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Strategic Imperatives of Sustainable Marketing of Religious Tourism in Nepal

Bhim Bahadur Khadka¹, Prof. Anjani Kumar Malviya² (PhD)

¹ PhD Scholar, Department of Commerce and Business Administration

University of Allahabad, Prayagraj, India

² Professor, Department of Commerce and Business Administration

University of Allahabad, Prayagraj, India

Corresponding Author: *Bhim Bahadur Khadka*; Email: kdkbhim@gmail.com

Abstract

The growth of tourism industry presents both opportunities and challenges and requires effective marketing strategies to promote sustainable development. In this context, the study examines the current state and identifies sustainable marketing strategies for religious tourism in Nepal. The study is based on a qualitative research design and utilizes self-administered open-ended questions to collect data. It employs snowball sampling to select samples from two distinct groups: tourism professionals and entrepreneurs, who are acknowledged for their remarkable abilities and expertise in the field and have achieved high levels of professional recognition at the national level. The analysis involves identifying key themes related to the data and relevant literature using a thematic analytical approach. The study is limited due to the small sample size. Results of the study indicate that a balanced approach, which integrates economic, social, and environmental marketing initiatives, is crucial for the sustainable development of Nepal's religious tourism industry. The study emphasizes the interdependent nature of these initiatives and their significant impact on the industry's long-term viability. The study provides insights into the key marketing strategies and best practices of religious tourism for governments, tourism boards, entrepreneurs and stakeholders to drive long-term success and growth in Nepal.

Keywords: Sustainable marketing, economic sustainability, social sustainability, environmental sustainability, religious tourism marketing

Introduction

Religious tourism is defined as travel to holy places, religious festivals, or pilgrimages (Hassan et al., 2022). It is a type of travel motivated by religious or

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spiritual beliefs and practices, and it can include visits to places of worship such as churches, mosques, temples, shrines, and other places of worship (Balan, 2022). Religious tourism is practiced by people of various religious backgrounds, including Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and many others (Suchana, 2018). Individuals and communities can benefit greatly from this type of tourism because it allows for the strengthening of religious beliefs and the promotion of cultural and religious heritage (Corsale & Krakover, 2019). Religious tourism is one of the oldest forms of tourism (Rinschede, 1992), and it is a significant, evolving, growing, and diverse sector of the global tourism market (Suchana, 2018). Pilgrimages, retreats, conferences, seminars, and festivals are all examples of religious travel and tourism (Suchana, 2018). Religious tourism encompasses a variety of spiritual sites and related services that are visited for both secular and religious purposes (Raj et. al., 2015). Researchers are agreed that religious tourism is among the least explored tourist activities in the world of modern tourism and the most understudied research areas in tourism research (Olsen & Timothy, 2006; Hughes et al., 2013). However, it is one of the oldest types of tourism (Egresi et al., 2012; Rinschede, 1992). Research interest in religious tourism marketing is steadily increasing (Durán et al., 2018).

The economic potential of religious tourism has increased public and government interest in religious tourism in recent years (Kartal et al., 2015; Razaq & Nigel, 2007). Religious tourism has grown rapidly in the last 30 years, particularly since the turn of the millennium, and the industry is estimated to be worth \$18 billion globally, with 300 million visitors (Griffin & Raj, 2017). Religious tourists have been observed to spend more money on shopping than other types of travelers (Koren & Collins, 2018). Several benefits are seen for promoting and increasing religious tourism market share, including more tourists and possibly higher tourism earnings (Ornek, 2002; Olsen & Timothy, 2006). Similarly, Sharma et al. (2006) contend that tourism is an important tool for poverty reduction in Nepal. Additionally, Pradhan (2014) sees a high potential for prosperity and growth in Nepal's religious tourism market.

Nepal is a small country with many religious, cultural, natural, and ethnic communities and historical heritages that draw religious, sports, and endemic tourists (Thapa, 2012). It is a tourist destination with a lot of potential. Nepal has several religious and cultural monuments that continue to draw both domestic and international visitors. Visiting these pilgrim, archaeological, and historical sites helps in understanding Nepal's ancient religion and history (Shinde, 2021). Hinduism and Buddhism are both recognized, and the blending of the two religions into one entity has inspired and created its own culture (Adhikari, 2022).

