



**Jahan Ul Mulk<sup>1</sup>, Murad Ali<sup>2</sup>, Zakir Hussain<sup>3</sup>, Farman Ali<sup>4</sup> and Umar Daraz<sup>5</sup>**

1. Lecturer, Department of Sociology, Riphah International College, Swat, Pakistan.

Email: [jahansocial@gmail.com](mailto:jahansocial@gmail.com)

2. PhD Scholar, Department of Development Studies, COMSATS University, Islamabad, Abbottabad Campus, Pakistan. Email: [murad.yousafzai81@gmail.com](mailto:murad.yousafzai81@gmail.com)

3. Lecturer, Department of Social Work, University of Malakand, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan.

Email: [zakir.hussain@uom.edu.pk](mailto:zakir.hussain@uom.edu.pk)

4. Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work, University of Malakand, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan.

Email: [aleefarman@gmail.com](mailto:aleefarman@gmail.com)

5. Lecturer, Department of Sociology, University of Malakand, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan.

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#### Corresponding Author:

**Dr. Umar Daraz**

Email: [dr.umar@uom.edu.pk](mailto:dr.umar@uom.edu.pk)

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**Abstract:** The global economies were severely disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic with the tourism and hospitality sectors being the hardest hit. The pandemic hit Pakistan, especially Swat, a region dependent on tourism, hard, causing major economic losses, business closures and unemployment. The transport sector was further compounded by changes in consumer behavior. The research examined the operational hurdles of transportation services in tourism and employment shift and consumption behavior change during and after the COVID-19 pandemic in Swat's hospitality industry. In this study, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) of 60 transport owners, managers and employees were used as qualitative research methods. Data collected was analyzed by using the Braun and Clarke six-step model of Thematic Analysis to extract important themes from the information. Findings showed that the extinction of tourism resulted from the pandemic in terms of less customer flow and huge economic losses to businesses. Through widespread layoffs and job insecurity, many establishments temporarily shut down or operated at minimal capacity. Consumers shifted their behavior toward a health-conscious approach. These rapid changes were beyond the capacity of the transport sector-related tourism to adapt to, adding to economic hardships. Swat's transport sector was deeply affected by COVID-19, which disrupted businesses, jobs and consumers. The sector will recover through its capacity to transform its services into modern consumer requirements and integration with modern technology. Monetary aid programs and training initiatives along with financial motivation towards digital transformation are needed in the recovery process. Building tourism resilience should be promoted by implementing domestic tourism with various offerings and emergency funds for tourism. When the hospitality and transportation sectors in Swat engage in public-private partnership and local community involvement, they will facilitate sustainable equitable development in the hospitality and transportation sectors.

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, which started showing up in December 2019 in Wuhan, China, spread rapidly both geographically and on people's spread sheets to become a crisis that touches the whole world. The pandemic became a declared public health emergency by the World Health Organization (WHO) early in 2020, and triggered unprecedented challenges throughout the world (Stojkoski & Tevdovski, 2020). However, imposition of lockdowns, grounding of flights and closure of tourist sites affected these key sectors including tourism, hospitality and transport. This was a time of dramatic downturn for the global tourism industry, which accounts for about 10 percent of the world's GDP, losing more than USD 820 billion around the world. In 2020, the sector's contribution to the global GDP was 53.8% down according to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) and 62 million jobs were lost. Social distancing mandates resulting in the suspension of tourism industry, have caused severe disruption in transport, which is an integral component of this ecosystem, as many businesses had to shut down, or work on a minimal scale (Moghadas, Fitzpatrick, Pandey, Shoukat, & Galvani, 2020).

The research findings of the study of Burhan et al. (2021) shows that the ripple effect of the pandemic was severe in developing countries like Pakistan where certain industries heavily depend on developed nations for resources like technology and medicine. In 2019, the national GDP was 5.9 percent from tourism activities in Pakistan before international and domestic travel restrictions severely hit the economy. Disaster caused the beautiful landscapes and cultural heritage sites of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province to suffer greatly. Estimates of loss to the aviation industry and tourism related businesses ranged between \$20 billion and displacement of over 260,000 formal jobs. Famous as 'Switzerland of Pakistan,' Swat Valley was not an exception, bringing down the sharp decline in the tourist visits during the pandemic (Daraz, 2024).

