

The role of tourism in social integration in Afghanistan

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Abstract

The main aim of this research has been to sociologically examine the role of tourism in promoting social convergence in Afghanistan. The study is practical in terms of its goals and expected outcomes, resorting to a survey method with a descriptive-explanatory approach. The research population consists of social media users and a sample size of 384 individuals has been selected by having a Morgan's table as a basis, adhering to two criteria: a) participants must have taken a minimum of two tourism trips; and b) be at least 18 years old. Both accessible and random sampling methods were used. Data collection took place through a researcher-designed questionnaire, whose validity and reliability were confirmed by means of a Likert scale. The analysis was performed using the software SPSS, version 26. Descriptive findings have revealed that the average scores for social convergence, except for the dimensions of trust and perceived deprivation, were above the midpoint and positive point. Also, variables such as gender, marital status, ethnicity, and number of tourism trips showed a significant relationship with social integration. A positive and significant correlation was found between social integration and its dimensions with tourism. Stepwise regression analysis further indicated the significance of the model, with the variable tourism explaining approximately 19% of the variance in the dependent variable's dimensions. Overall, the research concludes that tourism can play a vital role in enhancing social cohesion, both directly and indirectly. Therefore, it is key to implement appropriate policies in this area.

Key words tourism; social integration; policy-making; Afghanistan.

O papel do turismo na integração social no Afeganistão

Resumo

O principal objetivo desta pesquisa é examinar sociologicamente o papel do turismo na promoção da convergência social no Afeganistão. O estudo é prático em termos de seus objetivos e resultados esperados, adotando um método de pesquisa com abordagem descritivo-explicativa. A população da pesquisa consiste em usuários de mídia social e um tamanho de amostra de 384 indivíduos foi selecionado com base em uma tabela de Morgan, aderindo a dois critérios: a) os participantes devem ter feito no mínimo duas viagens de turismo; e b) ter pelo menos 18 anos de idade. Foram usados métodos tanto de amostragem acessível quanto aleatória. Os dados foram coletados por meio de um questionário elaborado por pesquisadores, cuja validade e confiabilidade foram confirmadas recorrendo a uma escala Likert. A análise foi realizada com uso do software SPSS, versão 26. Os achados descritivos revelaram que os escores médios para convergência social, exceto para as dimensões de confiança e privação percebida, estavam acima do ponto médio e positivos. Além disso, variáveis como gênero, estado civil, etnia e número de viagens turísticas apresentaram relação significativa com a integração social. Encontrou-se correlação positiva e significativa entre a integração social e suas dimensões com o turismo. A análise de regressão passo a passo indicou, ainda, a significância do modelo, com a variável turismo explicando cerca de 19% da variância nas dimensões da variável dependente. No geral, a pesquisa conclui que o turismo pode ter um papel crucial no aumento da coesão social, direta e indiretamente. Por conseguinte, é essencial implementar políticas adequadas nessa área.

Palavras-chave turismo; integração social; formulação de políticas; Afeganistão.

El papel del turismo en la integración social en Afganistán

Resumen

El objetivo principal de esta investigación ha sido examinar sociológicamente el papel del turismo en la promoción de la convergencia social en Afganistán. El estudio es práctico en cuanto a sus objetivos y resultados esperados, recurriendo a un método de encuesta con un enfoque descriptivo-explicativo. La población de investigación está constituida por usuarios de redes sociales y se seleccionó un tamaño de muestra de 384 individuos con base en una tabla de Morgan, atendiendo a dos criterios: a) los participantes debían haber realizado al menos dos viajes turísticos; y b) tener al menos 18 años. Se utilizaron métodos de muestreo tanto accesibles como aleatorios. Los datos fueron recolectados mediante un cuestionario elaborado por investigadores, cuya validez y confiabilidad fueron confirmadas mediante una escala Likert. El análisis se realizó con el software SPSS, versión 26. Hallazgos descriptivos revelaron que los puntajes medios de convergencia social, excepto para las dimensiones de confianza y privación percibida, estaban por encima de los puntos medio y positivo. Además, variables como género, estado civil, etnia y número de viajes turísticos mostraron una relación significativa con integración social. Se encontró una correlación positiva y significativa entre la integración social y sus dimensiones con el turismo. El análisis de regresión paso a paso también indicó la significancia del modelo, con la variable turismo explicando aproximadamente el 19% de la varianza en las dimensiones de la variable dependiente. En general, la investigación concluye que el turismo puede desempeñar un papel crucial en el aumento de la cohesión social, tanto directa como indirectamente. Por lo tanto, es esencial implementar políticas adecuadas en esta área.

