other women travelling, and engage with Travel agencies offering culturally sensitive experiences. Instagram Reels shared by PakRoute Travel Agency, showing women travelling along the Pipeline Track, demonstrate how gendered tourism is enacted through slow, mindful engagement with nature. Rather than emphasizing adventure, risk, or physical conquest, these visuals foreground attentiveness, environmental appreciation, emotional presence, and personal agency. Such representations subtly reframe women’s travel as respectable, reflective, and meaningful, aligning mobility with culturally acceptable narratives of self-care and personal growth.

Women’s participation in tourism, when documented and mediated digitally, illustrates how social media functions as an infrastructure of inclusion and empowerment (Khoso, 2023). Online visibility allows women to see themselves represented as legitimate travelers, challenging the assumption that travel is primarily a male or family-oriented activity. Through shared images, stories, and experiences, women collectively produce a body of practical knowledge about safety, logistics, and emotional navigation, enabling others to imagine travel as achievable and socially acceptable.

These mediated experiences also highlight the importance of supportive travel infrastructures. Women-only tours, female tour guides, and gender-sensitive initiatives provide not only logistical safety but emotional reassurance (Kinnaird & Hall, 1994). Such arrangements foster a sense of shared identity, belonging, and collective confidence, allowing women to travel without fear of social judgment. In this way, empowerment emerges not as individual resistance but as a relational and culturally embedded process, co-produced through agencies, digital platforms, and peer networks.



Figure 4: Girls calmly experience the nature

During the field observation, an Instagram Reel “PakRoute Travel Agency” showed two young women travelling along the famous pipeline Track. What makes this video ethnographically significant is not merely the presence of women in a travel setting but the manner in which they engage with the landscape. Instead of rushing through the track of the pipeline or framing the journey as an adrenaline-filled, fun adventure, the women move slowly and calmly. Their pace is not unhurried, and their focus remains on enjoying the journey itself, rather than reaching the destination.

The Reel captures moments of sensory engagement - listening to the birds, seeing leaves, and absorbing the atmosphere of the forest. This embodied attentiveness communicates a deep respect and love for nature and conveys travel as a reflective and restorative practice. The calm expressions and gentle movements of the travelers produce a mood of tranquility, contrasting sharply with dominant representations of tourism as fast-paced or thrill-oriented. Through this visual narrative, the agency communicates that travel is not about ticking destinations off a list but about cultivating presence, awareness, and emotional connection.

Social media further enables the formation of women-centered travel communities. Numerous Facebook groups and Instagram pages now offer spaces specifically designed for women travelers, promoting all-female tours, female guides, and culturally sensitive travel arrangements. These digital spaces provide more than information; they offer emotional solidarity, collective reassurance, and a sense of belonging. Such mediated communities play a crucial role in enabling women’s mobility by creating environments where safety, respectability, and enjoyment coexist.

4.5 Post-Travel Storytelling and Meaning-Making

Tourist experiences extend beyond the physical journey through post-travel storytelling, which is both interpersonal and digitally mediated. Tourists narrate experiences to family, friends, and online audiences, transforming memories into cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 1984). Jamshaid’s and other participants’ practices illustrate the co-production of meaning, where tourists, agencies, and digital platforms collectively construct narratives of Northern Pakistan as beautiful, peaceful, and aspirational.

Storytelling, both offline and online, stabilizes particular representations of destinations, shaping future tourists’ expectations and behaviors. For example, curated Instagram Reels, group photos, and testimonials collectively reinforce what it means to visit Dolai Waterfall or Pir Chanasi Top, showing how tourists are enrolled into specific ways of seeing, moving, and narrating places, as stated in the sub-questions of this study. Travel narratives become affective circuits, where memory, emotion, and social recognition circulate across digital and material networks (Afzal et al., 2024).