The pandemic hit hard on Swat's transport, which is essential to its tourism economy. Lockdown regulations limiting people's movements, and the closure of roads along with the reduction of the numbers of visitors to Butkara, Barikot, Manglawar, and Shengardara by 90%. The business lost much revenue and had to dismiss many employees due to the pandemic's disruption. Transport, being a core part of Swat's tourism infrastructure, was operated at bare minimum capacity, crippling their capacity to survive. Financial limitations caused changes to consumer behavior and many transport businesses closed down and workforce reduced (Sanaullah, Rabbi, Khan, & Zamin, 2020).

The impacts also reached employment in Swat's tourism sector with large scale job losses and no financial support to laid off workers. Acute economic hardships were faced by employees, dependent on daily wages. Additionally, there was a shift of behavior, where there is increased preference for health and safety. When restrictions were eased, the sector's recovery was slowed down by the unwillingness of both tourists and local consumers to visit crowded places (Ali, 2020).

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the impacts of COVID-19 on transport business in Swat, particularly on consumer behavior, jobs, and the overall distraction created by the pandemic. It also highlights the issues and challenges faced by the owners and employees of the transport sector coupled with the planning for recovery in the post-pandemic scenario (Khan, Ahmad & Saeed, 2022).

## Literature Review

The COVID-19 pandemic has distracted the tourism sector considerably throughout the world, causing severe economic and social consequences. Previous studies related to the said topic have obtained experiential results that shows the effects of lockdowns and social distancing on transportation systems coupled with travel restrictions. According to Nicola et al. (2020), the influx of international tourists reduced to 73% in 2020 compared to 2019, resulting a loss of over USD 820 billion in tourism-related

businesses worldwide. Travels, hotels and restaurants sectors are directly attached with tourism and were therefore, affected the most during the pandemic. The research of SHT (2020) has highlighted the disruption in revenue generation because of the closure of transport and COVID protocols. WTTC data indicates that GDP contribution from global tourism decreased by 53.8% which led to the elimination of 62 million tourism-related jobs.

The pandemic affected tourism and its associated transportation systems with equal force in developing countries such as Pakistan even though these stories escape global attention. Khan et al. (2021) revealed the tourism sector in Pakistan produced 5.9% of GDP through 2019 before extensive travel limitations caused significant financial damage. The aviation industry and businesses related to tourism faced \$20 billion financial obstructions and severe unemployment which affected almost 260,000 people. A rapid decrease in the influx of tourists to Swat, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the consequent revenue generation caused severe economic problems for the local communities. Rukh et al. (2020) documented that the Swat Valley specifically felt the impact because it depends heavily on tourist visits. Lockdowns and decreased number of consumer resulted in business closures and a sharp increase in unemployment in the area (Daraz, 2024).

Swat is famous for its scenic views and cultural heritage, but it met with unmatched challenges during the COVID-19. The year 2020 witnessed a 90% reduction in tourist numbers visiting important historical sites of Butkara and Barikot which caused substantial economic disruption. Swat's tourism transport sector businesses suffered substantial revenue decreases that forced them to dismiss workers and shut down operations. The pandemic brought about substantial changes in consumer behavior since people remained cautious about visiting locations despite COVID-19 restrictions being lifted (Sanaullah et al., 2020).

### Research Gap

Research about the COVID-19 impact on tourism exists at global and national levels but lacks investigation into specific localized effects on smaller regions such as Swat. Though the studies of Sanaullah et al. (2020) are very helpful in understanding the tourism decline of Swat, the empirical evidence for the precise effect of the pandemic on transport is missing. The transport sector in Swat lacks research about employment dynamics alongside consumer behavioral changes and sustainability for business operations.

The intended research examines COVID-19 consequences for transport in Swat and employment fluctuations and changing transportation preferences in Swat's transportation sector during and after the pandemic. The study looks at these dimensions to understand the nuances of the challenges that Swat's transport sector faced during the pandemic. The findings also will help in the development of resilience and recovery strategies for the sector, making it prepared in future crises.