Palabras clave turismo; integración social; formulación de políticas; Afganistán.

Le rôle du tourisme dans l'intégration sociale en Afghanistan

Résumé

L'objectif principal de cette recherche a été d'examiner sociologiquement le rôle du tourisme dans la promotion de la convergence sociale en Afghanistan. L'étude est pratique en termes d'objectifs et de résultats attendus, en utilisant une méthode d'enquête avec une approche descriptive-explicative. La population de recherche est composée d'utilisateurs de médias sociaux et un échantillon de 384 individus a été sélectionné sur la base d'un tableau de Morgan, en tenant compte de deux critères: a) les participants doivent avoir effectué au moins deux voyages touristiques; et b) être âgé d'au moins 18 ans. Des méthodes d'échantillonnage accessibles et aléatoires ont été utilisées. Les données ont été collectées à l'aide d'un questionnaire développé par des chercheurs, dont la validité et la fiabilité ont été confirmées à l'aide d'une échelle de Likert. L'analyse a été réalisée à l'aide du logiciel SPSS, version 26. Les résultats descriptifs ont révélé que les scores moyens de convergence sociale, à l'exception des dimensions de confiance et de privation perçue, étaient supérieurs au point médian et au point positif. De plus, des variables telles que le genre, l'état matrimonial, l'origine ethnique et le nombre de voyages touristiques ont montré une relation significative avec l'intégration sociale. Une corrélation positive et significative a été trouvée entre l'intégration sociale et ses dimensions avec le tourisme. L'analyse de régression par étapes a également indiqué la signification du modèle, la variable tourisme expliquant environ 19 % de la variance dans les dimensions de la variable dépendante. Globalement, l'étude conclut que le tourisme peut jouer un rôle essentiel dans le renforcement de la cohésion sociale, directement et indirectement. Il est donc essentiel de mettre en œuvre des politiques appropriées dans ce domaine.

Mots-clés Itourisme; intégration sociale; formulation des politiques; Afghanistan.

Introduction and statement of the problem

Social integration stems from the beliefs and ideals formed among all members of a society, manifesting in social behaviors. Factors such as cultural, linguistic, and religious solidarity, spiritual and historical heritage, and shared economic interests contribute to social harmony and convergence. These factors may strengthen or weaken depending on the events occurring in society. As a result, the cohesion of society and the maintenance of stability and integration have been key concerns for scholars, especially in the social sciences. Many discussions and theories have arisen regarding this topic (Bagheri et al., 2022). However, Jean Gottman believes that individualism and pride in life's specific manifestations are inherent characteristics of every human group. Each country has its religious beliefs, social views, and special memories that form its identity. In his view, national identity serves as the foundation of a country's unity and cohesion. He emphasizes the importance of national identity and spirit because they provide the foundation for social cohesion and unity (Jan Parwar, 2010). Convergence, therefore, is understood through dimensions such as social cohesion, social solidarity, social participation, social trust, social connection, and social exchange – concepts that are crucial for forming national identity and nation-building processes (Mowij & Beniflah, 2017).

Conversely, convergence and social unity are often challenged in societies with ethnic structures and numerous subcultures. Ethnic structures tend to act as divergent forces, promoting division rather than unity. Each divergent force seeks to achieve its goals, often opposing converging forces. However, at the local and cultural levels, these forces may foster internal cohesion, even though they may intensify divergences between ethnic groups on a national scale (Jan Parwar, 2010). Ethnic identity, especially in multi-ethnic countries, remains a significant social issue, and its importance is even greater in underdeveloped countries. Integrating ethnic groups is essential for national security and social stability, as cooperation and unity can help protect collective interests. Achieving this requires political and social will, culture-building, and unified action. Social media plays a critical role in this process by leveraging its unique influence (Shirazah Mohabbat et al., 2022).

