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THE MEDIATIZED RESIDENT–TOURIST EXCHANGE: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF RESIDENT PERSPECTIVES ON SOCIAL-MEDIA-DRIVEN TOURISM IN HUNZA, PAKISTAN

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Abstract

Hunza, a high-mountain valley in Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan, has become one of South Asia's most visually circulated tourism destinations, its terraced orchards, glacial peaks, and heritage forts propagated less through conventional destination marketing than through an unbroken stream of Instagram reels, YouTube vlogs, and TikTok clips produced by visitors, influencers, and residents alike. A growing body of research treats Hunza as a case of local-economy benefit or environmental strain, and a parallel literature treats social media as a driver of destination image and overtourism elsewhere, yet few studies ask how the residents who live inside this heightened visibility make sense of it themselves. Drawing on social exchange theory, Doxey's Irridex, and the concept of the mediatization of tourism, this qualitative study investigates how Hunza residents perceive, narrate, and respond to social-media-driven tourism growth. Analysis of 27 in-depth interviews and three focus group discussions reveals four themes: (1) the compression of visitation cycles and the emergence of "check-box tourism"; (2) the uneven distribution of economic benefits across differently positioned residents; (3) environmental and cultural costs experienced as a form of dispossession; and (4) residents' ambivalent agency and their expressed desire for locally embedded governance. The findings suggest that social media does not merely add new costs and benefits to the resident–tourist exchange but fundamentally alters the terms of that exchange, producing what this paper terms a mediatized resident–tourist exchange characterised by temporal compression, representational contestation, material consequence, and uneven experience. Implications for sustainable destination governance in Gilgit-Baltistan and comparable "Instagram-famous" destinations are discussed.

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, Hunza has moved from a relatively niche destination on the old Silk Road trekking and mountaineering circuit to one of the most photographed and shared valleys in South Asia. Its transformation has tracked less with formal destination marketing than with an informal, decentralised, and largely unplanned circulation of user-generated content: drone footage of Attabad Lake's turquoise water, reels filmed against the apricot blossom in Ganish and Aliabad, and vlogs following the Karakoram Highway toward Khunjerab. Travel trade press has begun describing Hunza and its Gilgit-Baltistan neighbours as destinations "rising" under pressures that outpace planning capacity, and Pakistani and international outlets alike increasingly frame the valley's popularity in terms of its social media visibility rather than its historical mountaineering reputation (Hussain et al., 2018). This shift raises a question that is easy to state and difficult to answer well: what happens to a small, historically self-governing mountain community when its landscape becomes a globally circulating image, and what do the people who live there make of it?

Existing scholarship offers two only partially overlapping answers. One stream, situated in tourism and development studies, has examined how Hunza and Gilgit-Baltistan residents perceive the economic and environmental consequences of tourism growth more broadly documenting perceived benefits such as income diversification and infrastructure investment alongside costs such as waste accumulation, water stress, land-use conversion, and price inflation (Saqib et al., 2019). A second stream, situated in tourism and media studies, has examined social media as an antecedent of destination image, visitor decision-making, and, in its more critical register, of overtourism showing that platforms can compress the usual discovery-to-visitation cycle and produce visitor surges that are disproportionate to a destination's physical and institutional capacity (Cheng, 2024; Lee et al., 2020). A small number of studies sit at the intersection of these two streams in the Pakistani context specifically, most notably Hussain et al.'s (2018) survey-based analysis of how social media shapes the "sustainable tour process" in a rural mountain region of Pakistan closely adjacent to Hunza.

What remains largely absent is a body of work that asks Hunza's own residents, in their own words, how they interpret social media's role in reshaping their community not as a variable correlated with attitude scores, but as a lived, ongoing, and often ambivalent process. Are residents who now depend on guesthouses, transport, and handicraft sales for their livelihood experiencing social-media-driven visibility primarily as opportunity, and if so, on what terms? Do residents who see comparatively little direct benefit subsistence farmers, elderly residents, women whose mobility or public visibility is culturally circumscribed experience the same phenomenon as pressure, intrusion, or a redefinition of their home as a stage? And how, if at all, are these divergent experiences connected to residents' own understanding of what social media has done to their valley?

This paper addresses these questions through a qualitative study conducted in Hunza between 2023 and 2024. It is guided by four research questions:

- **RQ1.** How do Hunza residents perceive the role of social media in shaping tourism growth in their community?
- **RQ2.** What benefits and costs do residents associate with Hunza's emergence as a "social-media destination"?
- **RQ3.** How do residents' perceptions vary according to their position within the local tourism economy?
- **RQ4.** What coping, adaptation, or resistance strategies do residents describe, or wish to see adopted, in response to social-media-driven visitation?