### Statement of the Problem

The global tourism industry and its accompanying segments such as transport were disrupted by the COVID 19 pandemic in a way never seen before and the consequences were devastating to businesses, employment and consumer behavior. Pakistan's tourism and transport sectors were not exempt as lockdowns, travel restrictions and health concerns affected both the domestic and international travels. Swat Valley, one of the most famous tourist places in Pakistan, was dealt a crippling blow. Swat is known for its scenic beauty, cultural heritage and historical significance; economy of the area is based on tourism related activities like transport.

The pandemic resulted in a dramatic decrease of visitors which led businesses to close completely or cut their operations to minimal levels. The decline in tourist arrivals caused extensive financial losses and

major joblessness among hospitality workers in the local sector. People altered their consumer behavior to stay away from crowded areas which resulted in severe consequences for the local transport industry. Research analyzing economic effects of COVID-19 on the transport sector of Swat is scarce even though worldwide attention focuses on pandemic economic impacts.

This research holds importance because it examines the particular effects that COVID-19 has generated for the transportation sector in Swat. By examining the financial, employment, and behavioral dimensions, the study will provide actionable insights to inform recovery strategies for businesses and policymakers. The novelty of this research stems from its localized approach, which addresses gaps in existing literature by offering a comprehensive analysis of Swat's unique challenges and opportunities. This study not only contributes to academic knowledge but also provides practical guidance for building resilience in a region heavily dependent on tourism.

### Objectives of the Study

- To measure the impacts of COVID-19 on the transport business in Swat
- To find out the impacts of COVID-19 on jobs within transport sector Swat
- To assess changes in behavior of consumers towards public transport in pre and post-COVID scenario

### Research Questions

- What were the impacts of COVID-19 on the operations and revenue of transport in Swat?
- How did the pandemic affect employment levels and workforce dynamics in Swat's transport sector?
- In what ways did consumer behavior towards public transport in Swat change during and after the pandemic?

### Methodology

#### Research Design

The research employed qualitative methods to study how Swat's hospitality sector including transport was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Qualitative research proves effective for studying human conduct and detailed experiences which makes it an appropriate method for analyzing pandemic-related behavioral and social and economic effects. The research design enabled comprehensive understanding of business and individual challenges which corresponded to the descriptive and exploratory nature of the study (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2020).

#### Study Setting

District Swat located in Pakistan serves as the research site because of its well-known attractions for tourism visitors with fantastic scenery. Tourism provides Swat with its primary economic foundation so the researchers chose this region because of its extensive economic setbacks from the COVID-19 crisis. Various transport services across Swat were included in the study to capture a comprehensive understanding of the pandemic's effects on the local transport sector.

#### Participants of the Study

Participants were individuals directly associated with the transport sector in Swat, including owners and employees. These stakeholders provided critical insights into how the pandemic affected their businesses, employment conditions, and consumer interactions.

#### Socio-Economic Profile of the Participants

The study included participants from different socio-economic backgrounds to achieve diversity. The research involved participants who operated small-scale as well as large-scale transport businesses and employed skilled and unskilled workers alongside managers who came from various economic

backgrounds. The wide range of participants allowed researchers to understand the pandemic's complete effects on all levels of the transport industry.

#### *Sampling Technique and Sample Size*

Purposive sampling was employed to deliberately select participants with direct involvement in the transport sector of Swat attached to tourism. The researcher used this technique to get responses from people who had enough professional experience as Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim (2016) stated. For the study, sixty interviews and a focus group discussion with 8 to 16 participants was conducted. The researchers used the "New Information Threshold" proposed by Guest, Namey, & Chen (2020) to determine when enough data had been collected.

#### *Tool of Data Collection*

In this study two primary data gathering tools were applied; in depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). Semi structured interview guides were used to guide the in depth interviews so as to allow for open ended discussions with the participants so that more detailed narratives were generated. This method allowed the researcher to grasp in deep the individual experience and vision of those who were engaged in Swat's transport sector. The research method involved focus group discussion in order to create group level interaction that encouraged participants to discuss their collective experiences. These research instruments combined together gave a complete understanding of the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the transport sector in Swat.