Afghanistan, due to external interventions, state-nation-building failures, and its ethnic-racial structure, has faced persistent challenges to social integration throughout its modern history. The relations between its ethnic and social groups have frequently been problematic (Iman et al., 2018). While social integration faces obstacles and threats, it also benefits from incentives and facilitating factors. Given the necessity of social integration in Afghanistan, identifying and strengthening these factors is critical. Tourism and the tourism industry are among the most effective facilitators of integration.

Through tourism, social interactions increase, fostering mutual recognition and understanding of the cultures and values of both tourists and hosts. Tourism also promotes

social participation and trust, leading to greater social cohesion and solidarity across diverse groups due to cultural interactions (Harrigan et al., 2017).

Thus, developing tourism into a well-organized industry not only fosters cultural growth but also supports the expansion of industries like marketing and transportation services. Tourism reduces conflict and stimulates innovation and prosperity. It helps people better understand different cultures and fosters cultural exchange. This can lead to changes in language, clothing, and culture while mitigating social anomalies and influencing both material and non-material aspects of local culture (Shamai, 2007). Considering the active and potential areas of divergence and convergence in Afghanistan, this research aims to identify the role of tourism in promoting social integration.

The main question of this research is:

- What impact does tourism have on social integration processes in Afghanistan?

Background of the study

In their research, Safai et al. (2021) examined the factors influencing ethnic integration among various ethnic groups living in Ahvaz. They concluded that cultural capital, consisting of cognitive capital and normative interactions, significantly affects ethnic integration in the city. Iman et al. (2018) explored social integration in Afghanistan, focusing on adults aged 20 to 50 years in Kabul, selected from four major ethnic groups: Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, and Uzbek.

The results of their study indicate that the absence of relative deprivation, along with increased social participation, social belonging, and social trust between different ethnic groups, can foster interactions and social connections. This, in turn, promotes the social integration of ethnic groups and prevents ethnic divergence in Afghanistan's political and social structures. Karimipoor et al. (2016) investigated the role of tourism in fostering political convergence between Iran and Azerbaijan. The study sought to determine whether territorial proximity, historical ties, and shared interests between these two political units could play a crucial role in regional tourism-related geopolitical developments.

The findings reveal that economic and commercial aspects of tourism-scoring 4.05 and 4.02, respectively – have the greatest impact on convergence between the two countries. Fazli et al. (2013) explored the concept of tourism diplomacy and its role in regional convergence. The authors argue that tourism contributes to peace, friendship, security, interaction, and cooperation among Persian Gulf countries. It enhances economic prosperity, neutralizes negative foreign publicity, and strengthens the position of governments in achieving these objectives. As traditional borders fade, new boundaries are forming in emotional and mental spaces. In addition to official, public, economic, and commercial diplomacy, a new form – tourism diplomacy – has emerged. Tourism, in

conjunction with public diplomacy, can become a tool for fostering economic, social, and political convergence between nations.

Basiri et al. (2012) argue that the tourism industry significantly influences cultural development at national, regional, and international levels. It contributes to peace and stability, increases scientific exchanges, promotes economic and social growth, and enhances unity among societies. Tourism, as a means of cultural diplomacy, fosters interactions between cultures. It creates an environment where peace among nations is achievable, while preserving and honoring cultural identities. Mowij and Beniflah (2017) examined the intercultural differences among ethnic groups in the United States, focusing on the convergence or divergence of cultural values. They found that the degree of cultural convergence among ethnic groups depends on mutual recognition and interaction. Rudez and Vodeb (2015) highlighted that increased social capital, through interactions and exchanges between groups, strengthens social cohesion.

Midtbøen (2015) studied citizenship, cohesion, and efforts to achieve social solidarity among ethnic groups in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. The study concluded that citizenship laws and principles play a crucial role in fostering social integration and cohesion in multi-ethnic countries. Cheshire et al. (2013) found that tourism, normative interactions, and the recognition of other groups contribute to improved relationships and social cohesion.