As a result, this study seeks to provide a sustainable marketing approach and prospects of the issues in the context of Nepal. The sustainable marketing approach to religious products or services could contribute to promoting and engaging more tourists with domestic and internationally. To date, the research gap observed in the issues to propose and examine the sustainable marketing strategies for religious tourism in Nepal. In this context, this study has set the following purposes:

1. To examine the current state of the religious tourism industry in Nepal, and
2. To identify sustainable marketing strategies for religious tourism in Nepal.

By achieving these purposes, the study intends to shed light on sustainable marketing strategies and provide valuable insights for policymakers and entrepreneurs to successfully promote religious sites and businesses, which will ultimately lead to the growth of religious tourism in Nepal.

Literature Review

Religious Tourism

Religious tourism has been a recurring phenomenon within the history of religions and refers to the forms of tourism that have religious associations (Rinschede, 1992). Relevant religious tourism studies have investigated topics in diverse destinations, such as devotional sites (Abbate & Di, 2013; Kim et al., 2020), religious tourist attractions (Bond et al., 2015; Hughes et al., 2013), pilgrimage routes (Nilsson & Tesfahuney, 2016), and festivals (Kim et al., 2020; Suntikul & Dorji, 2016). The preceding studies have highlighted distinct religious tourism topics within the wider tourism phenomenon, notably in the case of the connotations of pilgrimage and where it occurs (Bond et al., 2015), and the transition of pilgrimage into tourism from the perspective of tourism enlargement (Singh, 2006). In addition, topics within the broad categories of religious tourism and pilgrimage have evolved into considerations of secularity (Hung et al., 2017; Nilsson & Tesfahuney, 2016) and even to postmodern pilgrimage as a manifestation of secular pilgrimage (Hyde & Harman, 2011).

The global revival of religious tourism has occurred for several reasons, like the rise of spirituality, the growing share of aged people, media coverage regarding pilgrims and events, the globalization of the local through the mass media, seeking peace and solace in an increasingly turbulent world and availability of affordable flights to important religious tourism destinations (Egresi et al., 2012). All ancient places of worship, sacred sites, and pilgrimage shrines are places of our existence today and also for future generations. In this context, religious tourism commodities should be packaged and promoted to attract more tourists (Kartal et al., 2015).

Religious Tourism Marketing

Religious tourism marketing aims to attract visitors to religious destinations or events. Haq (2011) defines relationship marketing as a connection between tourists, pilgrims, and suppliers. Furthermore, it requires understanding tourists' needs and expectations and tailoring marketing programs accordingly to encourage repeat visits and positive promotion. Similarly, Kartal and Tureli (2015) proposed frameworks for effective place marketing in the context of religious tourism in line with Rainisto's "Levels of Place Marketing" which includes attraction, destination, image, and place product development, which are interdependent and integrated holistically. In addition, Kartal and Tureli's framework included six components; marketing research, product, placing, people, collaborations, and communication, which provides a comprehensive understanding of marketing activities for religious tourism.

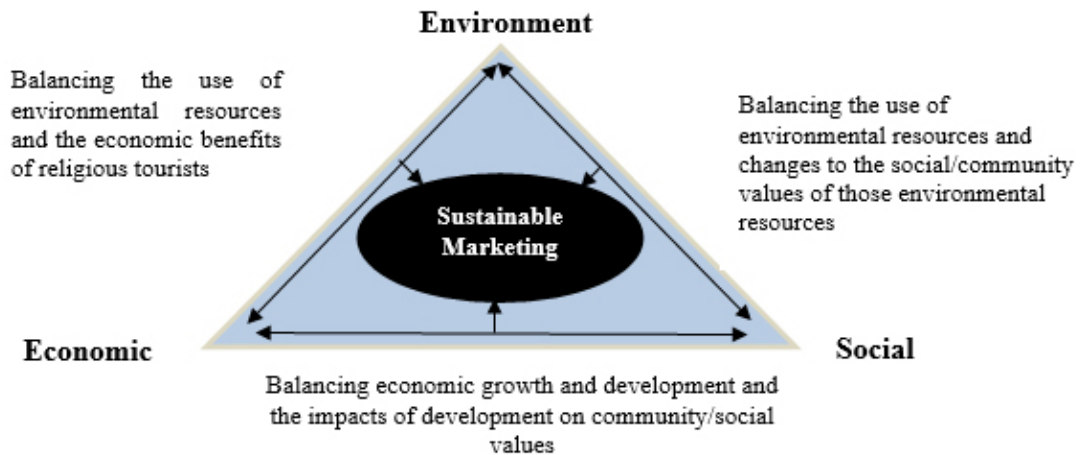
The research on sustainable tourism started in the mid-1990. In the present day, discussions relating to tourism have become dominated by the principles of sustainability (Dredge, 2008). Sustainable tourism continues, however, to be an adjustable concept (Farsari et al., 2011) which means different things to different people (Maxim, 2013). Likewise, sustainable tourism is a part of the economy comprising the current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of the tourist, the industry, the environment and host communities (UNWTO, 2005).