#### *Ethical Considerations*

The ethical protocols were followed strictly to protect the rights of the participants. All participants provided informed consent and were aware of the purpose of the study and had volunteered to participate. Sensitive information was maintained in confidentiality and anonymity. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without any consequences.

#### *Reliability and Validity of the Tool*

A preliminary study tested the tools to confirm their clarity as well as their consistency and their match with the research topic. Adjustments were made to refine the interview guide and FGD structure. Triangulation was employed by comparing insights from interviews and FGD to enhance the reliability and validity of the findings.

#### *Data Analysis*

The researchers utilized Thematic Analysis for their data analysis because it helps identify patterns and themes within qualitative data. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2012) six-step model starting from data familiarization through initial code generation to theme searching followed by review and definition before the report writing stage. The researchers used this methodical process to analyze the data which produced relevant findings.

#### *Limitations and Their Mitigation*

The research study had multiple restrictions because it used qualitative methods combined with a Swat focus that might not demonstrate nationwide patterns accurately. Additionally, participants' responses could be influenced by biases, especially given the sensitive nature of economic disruptions caused by the pandemic. The study faced multiple obstacles due to time restrictions together with limited resources when conducting data collection and analysis activities. The study's limitations were reduced by choosing a diverse research group to improve data generalizability. Throughout the research all participants received protection of their anonymity and confidentiality to ensure open and honest responses. Saturation required multiple extensive data collection periods to reach a deeper understanding of the research.

## Results

### *Theme 1: Decrease in Passengers' Number*

After the outbreak of COVID-19, the transport service of Swat was affected severely due to the prolonged lockdown. This created severe financial crisis for the people attached to the sector in Swat. Apart from lockdown, people avoid public transport due the fear of virus in congested buses.

Transport Owner-1 stated: "People opted to stay at their homes because of coronavirus transmission fears became widespread throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. People left their houses exclusively for essential needs during severe circumstances. My vehicles have left the terminal multiple times empty apart from minimal passenger occupancy. My ownership of a transport business has brought significant hardships because of public fear to travel."

Transport Owner-2 shared: "People would avoid crowded spaces like buses etc. due to fear for virus transmission and that would affect the public transport badly. Several times the transporters, including myself, would request the passengers to travel with us but they would refuse due to their phobia about enclosed and crowded spaces."

Transport Employee-1 noted: "During the COVID-19, the number of passengers in vehicles were reduced in order to observe social distancing in vehicles which was one of the main protocols. Being a driver, I was asked to reduce the number of passengers to one third in my concerned vehicle. This extremely reduced the total number of passengers per day."

### *Theme 2: Travel Restrictions due to Lockdown*

The COVID-19 pandemic has seriously impacted the transport sector of Swat. The government demonstrated immediate decisive responses to control coronavirus transmission from the start of the COVID-19 outbreak. The implemented restrictions led to a significant decrease in human travel and tourism became hesitant to engage in public activities. The owners of public transport received instructions to halt their operations leading to transportation disruptions that disrupted both routine transport and service delivery.

Transport Owner-3 noted: "The government implemented lockdown restrictions during peak pandemic times to control virus spread rates. The authorities put a total restriction on public transportation systems across District Swat. The situation resulted in financial hardship because I was forced to stop my vehicle."

Transport Owner-4 added: "Transport system interruptions led to serious economic damages. The owners and employees of transport sector together faced economic survival challenges due to reduced number of passengers because of coronavirus rules and regulations. I encountered major financial difficulties due to my transport terminal operating at non-functionality during this period."

Transport Employee-2 shared: The government-imposed lockdown aimed to contain virus transmission yet it generated severe financial problems for transport owners and their staff because their revenue decreased. Transport work gave me few opportunities to earn money and left me without employment most of the time throughout the lockdown period."

Transport Employee-3 stated: "The prolonged lockdowns resulted in the closure of transportation services throughout the region. Majority of us received unpaid time off and among those who stayed employed they needed to work fewer hours."

### *Theme 3: Financial Losses*

Public mobility faced significant operational difficulties when it had to adhere to strict COVID safety rules. The combination of safety protocols and tourist spot closures led to such substantial transport usage reduction that it caused severe financial impact on Swat's transport sector.