The summary and conclusion of these studies indicate three key points: First, no scientific research has been conducted on the relationship between tourism and social convergence in Afghanistan, making this study unique and original. Second, previous research on the socio-cultural structures of Afghan society highlights active and potential areas of social divergence and ethnic division, which necessitate further exploration to enhance social convergence. This research aims to examine the relationship between tourism and social convergence, representing one of its innovative aspects. Third, all studies that have investigated the role of tourism and social interactions in fostering unity between ethnic and cultural groups confirm that tourism has the potential to bring diverse social and ethnic groups together, promoting social integration.

Fundamentals and theoretical framework

Tourism, cultural interactions, and social integration

Culture is the social heritage passed down from the past that influences present and future human behavior. Ruth Benedict, one of the early anthropologists, believed that every society nurtures its own unique personality. She argued that each society unconsciously selects certain characteristics from the broader spectrum of human potential as cultural

ideals, and its members gradually internalize these ideals. As a result of this unconscious selection, commonalities in thinking and behavior emerge, creating a distinctive group personality for each society (Halbmayer, 2001). These patterns, values, and habits shape people's behavior and social actions, fostering an in-group versus out-group mentality. These mentalities often lead individuals to view their own cultural-ethnic group as superior to others.

As Margaret Mead emphasizes, the process of cultural transmission, dissemination, and the socialization of people outside their ethnic culture is essential to overcoming these mindsets, which are the root causes of cultural-ethnic division. She believed that the way this transmission occurs significantly shapes individual personalities (Halbmayer, 2001). In today's globalized world, tourism has become one of the key avenues for cultural exchange, understanding, and social interaction between tourists and host communities across different cultures. Through this process, cultural recognition and socialization in diverse environments help break down prejudices and value judgments, ultimately fostering convergence and social unity.

Park similarly argued that the lack of intercultural contact between different groups can fuel ethnic conflict and prejudice. He suggested that ethnic groups can resolve conflicts through adaptation, interaction, and restructuring the power dynamics between dominant and subordinate groups. While adaptation is often a temporary and unstable arrangement, it is through the final stage of assimilation that group tensions are fully resolved (Beck, 2008).

Ibn Khaldoun also paid particular attention to the role of prejudice and "nervousness" in shaping civilization and culture, especially when considering social transformations and their influencing factors. He observed that groups threatened by foreign tribes tend to develop intense prejudices toward outsiders, which fosters a strong sense of responsibility toward their in-group members. This in-group cohesion, spurred by external threats, can empower elites within these societies (Sediq Sarostani, 2006). His theory underscores how a lack of interaction and cultural recognition, coupled with a fear of invasion, can fuel ethnic tensions. However, as the tourism industry expands, fear of aggression can be replaced with acceptance driven by the potential for profit.

Tourism and increasing social connections and belonging

Social belonging refers to an individual's sensitivity to the opinions of others and their desire for approval from like-minded people. Those who care about the welfare and feelings of others often act responsibly toward them. In other words, social belonging manifests as a sense of obligation and connection to society (Robertson, 1993). Additionally, individuals who have invested in their education, career, home, or other assets have a vested interest

in maintaining harmony with society to protect their achievements. For a society to be sustainable and stable, it requires a certain level of social belonging from its members.

This sense of belonging is influenced by various factors, depending on the history and social structures of each society. According to Denis Mac Quails's (1987) theory of mass communication, anything that reduces social isolation and strengthens a sense of commonality among individuals enhances social belonging. When the identity of the community takes precedence over other identities, public commitment and social belonging are reinforced. Tourism, by creating opportunities for individuals to come out of social isolation and experience shared emotions, can significantly contribute to social cohesion. Tourism also promotes ethnic convergence and strengthens social bonds within a community (Goljan, 2013).

Tourism and the reduction of relative deprivation

The theory of relative deprivation posits that individuals who feel deprived due to their economic or racial status may eventually develop feelings of injustice and dissatisfaction. When a society fosters social inequality and blocks legitimate means for advancement, individuals experiencing deprivation may resort to aggression and hostility, which can lead to violence and crime. This theory emphasizes the gap between value expectations (what people believe they deserve) and value capabilities (what they believe they can attain). Individuals compare their situation with others, and if they perceive injustice, they may develop a negative attitude toward the system (Taheri, 2008).