The sustainability of religious tourism is measured by evaluating its economic, social, and environmental impacts while balancing the needs of the community, economy, and environment. A sustainable marketing framework for religious tourism requires participation and cooperation from all stakeholders, such as tour operators, travel agencies, local communities, and governments (Muganda et al., 2009). Similarly, several seminal discussions have argued that sustainability hinges on the broad concerns of social equity, economic efficiency and environmental sustainability (Angelsen et al., 1994; Mbaiwa & Stronza, 2009; Swarbrooke, 1999). Furthermore, Suchana (2018) discussed the UNEP/UNWTO definition of sustainable religious tourism and focused on the triple bottom line of economic, socio-cultural and environmental aspects of sustainability. Likewise, it was Coccossis (1996) who earlier noted that sustainable religious tourism adopts these three principles. Niedziółka (2014) explained the model for sustainable marketing for tourism considering the impacts on the community and social values of a destination. Furthermore, the study suggested three components (environmental, economic and social) of religious tourism. Additionally, some discussions (Dodds, 2007; Waligo et al., 2013) have centered on stakeholder issues as a significant barrier to implementing sustainability within religious tourism.

The study emphasized the need for balance between the use of environmental resources, economic growth and social sensitivity shown in Figure 1 (UNWTO, 2005; McLoughlin, 2017; Mowforth & Munt, 2015). The need for continuous monitoring and evaluation of religious tourism positively impacts the destination discussed by Rio and Nunes (2012) and is indispensable to guaranteeing long-term sustainability. In addition, this study comprises the above diverse range of tools and approaches to sustainable marketing of religious tourism defined and developed.

Figure 1

Sustainable Marketing Framework of Religious Tourism (McLoughlin, 2017)



Religious Tourism in Nepal

Religious tourism is an aspect of tourism in Nepal, with several ancient temples and pilgrimage sites attracting large numbers of visitors from around the world (Pradhan, 2014). Surveys showed that tourists increasingly visit religious destinations to experience the lifestyles, everyday culture and customs of the people they visit. Another piece of evidence presented by Wenan (2020) highlighted that Nepal has a diverse cultural and religious heritage that attracts tourists. Therefore, Nepal is a unique place that attracts religious tourists.

Religious sites in Nepal are renowned for their beauty, history, and cultural significance, and some of the most popular religious tourism destinations include the Pashupatinath temple, Swayambhunath stupa, Boudhanath stupa, Muktinath temple, Manakamana temple, Lumbini, Janaki temple, and Swargadwari temple (MoCTCA, 2021). The Annapurna Circuit trek is also a popular pilgrimage for tourists seeking a unique blend of Hindu and Buddhist traditions in the rural villages of the Himalayas (MoFA, 2022). The Pashupatinath temple is a UNESCO World Heritage site and

one of the most sacred Hindu temples dedicated to Lord Shiva. Swayambhunath Stupa is a Buddhist temple and pilgrimage site with a history of over 2,500 years, and Boudhanath Stupa is also a UNESCO World Heritage site and one of the largest stupas in the world. Muktinath temple, located in the Himalayas, is a popular pilgrimage site for both Hindus and Buddhists. Lumbini is the birthplace of Buddha and a major pilgrimage site for Buddhists, and the Janaki temple is a Hindu temple with architectural beauty dedicated to the goddess Sita. The Swargadwari temple is a Hindu temple associated with Lord Vishnu and is considered a gateway to heaven.