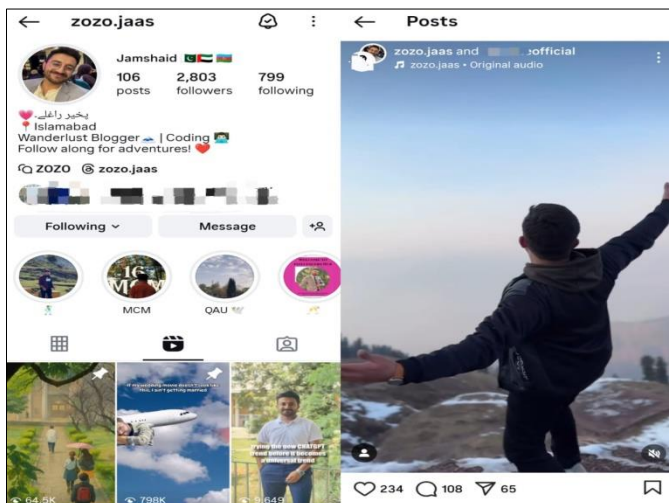


Figure 5: Jamshaid’s Instagram profile and post, which he collaborated with a travel agency.

Jamshaid's emphasis on capturing "beautiful clips and chunks" highlights the aesthetic dimension of contemporary travel storytelling. Within Pakistan's social media ecosystem, especially among the urban and middle class, there is a strong desire to present travel as visually pleasing and emotionally rich (Liechty, 2003). Destinations such as Fairy Meadows or Attabad Lake are not merely visited, they are framed, filtered, and edited to align with global visual aesthetics while remaining culturally legible within local norms. Jamshaid's account of Reel "going viral" reflects how social media feedback loops (such as likes, comments, shares) motivate continued participation in travel storytelling. The act of sharing becomes both emotionally rewarding and socially validating.

This dynamic is particularly relevant in Pakistan's youth culture, where digital platforms offer alternative spaces for recognition, identity formation, and even career opportunities. Pakistani influencers and platforms such as Instagram and YouTube are increasingly seen as "aspirational spaces" where ordinary users can transform their travel experiences into visibility and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1984). As Jamshaid noted during the interview, screenshots from his profile showed high engagement, and posts created in collaboration with travel agencies achieved particularly wide reach, reinforcing the mutually beneficial relationship between tourists and tourism operators.

Social media also operates as a tool of memory preservation, as Jamshaid described. Capturing and editing moments for public sharing also enables long-term personal archiving. His phrase "making memories and preserving moments" reflects a blend of emotional attachment and digital permanence. In a society where oral storytelling has long been central, digital storytelling adds a visual and performative layer that is both individually empowering and culturally resonant. Digital memory practices are deeply tied to how individuals narrate their lives and situate themselves within the broader social world (Afzal et al., 2024; Van Dijck, 2007).

These post-travel narratives interact with travel agencies in new ways. Organized trips increasingly serve as content-rich environments for aspiring influencers and everyday users alike. Agencies plan itineraries with "Instagrammable" locations in mind, encouraging photography, drone usage, and content creation. This changes the structure of tourism itself, aligning it with media production rather than pure leisure. In turn, tourists such as Jamshaid become informal promoters of both destinations, and the travel agencies facilitating their journeys, a form of peer-driven marketing that has grown substantially in Pakistan in recent years (Ahmed & Ahmed, 2022).

At the same time, digital storytelling is not socially neutral. It reflects class privilege, gendered mobility, urban access, and culturally sanctioned forms of visibility. While platforms offer new modes of expression, they also reproduce existing inequalities, especially for women and the lower-middle-class travelers whose mobility and self-presentation are more tightly regulated (Liechty, 2003). Nonetheless, for many urban Pakistani youth, these digital narratives remain powerful avenues of identity performance, emotional expression, and cultural connectivity.

Travel storytelling in Pakistan is also influenced by social norms and class-based sensibilities. Female travelers may selectively share stories depending on how travel is perceived within their families or communities. Middle-class narratives often emphasize comfort, safety, spiritual insight, or emotional well-being, while upper-class accounts may focus on exclusivity, luxury, or cosmopolitan curiosity. These variations shape how travel is remembered and what meanings are constructed from it.

Across travel narratives in this ethnographic research, a clear pattern emerges: tourist experiences are co-produced within networks of human and non-human actors. Travel agencies, digital platforms, peer networks, landscapes, itineraries, and technologies actively shape tourists' perceptions, decisions, and storytelling practices. Social media acts as a mediator of trust and meaning, translating agency-curated itineraries and scenic encounters into emotionally and aesthetically resonant experiences.