In Afghanistan, feelings of relative deprivation are common among different ethnic and social groups, with each group often blaming others for their perceived disadvantages (Iman et al., 2018). Much of this stems from a lack of interaction and understanding between groups. For instance, the people of Bamiyan may feel more deprived compared to those in Khost or Logar. However, increased interaction and recognition between these groups, facilitated through tourism, can reduce these feelings of deprivation by revealing the unique challenges faced by different communities.

Tourism and the increase of social trust

One of the major issues in Afghan society is the crisis of social trust, which has been severely damaged by events over the past fourteen years. Trust in institutions, different ethnicities, religions, and regions has been significantly eroded (Firozi et al., 2022). Rebuilding social trust requires extensive efforts and investment. Tourism, as a tool for social interaction and cultural understanding, can play a crucial role in rebuilding this trust.

Tourism and the strengthening of collective identity

Tajfel and Turner's Social Identity Theory explains intergroup conflict through the concept of collective identity. Their theory emphasizes how social categorizations, hierarchical systems, and group identities contribute to in-group and out-group dynamics. Minor intergroup categorizations, even without pre-existing conflicts, can lead to self-centeredness and discrimination against the out-group (Banyard et al., 2006). Strengthening collective identity is crucial for social cohesion, and symbolic interactions and the recognition of shared values are essential for this process. Many studies have linked this concept to the tourism industry, as tourism fosters cultural harmony and alignment (Karimipour et al., 2016).

Tourism and the enhancement of social exchange

Social Exchange Theory posits that all human interactions are shaped by a subjective analysis of costs and benefits. Individuals calculate their investments in interpersonal relationships and assess whether these relationships offer greater rewards than costs. Social exchanges, unlike economic exchanges, rely on trust rather than legal obligations, and they promote flexibility and mutual benefit (Shahsawrani, 2017). Tourism inherently involves social exchange, fostering shared values and contributing to social cohesion, participation, and convergence.

Research methodology

This study is cross-sectional in terms of time, broad in scope, and practical in purpose. It uses a survey-based and descriptive-explanatory approach. Theoretical discussions were conducted through library and electronic research. The statistical population includes social media users in Afghanistan who have traveled outside their province at least twice and are at least 18 years old. According to standard quantitative research methods, when the population exceeds 100,000 individuals, a sample size of 384 respondents is deemed appropriate, as calculated using Cochran's formula and Morgan's table. Thus, 384 individuals were selected as the sample size. The sampling method used was a combination of convenience and random sampling. Data was collected through researcher-developed questionnaires, which were confirmed to be valid and reliable. The questionnaire was based on the Likert scale and completed by selected participants from the statistical population. The collected data was then entered into the SPSS, version 26. After indexing and checking for data normality, the data was described, analyzed, and interpreted.

Research findings

The findings show that 19.6% of respondents were female and 80.4% were male. In terms of age, 10% were between 18 and 25 years old, 45.6% between 26 and 35, 20.4% between 36 and 45, 12.8% between 46 and 55, and 3.2% were over 56 years old. Regarding marital status, 60.8% were married and 39.2% were single. Ethnically, 28.8% of respondents were Pashtun, 30.1% were Tajik, 31.3% were Hazara, 9.6% were Uzbek, and 20% belonged to other ethnic groups. In terms of travel experiences, 37% of respondents had visited other provinces twice, while the remainder had traveled outside their province more than twice.

Table 1 – Average scores of social integration of research sample

| | Lower Kran | Upper Kran | Theoretical average | Observed average | Standard deviation | T | Sig. |
|------------------------------------|------------|------------|---------------------|------------------|--------------------|------|-------|
| Social bond | 4 | 20 | 12 | 4.13 | 2.13 | 8.3 | 0.000 |
| Readiness for cultural interaction | 4 | 20 | 12 | 7.13 | 1.41 | 21.7 | 0.001 |
| The level of perceived deprivation | 4 | 18 | 12 | 11.9 | 2.9 | 9.5 | 0.000 |
| Preparation for social exchange | 4 | 20 | 12 | 12.56 | 1.93 | 3.3 | 0.001 |
| Social trust | 4 | 19 | 12 | 11 | 1.48 | 1.4 | 0.002 |
| Collective identity | 4 | 19 | 12 | 12 | 1.91 | 5.2 | 0.003 |
| Variable social integration | 24 | 72 | 116 | 117.9 | 11.9 | 9.2 | 0.001 |

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Table 1 shows that the observed averages of social convergence scores, except in the dimensions of relative deprivation and social trust, were higher than their theoretical averages in other dimensions. The T-test sample also showed that the overall level of social cohesion in these samples was positive and significant.