Transport owner-5 shared: "Reduced passenger numbers emerged from the travel limitations and lockdown measures that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. I experienced my worst career losses in transport sector history. The absence of passengers caused all these problems."

Transport employee-4 expressed: "Running a local transport operation brought its own set of challenges when implementing safety protocols during COVID-19. These efforts from the government exacerbated the economic losses of transport sector and I was ultimately compelled to stop my business services for some time."

Transport owner-6 pointed out: "Apart from the general COVID-19 SOPs, the government instructed us to keep, gaps between the timings of bus services which interrupted the normal flow of vehicle services, ultimately affecting the income of the transporters."

#### *Theme 4: Closure of services*

All regular operations and services became prohibited while stringent COVID safety measures took effect in Swat to prevent additional virus transmission. The government implemented lockdown as the only available measure to stop the rapid virus spread because it safeguarded the rest of the population from the dangerous virus. Swat faced complete or partial lockdown at the hands of the government which resulted in the closure of educational institutions and businesses and public transportation services.

A transport owner- 7 expressed: "The routine life of people experienced disruption from COVID-19 which led to the closure of markets, parks, hotels and other establishments. Transport sector is dependent upon the mobility of public, downfall in which resulted in decreased numbers of passenger. The decline in passenger traffic led to complete destruction of my business operation. I discontinued service operations for an extended period that made all my employees lose their employment."

A transport employee-5 discusses: "The tough COVID-19 regulations combined with decreased transport owner revenue made it challenging for them to maintain their staff. The company had to cut down the workforce present in their organization. The owner dismissed me after these situations and I spent several months without employment."

#### *Theme 5: Decrease in Demand of Public Transport*

Public transportation services experienced severe reduction in both passenger numbers and service frequency because people feared the virus would spread throughout the system. People decided to remain inside their homes rather than leaving their residences. The shift in consumer preferences resulted in reduced movement of tourists throughout the area and massive declines in public transportation demand. This ultimately resulted in increased unemployment in transport sector of the area.

A transport owner-8 shared: "I used to have little resting time before COVID-19 but today I spend my time waiting for travelers to arrive. People do not prefer to use public transport due the fear of virus which has decreased the demand of public transport significantly. This has resulted in the closure of several public transport services which has negative effects on the employment."

The transport employee-6 expressed: "The decline in tourism at Swat's scenic areas led to transportation service shutdowns. Transport vehicles I operate had to modify their schedules or cut routes because of decreased customer numbers. The demand for public transportation continues to decrease. This uncertain situation raised the unemployment among drivers, cleaners and other staff."

#### *Theme 6: Social Distancing*

The transportation sector of Swat changed a lot during the COVID-19 pandemic, due to health and safety measures. All transporters and passengers needed to follow mandatory mask requirements while

maintaining social distance and using sanitizers. The requirement for social distancing on public transport led to reduced capacity limits which caused bus operators to modify their schedules while serving fewer passengers.

A transport owner-9 shared: “The government introduced smart lockdown after COVID-19 cases decreased slightly. Transport owners received permission to operate services after following guidelines which included vehicle sanitization and frequent cleaning and passenger capacity limitations.”

An employee-7 of transport sector expressed: The government established health and safety protocols that involved enhanced cleaning practices, sanitizer and face mask usage and passenger caps. I have personally followed these protocols while using the mentioned objects. The safety measures implemented to control virus transmission caused passenger numbers to drop because most people found these procedures bothersome.

#### *Theme 7: Avoiding public transport by Passengers*

Transportation services faced severe disruptions after COVID-19 began spreading in Swat because transport operators suffered financially. Public transport became a source of worry for people because of the risk it posed to their proximity with others.

A transport employee-8 expressed: “Public transportation faced severe disruptions because people chose to stay away from crowded spaces such as buses because of their virus transmission concerns. The drivers together with myself repeatedly asked passengers to ride with us yet they refused public transportation because they considered it unsafe.”

The transport owner-10 noted: “Due to coronavirus fear, individuals chose to remain indoors throughout the time of COVID-19. People left their homes only when facing critical requirements. The departure of my vehicle from the terminal has occurred multiple times with only a reduced number of travelers on board. Many people today experience phobic reactions to travel so they avoid bus and train systems.”