In addition, religious tourism significantly contributed to the economy of Nepal. The country is home to numerous pilgrims and temples attracting millions of tourists each year. Religious tourism generates employment opportunities, income for local communities, and revenue for the government through taxes and fees. Overall, religious tourism played a vital role in the development of the tourism industry in Nepal (Paudyal, 2012). The world bank reported that the country received approximately 1.7 million tourists in 2019, many of whom were attracted by its temples, monasteries, shrines, and cultural festivals. The data in 2019 revealed that the contribution of travel and tourism to GDP was 7.9 percent contributing about US\$ 2.2 billion in Nepal. Likewise, in 2019, tourism supported over one million direct and indirect jobs or 6.7 percent of total employment. Approximately 80 percent of these jobs are in the most remote and resource-constrained regions (World Bank, 2022). In addition, tourist arrivals in Nepal in 2021 were almost 34.3 percent (150962). Beyond, the major visitors consist of five countries i.e., India (42.8 percent), the USA (15.13 percent), the U.K. (5.7 percent), China (4.1 percent), and Bangladesh (3.3 percent). Similarly, the portion of religious tourist arrival in Nepal is 7.4 percent of total tourist arrival (MoCTCA, 2021).

Methods and Procedures

The study employed a qualitative research design to explore sustainable marketing strategies for religious tourism in Nepal. The primary data collection instrument was a self-administered open-ended questionnaire, which is a common technique in qualitative research for obtaining detailed information about participants' experiences, perceptions, and attitudes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The research sample was comprised of two distinct groups: tourism professionals and entrepreneurs, who are recognized for their exceptional skills and expertise in the field, and who have attained a high level of professional recognition at the national level. The sample was selected through snowball sampling in which referral chains were used to identify potential participants (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981), and 15 participants were recruited for the study. The data collection took place over a 28 days from January 9 to February 2, 2023, and participants were given 10 days to

complete the questionnaire. Completed questionnaires were collected after the specified period, and two additional opportunities were given to non-respondents, with a seven-day interval between them.

After excluding three inappropriate questionnaires, the final sample size comprised 12 participants, with six individuals from each group of participants, resulting in a valid response rate of 80 percent (12 out of 15 questionnaires) (Dillman et al., 2014). This approach ensured the reliability and validity of the data collected, enabling a comprehensive exploration of the research topic. The present study derived its findings from an open-ended questionnaire that was distributed to 12 participants, comprising both tourism professionals and entrepreneurs. The participants' responses were categorized using codes P1-P6 for tourism professionals and E1-E6 for tourism entrepreneurs.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, which entailed reviewing the collected data, identifying key themes, and analyzing the data to generate meaningful insights into participants' experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006) with marketing strategies for religious tourism in Nepal. The study also connected and related the collected data with the relevant literature. Notably, this study has limitations, such as a small sample size and a limited group of participants, which may limit the generalizability of the findings.

Results

The findings of both open-ended questionnaires are presented according to the order of questions presented to the participants. The study examined how religious tourism can be sustained in a way that benefits the economy, people, and the environment. The study looked at the impact of tourism on local businesses, communities, and the natural environment, and came up with ideas for making tourism more sustainable. The study identified and categorized the participants' responses and looked for patterns or themes among the data. The questionnaire provided large amount of richly detailed data that are contextually laden and subjective. Further, it also reviewed existing research on religious tourism and discussed how their findings fit into the broader context. Overall, the study aimed to identify strategic imperatives for sustaining the religious tourism industry, with economic, social, and environmental sustainability as specific objectives. Findings of qualitative research based on the research questions are as follows.

Current Development in the Religious Tourism Market of Nepal

According to the majority of the participants, religious tourism has been a popular activity in Nepal for many years, especially among Hindu and Buddhist

pilgrims (Adhikari, 2022). They also observed a recent increase in spiritual and yoga-based travel experiences, which provide tourists with the opportunity to connect with nature and deepen their spirituality through retreats and visits to sacred sites. This observation is consistent with the findings of Raj and Griffin (2020). Furthermore, the respondents pointed out that the improved infrastructure and facilities near Temples, Monasteries, and Gumbas have made it easier for visitors to experience Nepal's religious heritage. The participants also noted a growing interest in eco-tourism, which offers tourists a chance to minimize their environmental impact while enjoying Nepal's natural beauty and spiritual atmosphere (Apollo et al., 2020). Overall, based on the responses of the participants, it can be concluded that Nepal's religious tourism market is evolving and diversifying to meet the changing interests of tourists.

Factors Contributed to the Recent Development in the Religious Tourism Market

Tourist experts and other stakeholders' ideas blend them coherently. The study found that several factors contributed to the recent changes in the Nepalese religious tourism market. The government recognized the importance of this sector and invested in infrastructure and facilities in and around religious sites to make them more accessible and attractive to tourists (Hamarnah & Steiner, 2004). Additionally, the government offered tax incentives and other support to encourage private sector investment in the tourism industry, including religious tourism (Newland & Taylor, 2010).