Table 2 – Results of the test between contextual variables and the level of social cohesion

| Variable | Group | Average score of social integration | T/F* | Significance level |
|---------------------------|-----------------|-------------------------------------|-------|--------------------|
| Gender | Woman | 59.4 | 2.732 | 0.001 |
| | Man | 60.14 | | |
| Marital status | Single | 59.81 | 2.553 | 0.001 |
| | Married | 60.49 | | |
| Ethnicity | Pashtun | 61.18 | 5.11 | 0.002 |
| | Tajik | 60.04 | | |
| | Hazara | 59.04 | | |
| | Uzbek | 61.8 | | |
| | Other | 59.9 | | |
| Number of trips (tourism) | Twice | 58.9 | 3.840 | 0.003 |
| | More than twice | 61.7 | | |

* In binary variables (T) and in multi-group variables (F).

Source: Prepared by the authors.

In Table 2 of the report on the T and F tests, the differences between the contextual variables and the dependent variable are reported. As seen, the average social integration of women is lower than that of men. The T-test shows that there is a significant difference between social convergence and gender, with a reported significance level of 0.001. This table shows that single respondents have less convergence compared to married respondents. The T-test for this variable also shows a significant relationship with significance level of 0.001. The F-tests have addressed the relationship between contextual-multivariate variables. In these tests, the difference in ethnicity has been measured against social cohesion. The level of convergence among the ethnic groups of Afghanistan has also been reported to vary in relation to others. However, statistically, the difference in ethnicity and attitude has been reported as significant, with a coefficient of 0.002. In the variable number of trips, those who have traveled for tourism more than twice have shown greater convergence, and this difference is statistically significant at the level of 0.003.

Table 3 – Results of the correlation test between the variable tourism, social integration level, and its dimensions

| Statistical index Hypothesis | Pearson Correlation coefficient | Significance level |
|---|------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| The relationship between the age of respondents and social convergence | 0.124 | 0.005 |
| The relationship between tourism and social connection | 0.124 | 0.003 |
| The relationship between tourism and perceived deprivation | 0.349 | 0.004 |
| The relationship between tourism and social trust | 0.23 | 0.004 |
| The relationship between tourism and readiness for cultural interaction | 0.89 | 0.000 |
| The relationship between tourism and readiness for social interaction | 0.79 | 0.001 |
| The relationship between tourism and collective identity | 0.9 | 0.002 |
| The relationship between tourism and social convergence | 0.29 | 0.001 |

Source: Prepared by the authors.

The Pearson correlation test shows the relationship between independent and dependent variables in Table 3. There is a direct and significant relationship between age and the level of social cohesion, with a correlation coefficient of 0.124 and significance level of 0.005. This means that as the age among respondents increases, social convergence also increases. A direct and significant relationship has been reported between the variable tourism and social connection, with a value of 0.124 and significance level of 0.003. A direct and significant relationship is observed between the variable tourism and perceived deprivation, with a value of 0.349 and significance level of 0.004. There is a direct and significant relationship between the variables tourism and social trust, with a value of 0.323 and significance level of 0.004. A direct and significant relationship has been shown between the variable tourism and readiness for cultural interaction, with a value of 0.893 and significance level of 0.000. A direct and significant relationship is observed between the variable tourism and readiness for social interaction, with a value of 0.791 and significance level of 0.001. There is a direct and significant relationship between the variable tourism and collective identity, with a value of 0.862 and significance level of 0.002. A direct and significant relationship is observed between the variable tourism and social convergence (as a whole variable) with a value of 0.912 and significance level of 0.001. Therefore, tourism has a positive and meaningful impact on both the dimensions and the overall social convergence variable.