#### *Theme 8: Health and Safety Measures*

The COVID-19 pandemic caused major transformations in the transportation sector of Swat through mandatory health protocols. The transport operators and passengers had to follow mask-wearing protocols and maintain social distancing practices along with using sanitizers. The limited capacity of public transport required people to keep enough distance leading to reduced ridership and altered public schedules.

A transport owner-11 shared: “When the cases of COVID-19 reduced, the government gave a bit relaxation in lockdown which was termed smart lockdown. The transport operators, including me, obtained permission from the government to restart services by complying with sanitization procedures along with reduced passenger limitations. These measures created extreme business challenges which resulted in complete financial loss for us.”

An employee-9 of transport sector expressed: “The government established various health and safety measures which included intensified cleaning practices together with sanitizer utilization and mask requirements and passenger density controls. I personally used all procedures as well as objects mentioned in these safety protocols. The safety measures implemented to control viral spread negatively affected passenger numbers since most people viewed them as cumbersome.”

### **Discussion**

The findings revealed a significant decrease in tourists’ influx in Swat during and after the pandemic directly affected the business of transport. Travel restrictions together with health concerns and fear of



the virus became the main factors behind this decline. Participants highlighted the sharp reduction in visitors, which led to financial crises for transporters. They shared that the fear of pandemic and travel restrictions imposed by the government drastically reduced the number of tourists, which aligns with global trends reported by Gössling et al. (2021), who observed a worldwide decrease mobility. Sigala (2020) analyzed the negative effect that reduced international and domestic travel during COVID-19 had on tourism-dependent economies especially in transport. This research contributes localized information about Swat's tourism sector by showing how domestic tourism primarily supported small transport businesses which suffered disproportionately when tourism declined. The study makes a unique contribution through localized analysis of how pandemic barriers negatively affect regions which depend on domestic seasonal tourism.

The government imposed complete lockdown restrictions in Swat as the COVID-19 outbreak peaked in order to control viral transmission. This strategy focused on banning public transportation because it functioned as a primary channel through which the disease spread. The participants reported that bus and van transportation was outlawed because these vehicles served as shared modes of transport which prevented people from traveling for work purposes. The lockdown prevented people from reaching their essential services in addition to blocking their access to basic daily requirements. The results reported by Ali (2021) match those found in this research. The participants agreed public health protection was the official reason behind the ban yet economic problems particularly affecting Swat's transport sector emerged as a result.

Similarly, the research of Khan et al. (2021) state that during the lockdown, buses, vans and taxis were forced to stop their services to control the spread of the virus. This resulted in a big drop in the number of passengers including tourists in Swat. The suspension of transportation created extensive damage to both personal daily routines and the transport industry financial stability. The economic challenges became worse because the main local economy depends heavily on tourism activities.

The strict COVID protocols decreased the number of passengers in public transport services. According to the participants, decreased public transit ridership led to financial collapse of public transit agencies. Both restricted travel and lockdowns decreased the number of passengers thus causing financial damage to service providers. The research conducted by Shortall (2022) has the same findings. It reveals that substantial revenue losses were incurred by transportation companies because of reduced passenger numbers. Tourist numbers disappeared completely which caused all transit vehicles to stop running and transport businesses faced severe financial difficulties.

Both the COVID protocols and decrease in vehicle movement had far reaching affects. The transport owners were so affect4d financially that they had to shrink their services which left them bankrupt. The disruptions affect passengers through delayed trips while causing them to lose money from non-refundable tickets and disrupted travel arrangements. The findings of Ali et al. (2021) confirm that transportation operations adapted their strategies while implementing new safety protocols and possibly readjusting pricing models because of decreased passenger volumes. All such steps created financial crisis, not only for passengers, but for the transport owners as well.

Swat alongside various other regions throughout Pakistan suspended their regular operational activities and services to restrict human movement thus minimizing disease transmission. The implementation of lockdown represents the sole method to manage disease transmission. Therefore, the government announced lockdown in Swat in which educational institutes, offices, markets and public transport were stopped. According to the participants, a very serious disruption in daily activities and services was caused due to the pandemic. The implementation of lockdowns and related restrictions intended to

reduce the coronavirus spread through mobility restrictions resulted in severe damage to the local tourism industry. According to Amiri et al. (2020) the disappearance of tourism in Swat led to massive employment losses across the sector while the transport industry suffered most due to its dependency on tourism employment.