In addition, the majority of sample opined of the importance of the Nepalese government working with international organizations such as the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) to develop sustainable tourism strategies and promote the country as a destination for religious tourism. However, four participants observed that “ the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant negative impact on religious tourism in Nepal”, causing a decline in the number of visitors (MoCTCA, 2021). Correspondingly, the government had worked to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the country's religious tourism market by implementing measures such as health and safety protocols for tourists. Furthermore, the government is working with local communities and NGOs to preserve and conserve important religious sites.

In addition, a few of the participants opined that Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Lumbini, the birthplace of the Buddha and Pashupatinath temple, in 2014, and his visit to Janakpur and the Janaki Temple and Muktinath Temple in 2018 were significant in terms of promoting the religious tourism market

in the region (Timalsina, 2019). These visits likely increased awareness of these sites as religious tourism destinations and encouraged more people to visit the sites, which had a positive impact on the local economy and the promotion of the religious tourism market in Nepal.

Key Challenges Facing Religious Tourism Destinations in Nepal

The collected data from all the participants were compiled and listed the challenges faced by religious destinations in Nepal. The results found that religious tourism destinations in Nepal faced several challenges. The major challenge resulted in the lack of proper infrastructure (roads, transportation, and accommodation facilities), which makes it difficult for tourists to reach and enjoy these destinations (Heydari et al., 2018; Neupane, 2019). Additionally, the development of the tourism industry found challenged by the lack of a clear and comprehensive policy framework (Sofyan et al., 2022). As a result, the promotion and regulation of the industry have been inconsistent and fragmented, making it challenging to attract investments and improve the quality of tourist experiences. Likewise, many religious sites in Nepal are not preserved and conserved to maintain cultural and historical significance (Apollo et al., 2020; Olsen, 2020). Uncontrolled tourism has led to overcrowding, littering, and other forms of degradation at some religious sites (Apollo et al., 2020; Mohanty & Mishra, 2021). In addition, the study found that political instability and security concerns can deter tourists from visiting these destinations (Garg, 2015). Aside from this, religious tourism in Nepal has been negatively affected in recent years due to the rise of adventure, cultural, and eco-tourism has shifted tourists' focus away from religious sites (Venkatesh & Raj, 2016) due to the growth of alternative forms of tourism in Nepal. Similarly, natural disasters, like earthquakes, have damaged many religious sites and discouraged tourists from visiting (Yates & Mackenzie, 2018). Likewise, Nepal is facing competition from countries like India and Bhutan that offer similar religious sites (Heydari et al., 2018).

Competitiveness of Religious Tourism Destinations in Nepal

The overall theme of the study indicated that religious tourism destinations in Nepal are less competitive in the context of their promotional and marketing activities. However, a majority of participants opined that most of the religious sites have high potential with their distinctive competence. Despite this, religious sites and destinations are striving with each other inside the country and outside the country to attract tourists and retain their cultural and spiritual significance by offering unique experiences and facilities. In addition, the study found that Hindu and Buddhist religious sites are popular among tourists and have attracted different types

of tourists due to their unique cultural and religious practices (Apollo et al., 2020). Likewise, the data revealed that the competition among the sites is more based on the history and cultural significance and attracting tourists interested in learning about the country's heritage and traditions (Camisón, 2020). Overall, the theme of the participants indicated that religious tourism destinations in Nepal are less effective in promoting and marketing their unique offerings to provide a memorable experience for tourists.

Impact of Cultural and Religious Events on the Success of Religious Tourism Marketing in Nepal

As far as knowing the impact of cultural and religious events on the success of religious tourism marketing is concerned, all the participants in this research question opined that cultural and religious events influence the success of religious tourism destinations (Hernández, 2018). Furthermore, the study found that these events have a significant role in attracting a large number of domestic and international tourists and providing a unique and immersive experience for visitors. Additionally, such events also provide opportunities for local businesses to increase their sales and ultimately positively impact the local economy (Sharma et al., 2006).