Table 4 – Regression of the impact of independent variable on dependent variable

| Variable | Non-standard coefficient | Standard error | Standard beta | T | Significant level |
|---|--------------------------|----------------|---------------|-------|-------------------|
| A constant number | 0.234 | 5.561 | - | 0.611 | 0.000 |
| Social bond | 0.335 | 0.123 | 0.138 | 2.77 | 0.001 |
| Perceived deprivation | 1.320 | 0.123 | 0.517 | 10.6 | 0.000 |
| Social trust | 0.149 | 0.744 | 0.231 | 0.29 | 0.002 |
| Readiness for cultural interaction | 0.689 | 0.273 | 0.127 | 2.52 | 0.002 |
| Readiness for social interaction | 0.318 | 0.096 | 0.168 | 3.32 | 0.001 |
| Collective identity | 0.283 | 0.11 | 0.146 | 2.98 | 0.003 |
| Multiple correlation coefficient: 0.45 Coefficient of determination: 0.20 Adjusted coefficient of determination: 0.19 | | | | | |

Source: Prepared by the authors.

In the stepwise regression test, all dimensions of the independent variable were included in the test table. As seen in Table 4, all dimensions of the social convergence variable remain in the model and 19% of the changes can be explained by the dependent variable (social convergence). The stepwise regression model also had a correlation coefficient of 0.45, and the model fit was approximately 22%.

Discussion and conclusion

Afghanistan faces challenges related to social cohesion and ethnic integration. Various factors can help reduce these gaps and promote greater unity. In this context, tourism can play a crucial role in fostering solidarity and convergence among individuals and different groups. The arrival of tourists in various regions of Afghanistan can strengthen human connections and enhance social cohesion through cultural exchange and shared experiences. Tourism can also serve as a cultural bridge, facilitating interactions between different ethnic and social groups, which in turn fosters solidarity and convergence.

This research examined the impact of tourism on social convergence. The findings indicate a moderately acceptable level of social convergence, but also highlight challenges in terms of perceived trust and deprivation. Many Afghans feel distrustful of foreign entities and experience feelings of deprivation, likely due to the country's long-standing crises. Significant differences were also noted between contextual variables and social convergence, reflecting the broader societal conditions in Afghanistan. Additionally, a positive and significant relationship was found between social trust and tourism. Social

trust influences individuals' behaviors and decision-making, while tourism can enhance trust through direct interactions. Increased social trust within a community can lead to higher volumes of tourism, and vice versa. Shared travel experiences can foster positive bonds and enhance a sense of belonging, strengthening trust among individuals.

Another finding was the positive and significant role of tourism in promoting cultural readiness, defined as the ability and willingness to engage with other cultures, concepts, and values. Tourism helps individuals and communities become more open to cultural exchange and better equipped to communicate and interact with others. This aligns with studies by Ezzati et al. (2012) and Karimipoor et al. (2016).

Additionally, tourism was found to have a positive impact on social interaction and exchange. Interactions between tourists and locals can deepen understanding and knowledge, while tourism itself enhances social connections. Shared experiences in tourist destinations facilitate cultural exchange and understanding, fostering social bonds and unity. These findings are consistent with Karamipoor et al. (2016) and Safai et al. (2021).

Tourism also plays a significant role in shaping collective identity, reinforcing local identity and extending it to national identity. Interaction with tourists can highlight the cultural, historical, and geographical significance of an area, strengthening local identity and connecting it to broader national symbols. Furthermore, tourism fosters the development of global identity by exposing individuals to diverse cultures and perspectives. This supports the findings of Bagheri et al. (2022) and Harrigan et al. (2017).

Finally, tourism has a positive impact on social connection, strengthening interpersonal and inter-group relationships. Tourism provides opportunities for cultural exchange and innovative ideas, contributing to social and cultural development. These findings align with studies by Ezzati et al. (2012) and Karimipoor et al. (2016).

In conclusion, the growth and development of tourism can significantly contribute to social cohesion and unity among Afghanistan's ethnic and social groups. Therefore, the following recommendations are made:

1. Promote cultural awareness to support the growth of tourism.
2. Implement economic, cultural, and social policies to develop the tourism industry and enhance inter-ethnic interactions.
3. Encourage people from different provinces to travel to regions outside their own.
4. Strengthen hospitality facilities and promote the values of tourism.
5. Promote Afghanistan's tourist sites to both local and international audiences through targeted programs.

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