Majority of the people associated with transport were illiterate and could not cope with the changing market situations. The employment sector was severely affected and those who have enjoyed key roles in transport sector were deprived of their statuses and forced to underemployment. A sudden decline in public transit ridership occurred during the pandemic according to Munawar et al. (2021), because people avoided close quarters and selected alternative methods of travel or conducted their work remotely. The revenue decreases forced transit agencies to downsize their operations while large numbers of employees lost their jobs.

The public stayed indoors to fulfill health directives as well as lockdown measures which intended to decelerate virus transmission. History showed that public transit systems had never experienced this level of reduction in passenger numbers. This sudden extreme transformation produced extensive effects on the mobility of tourists together with the economic stability of transit services. The transit agencies suffered substantial fare revenue reduction alongside an obligation to decrease their workforce.

People started avoiding crowded buses during daily commutes because of health and safety fears so they began using their personal transportation. Nicola et al. (2020) in their research studies show that the pandemic triggered people to reconsider their traditional commuting patterns. Consumers evolved their behaviors leading to considerable decreases in public transport usage. People prefer their own vehicles over public transit system which is a point of concern for the employers. Apart from affecting the employers, the low demand of public transport has affected the employees as well. Majority of the staff of transport sector remained jobless due to its less income for employers.

Tourism-dependent local economies together with businesses and communities faced worse consequences from the COVID-19 crisis. Use and demand of transport reached the minimum level. Transporters, tour agents and operators were all in intense financial strain. Transport establishments were forced to observe social distancing in order to discourage making crowds in vehicles. Weaver (2020) conducted research which produced identical findings. The district administrative restrictions combined with COVID-19 safety protocols caused people to develop alternative lifestyle patterns. The public needed to understand that supporting government restrictions against crowds and unnecessary outings represented the only viable protection against COVID-19 during the pandemic duration.

When COVID-19 broke out in Swat, the government banned all kind of gatherings of people. Therefore, people would not go for picnic or outing. Governments introduced COVID protocols such as lockdowns and social distancing in order to curb the spread of the virus. Moreover, tourist destinations were shut down in unprecedented fashion due to health concerns during the pandemic. The implemented measures produced adverse effects on transportation operations in Swat. Similar findings are seen in the study of Lee et al. (2021). The study notes that the purpose of COVID protocols were to prevent the spread of virus but it affected the services of transport sector.

The transportation industry of Swat implemented comprehensive pandemic safety measures throughout COVID-19. The transportation industry of Swat implemented comprehensive pandemic safety measures throughout COVID-19. Wearing masks alongside increased spacing between passengers as well as enhanced cleaning protocols represented the strict standards that ensured the protection of passengers and staff. Such changes were not welcomed by people and they started preferring personal

vehicles, cycling or walking. In some cases they took such steps to avoid crowded spaces. The COVID-19 period brought about changes in people's perception as demonstrated through research conducted by Ali (2020).

Staff members and passengers at transport companies underwent health screenings while hygiene measures and social distance requirements were implemented. The monitoring and control of virus spread through temperature checks and contactless payments and health passes with digital certificates have become standard procedures. Alalwan et al. (2020) says that the transporters took the necessary procedures for staff members and passengers. These requirements consisted mainly of personal hygiene measures, as well as environmental hygiene protocols. Because of the safety measures implemented to prevent the spread of COVID-19, passengers who would usually avoid public transportation systems had to bear an additional burden.

### Conclusion

COVID-19 has had great impacts on the transport sector in Swat, Pakistan, in terms of business operations and job levels. The pandemic brought tourism down with a major downfall as travel restrictions and health concerns as well as virus related anxieties made people stay away from the place. Decreased business occupancy rates and reduced customer traffic resulted in major financial damage to many businesses due to the pandemic. Essential tourist locations were shut down, public gatherings restricted, and tourism conditions deteriorated even more because transport companies suspended their operations, or drastically reduced the services they were providing. This caused some establishments to come to a complete halt for operations which contributed to further financial struggles.