Role of Local Communities in Promoting Religious Tourism Destinations in Nepal

In Nepal, local communities played a significant role in promoting and supporting religious tourism destinations, as evidenced by a thematic analysis that revealed economic benefits such as job creation, increased income, and growth of the local economy (Apleni, 2017). Furthermore, local knowledge, resources, and support contributed to the planning and promotion of religious tourism sites, ensuring that their cultural and spiritual significance was respected and preserved. Additionally, unique local experiences, practices, and customs provided a deeper understanding of the religious and cultural heritage of the sites. Many religious tourism destinations located in rural areas were maintained by local communities that offered essential services such as accommodations, food, and transportation. By preserving and maintaining religious monuments and sites, local communities celebrated their cultural and spiritual heritage and helped ensure they remained viable and relevant for future generations.

Marketing Efforts Necessary to Promote Religious Tourism in Nepal

Research questions were asked to identify marketing efforts necessary for promoting religious tourism destinations to a wider audience. The response of all participants were analyzed and necessary marketing efforts listed as follows : (i)

leverage digital marketing channels like social media, email marketing, and search engine optimization (Saura et al., 2020), (ii) collaborate with travel agencies to expand reach (Hsu et al., 2022), (iii) diversify offerings by adding cultural and adventure activities (Nare et al., 2017), (iv) develop an attractive and informative website and managed online reputation (Handriana et al., 2020), (v) create eye-catching content to showcase destinations (Handriana et al., 2020), (vi) host cultural and religious events (Albayrak et al., 2018), (vii) built partnerships with local communities, businesses, and organizations (Hsu et al., 2022), (viii) establish networking with travel trade organizations and participated in travel trade fairs (Hsu et al., 2022), and (ix) emphasize unique cultural and religious experiences (Handriana et al., 2020), as well as promote Nepal's natural beauty through word of mouth and exceptional service. By implementing these marketing strategies, religious tourism destinations would be able to attract a more diverse range of travelers, generate media coverage, and increase customer referrals, ultimately expanding their reach and contributing to the local economy.

Sustainable Marketing Strategies for the Development of Religious Tourism in Nepal

The study gained responses from participants regarding the significance of sustainable marketing strategies for developing religious tourism destinations in Nepal. The findings revealed that most of the participants have similar ideas that sustainable marketing strategies are crucial in the promotion of religious tourism destinations (Kim et al., 2020). However, all the participants agreed that the implementation part and awareness about sustainability are not enough in Nepal. Similarly, they opined that Nepal is rich in cultural heritage and religious diversity; therefore, it is necessary to implement the concept of sustainability and traditions in these sites for future generations while allowing tourists to experience them. In addition, the study posed three research questions to the participants and analyzed their responses to identify sustainable marketing initiatives for the development of Nepal's religious tourism industry. The study findings regarding the marketing initiatives are economic, social, and environmental.

Economically Sustainable Marketing Strategies

The study identified the different areas of economic sustainability of religious tourism in Nepal. The collected data among the participants showed an agreement that the economically sustainable initiative of religious tourism can only maintain its viability and growth over the long term while providing economic benefits to local communities, businesses, and the wider economy (Amerta et al., 2018). In addition, for sustainable economic development in religious tourism, effective and transparent

management systems must be implemented to increase tourism revenues, such as taxes and fees. It's important to support local entrepreneurs and small businesses by providing training and resources to help them succeed (Jamrozy, 2007). This includes helping local tour operators and other small businesses grow and develop. In addition, diversification of the tourism industry is also important to reduce the dependence on a single site or attraction (Milbrath, 1989). This can be achieved by promoting a range of cultural, historical, and religious destinations. Investment in infrastructure and facilities is necessary to improve the tourism experience for visitors and support local communities. Furthermore, developing partnerships with private sector companies and organizations can secure investment and support for the sustainable development of religious tourism (Jamrozy, 2007). Beyond this, to minimize costs and increase revenue, sustainable tourism practices should be promoted by preserving the cultural and natural heritage of the destinations. In this respect, by implementing these strategies, the sustainable economic development of religious tourism can be achieved.

Environmental Sustainable Marketing Strategies

The study found that promoting environmental sustainability is crucial for the development of religious tourism in Nepal. This includes adopting environmentally-friendly practices like reducing waste, using renewable energy sources, and promoting low-carbon transportation options (Koren & Collins, 2018). Collaborating with local communities and organizations is also important for conserving and preserving religious sites and artefacts (Jamrozy, 2007). To minimize the negative impacts of tourism on the environment, the government should implement environmental impact assessments and invest in infrastructure and facilities that promote sustainability. Furthermore, promoting environmentally-friendly products and services can help preserve the environment and its cultural heritage (Fuller, 1998). Overall, implementing these strategies can ensure the sustainability of religious tourism in Nepal for future generations.