Interlocutors collectively illustrate how digital, material, and social infrastructures interlock. They highlight that travel is simultaneously a practical, social, aesthetic, and emotional phenomenon. Tourists'

embodied movements, social interactions, and digital practices co-construct the Northern Pakistan tourism experience, revealing a relational understanding of travel where destination, media, and traveler mutually constitute each other. In ANT terms, experience emerges relationally, rather than existing a priori within the tourist or the landscape. Travel agencies, WhatsApp, Instagram, group dynamics, scenic landscapes, and tourists themselves are all agents in a network, shaping perceptions, behaviors, and narratives (Latour, 2005). This demonstrates how mediation, enrollment, and stabilization, the core analytical focus of this study, operate across both online and offline domains, producing a complex, networked, and performative tourism culture in Pakistan.

In sum, tourism in Northern Pakistan is a mediated and performative phenomenon, where digital technologies, commercial intermediaries, and embodied practices intersect. Experiences are relational, networked, and affective, producing not only leisure but also identity, memory, and social value, reflecting the broader anthropological insight that travel is simultaneously social, material, and technologically co-constituted.

5. CONCLUSION

The lived experiences of tourists on agency-curated trips in Northern Pakistan are shaped by a complex interplay of personal expectations, emotional engagement, and the structuring influence of travel agencies. Before traveling, participants often experienced anticipation and excitement, informed not only by their own aspirations but also by the images, stories, and recommendations circulating on social media. Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp acted as technological mediators, translating these desires into actionable travel plans. As ANT highlights, the meaning of travel is not confined to individual cognition; it emerges relationally through interactions with digital platforms, curated itineraries, peer networks, and material infrastructures (Latour, 1987; Latour, 2005). A hashtag, a shared post, or a curated Reel is not merely representational; it shapes the tourist's perception, emotions, and decision-making, transforming anticipation into embodied experience.

This ethnographic and netnographic study demonstrates that tourism is both a social and a technological process. Tourists are not passive consumers; they actively co-produce meaning through embodied engagement, social interaction, and digital storytelling. Their reflections reveal that travel functions as a medium for identity construction, emotional renewal, and self-exploration, serving as a temporary escape from routine life, a site for testing independence, or a space for establishing social bonds. The narratives of interlocutors illustrate how expectations, aesthetic sensibilities, and peer validation converge to shape both on-site behaviors and post-travel representations.

Travel agencies and digital media platforms play central mediating roles in this process. Agencies structure itineraries, coordinate logistics, and curate experiences in ways that shape tourists' perceptions and emotional responses. Their role extends beyond organization; they actively translate landscapes and activities into consumable narratives, stabilizing certain representations of destinations such as Fairy Meadows, Mushkpuri Top, or Pir Chanasi. Trust, reinforced through social proof, testimonials, and peer-generated content, grants these institutions cultural authority over the tourist experience. Simultaneously, social media allows tourists to extend, perform, and reinterpret their experiences, transforming travel into a public, digitally mediated narrative. Instagram Reels, shared photos, and vlogs not only preserve memories but also co-construct collective understandings of Northern Pakistan as scenic, culturally rich, and aspirational.

The study underscores that tourism is a networked, relational, and performative process. Tourists, guides, agencies, landscapes, smartphones, and social media platforms function as co-constitutive agents, producing experiences that are simultaneously emotional, social, and technical. Group dynamics, storytelling, and embodied engagement reveal tourism as a site of affective negotiation, social learning, and identity work. The ethnographic evidence indicates that Northern Pakistan's agency-curated trips are not merely logistical journeys; they are emotionally charged, socially mediated, and digitally entangled experiences that transform how people connect with themselves, others, and the landscapes

they traverse. Ultimately, this research highlights that modern tourism in Pakistan is relational, performative, and networked: experiences are co-produced across digital, social, and material domains, with agencies, platforms, and tourists mutually shaping the meanings of travel. Travel is therefore both a personal journey and a shared, technologically mediated cultural practice, reflecting the broader entanglement of mobility, memory, and digital mediation in contemporary leisure landscapes.

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