The sector was hit hard financially and financial losses were widespread as business owners adjusted prices, cut costs, or even close temporarily due to reduced demand both from within the country and from international customers. The economic crisis became so severe that many businesses had to make permanent closures and their employees were laid off and had to take salary cuts. With revenue decline, employers dismissed employees or cut salaries or reduced work hours. This led to job insecurity as a major problem for workers. In the uncertain environment, employees had doubts about their ability to return to their previous employment after the pandemic.

In addition, consumer behavior during the pandemic changed considerably. Health and safety became a key focus and customers were willing to travel on public transport by focusing on cleanliness and hygiene rather than other factors. Due to COVID-19, the transport industry in Swat faced major obstacles such as decreased tourism activity alongside financial problems and rising joblessness and changes in the customer buying patterns. For business success in this sector, it will be important to adapt to new changes and rebuild consumer confidence as well as use modern technology systems.

### Policy Implications

The study's finding underscores that a comprehensive policy measures are need to support the transport sector of Swat to mitigate the impact of crises such as COVID. The most important financial support mechanisms that enable businesses to get back on their feet are subsidized loans, grants and temporary tax relief. These measures will help to take some of the burden away from transport owners so that they can continue to operate their businesses in times of economic downturn. Additionally, such tax incentives will prove beneficial to businesses investing in the manufacture of products that align with consumers' changing expectations.

In order to deal with the high unemployment and insecurity of jobs caused by the pandemic, the

government should develop social safety nets (such as unemployment benefits) especially for informal and seasonal workers in the tourism sector. There are skill development programs focused on the tourism industry that are digital literacy, hygiene management, and customer service programs that train workers with the necessary skills to adapt to changing market demands and reemployment.

The other important policy implication is to promote digital transformation in the transport sector. The public financial incentives for the adoption of digital technologies such as online booking and contactless payments make companies more resilient. Improving digital infrastructure can be used as mean of investing in digital infrastructure for the betterment of your business facilities. Initiatives to implement certification programs on compliance in health and safety will also help to restore trust in the sector among the consumers.

Eco-tourism with other cultural tourist attractions should be promoted by tourism organizations because such activities will cut on foreign guest dependency and bring in new numerous sources of income. The diversification could be sustained through financial incentives, and training programs to local businesses. Stabilizing the sector can also be promoted by reducing dependency on international travels through targeted campaigns for promoting domestic tourism.

Tourism specific emergency funds and crisis management frameworks designed to deal with tourism are what paves the way for the immediate response to future crises. To ensure long-term sustainability of the tourism and transport industries, such frameworks ought to include region specific teams which are designed to address issues like health emergencies and natural disasters. Next, public-private partnerships and involving local communities in tourism planning can foster a collaborative governance model of tourism planning to enhance inclusive resilience and improve tourism's tolerance to other forms of tourism.

#### **Limitations and Future Directions**

A major limitation of this study is that the qualitative data collected through interviews is used. Despite its rich and detailed narratives, this approach may not generalize to a larger population as its validity is based on its explanation of certain individuals. To address this in the future, future researchers can use mixed methods approach which combines qualitative insights with quantitative data from larger sample size to provide a more comprehensive picture of the issues.

The study is limited to a single geographic region, Swat. However, the narrow scope may not fully represent the diversity of impacts experienced by transport sector in other parts of Pakistan as well as in other parts of the world. A future research could take a comparative stance by comparing impacts in other tourism dependent regions in order to determine common challenges and their uniqueness.

Due to the cross sectional design, the study is unable to determine the long term effects of the pandemic on the transport sector. This longitudinal study would also enable future researchers to track recovery trends and then understand the sustainability policy interventions.

This study focuses mainly on the perspectives of transport owners and employees but does not investigate consumer behavior beyond immediate changes. The next step of research should be towards understanding of profound changes in consumers' preferences and behaviors in the long term, particularly for the business model and marketing strategy.

The study ends here with immediate effects of the pandemic without examining broadly the role of systemic factors like government policy effectiveness or community resilience to tackling these impacts. Future researchers might then focus on how government intervention and community support networks impact that capability across the sector for recovery from crisis.

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