Social Sustainable Marketing Strategies

The study found that social sustainability is important for the promotion and development of religious tourism in Nepal. Policies should prioritize the participation and engagement of local communities, highlighting the social and cultural benefits of tourism (Aulet & Duda, 2020). Similarly, encouraging visitors to participate in social and cultural activities with local communities can promote cultural exchange and interfaith dialogue. In addition, marketing campaigns can also emphasize the social and cultural benefits of religious tourism (Jamrozy, 2007). Likewise, local communities can be provided with training and capacity-building programs to

participate in the tourism industry in a way that respects their customs and traditions. Furthermore, supporting local businesses with fair and ethical employment practices can create job opportunities for locals (Kilbourne et al., 1997). Finally, social and cultural activities that bring visitors and locals together can create a sense of community and belonging among visitors. By implementing these strategies, the development and management of religious tourism in Nepal can benefit local communities while preserving cultural and religious heritage and promoting sustainable development.

Discussion

Religious tourism in Nepal faced multiple challenges in the past, including inadequate infrastructure and a lack of a comprehensive policy framework, resulting in inconsistent promotion and regulation. There was a lack of preservation and conservation efforts at religious sites, which led to overcrowding, littering, and degradation. Political instability, natural disasters, and competition from other countries were also major problems faced by Nepalese religious tourism. A study conducted in the past highlighted the strategic importance of sustainable marketing practices for promoting the religious tourism industry in Nepal. The study indicated that a balanced approach, taking into consideration the three pillars of economic, social, and environmental sustainability, was essential for the long-term growth and development of the industry (Niedziółka, 2014).

The results of this research provided clear evidence of the significant impact that sustainable marketing strategies have on the promotion of religious tourism (Maxim, 2013). The findings showed the importance of developing a strategic approach that balances economic, social, and environmental considerations to support the growth and development of the industry while preserving cultural heritage (Rasoolimanesh & Jaafar, 2017). These findings have important implications for the religious tourism industry in Nepal and can inform future research and policy-making in this area.

The results further indicated that the strategic imperatives of sustainable marketing of religious tourism are necessary to promote the industry in Nepal. Likewise, economic initiatives such as the development of new tourism products and services and the creation of jobs can drive economic growth and contribute to development (Sheldon, 2022). Likewise, social initiatives such as community engagement and the promotion of cultural sensitivity can foster cultural preservation and enhance the tourist experience (Sharma et al., 2018). Additionally, environmental initiatives such as responsible waste management and the promotion of sustainable tourism practices can protect the environment and ensure the long-term sustainability of the industry (Yfantidou & Matarazzo, 2017).

Sustainable marketing strategies for the promotion of religious tourism must balance the economic needs of the industry with the well-being of local communities and the environment (Niedziółka, 2014). This can be achieved through eco-friendly practices, cultural sensitivity, responsible business practices, and a focus on the quality of the tourist experience. By doing so, religious tourism can continue to grow and thrive, while also contributing to sustainable development and preserving cultural heritage for future generations.

Conclusion

The government should take crucial steps to promote sustainable religious tourism. This includes developing and implementing sustainable tourism plans that encourage responsible practices and providing incentives and disincentives for sustainable behaviour. Funding and encouraging research into sustainable tourism practices is also recommended, as well as monitoring and evaluating the impact of religious tourism and taking corrective action if necessary. Likewise, coordination with stakeholders and all levels of government is suggested to further promote sustainable religious tourism.

Furthermore, stakeholders such as tourism entrepreneurs, travel agencies, and religious site management must develop a comprehensive marketing strategy that employs both traditional and digital tactics to promote religious tourism. In addition, the sufficient level of accommodation options should reflect the culture and history of the area, with a range of authentic choices like guesthouses, monasteries, and other religious-themed accommodations. Additionally, a compelling narrative showcasing the area's history, culture, and spiritual significance should be developed, along with cultural activities such as guided tours, workshops, and high-quality photography and videography.

Future research on sustainable marketing for religious tourism in Nepal should focus on developing a clear and comprehensive policy framework to overcome the current challenges, with an emphasis on creating a competitive and sustainable industry that benefits local communities and the environment. Likewise, future researchers should consider using mixed-method research to gather both quantitative and qualitative data, including surveys, interviews, and observation. Moreover, they should also involve stakeholders from different sectors and local communities to get a holistic understanding of the challenges and opportunities of the industry.

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