The paper contributes to sustainable tourism scholarship in three ways. Theoretically, it extends social exchange theory and Doxey's Irridex both developed before the platform era into a "mediatized" tourism context in which the pace, visibility, and social meaning of the resident–tourist exchange are altered by residents' and visitors' shared participation in image-making. Empirically, it provides an in-depth, resident-

centred account from a high-mountain, ethnically and religiously distinct community-based destination that has so far been studied mainly through survey instruments or through content analysis of the images tourists post about it, rather than through sustained engagement with the people who host that image-making. Practically, it is intended to inform tourism governance discussions in Gilgit-Baltistan around visitor management, revenue distribution, and community-led approaches to managing the valley's online visibility.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Social media and the transformation of tourism destinations

Social media has reorganised how destinations are discovered, imagined, and visited. Platforms built around user-generated images and short video Instagram, YouTube, and more recently TikTok allow ordinary travellers, rather than destination marketing organisations, to become the primary authors of a place's public image (Cheng, 2024). Research on geotagged content has shown that platform affordances such as location tagging actively steer visitation toward specific, highly photogenic sites within a destination, sometimes concentrating pressure on locations that were never designed, physically or institutionally, to absorb it (Le Busque et al., 2021). This "Instagrammability" of a site can become self-reinforcing: a location that photographs well accumulates visibility, visibility drives visitation, and visitation generates further content, in a loop that is largely exogenous to the destination community's own planning processes (Siegel et al., 2025).

A related literature examines the consequences of this loop for overtourism. Lee et al. (2020) argue that the intensity of a visitor's "place–visitor relationship," itself shaped by social media exposure prior to arrival, helps explain destinations' vulnerability to overtourism, while research on China's most heavily visited "internet-famous" cities has shown how social media virality can produce sudden, spatially concentrated surges in visitation that outstrip local infrastructure (Cheng, 2024). These studies, however, are overwhelmingly tourist-centred: they explain how and why visitors come, but they say comparatively little about how the destination's residents experience being on the receiving end of that visibility.

2.2 Resident perceptions of tourism: theoretical foundations

The tourism literature has a long-standing tradition of studying how residents perceive and respond to tourism development, most influentially through social exchange theory, which frames residents as evaluating tourism according to a rough calculus of perceived costs and benefits to themselves and their community (Ap, 1992). Residents who perceive themselves, or their community, as net beneficiaries of tourism tend to express more favourable attitudes and greater support for further development; residents who perceive the exchange as unfavourable, or who feel excluded from its benefits, tend toward scepticism, resentment, or opposition. A complementary and more explicitly developmental framework is Doxey's (1975) Irridex, which proposes that host communities move through successive stages of euphoria, apathy, irritation, and antagonism as tourism intensifies and its costs become more visible and less evenly distributed.

Both frameworks have been refined and critiqued in recent scholarship. Šegota et al. (2022) argue that resident attitudes are not uniform across a community but vary systematically at the individual level according to residents' economic dependence on tourism, their proximity to tourism activity, and their social position a heterogeneity that a purely community-level or linear-stage account can obscure. Allaberganov and Catterall's (2023) qualitative application of social exchange theory to the heritage cities of Samarqand and Bukhara similarly finds that residents hold their economic and cultural evaluations of tourism in tension simultaneously, rather than resolving them into a single net attitude a pattern this study expects to find echoed, and potentially sharpened, in a social-media-driven context. This individual-level heterogeneity is especially salient in a study such

as the present one, which explicitly seeks out residents in different structural positions relative to Hunza's tourism economy.

2.3 Authenticity, commodification, and the performed community

A second theoretical thread concerns what happens to a community's self-presentation once it becomes an object of sustained external attention. MacCannell's (1973) classic account of "staged authenticity" describes how host communities and the tourism industry construct front and back regions of social life, presenting a curated version of local culture to visitors while preserving other spaces and practices from outside view. Social media intensifies the stakes of this arrangement: where MacCannell's staged encounters were episodic and geographically bounded, a resident's home, dress, labour, or religious practice can now be captured, geotagged, and circulated by a visitor without invitation or negotiation. Recent work on the "commodification of photogenic sites" documents how destinations increasingly respond to this pressure by formally designating "selfie" zones or enclosures, in effect institutionalising the staging of authenticity for a camera-mediated audience (Siegel et al., 2025). Whether, and how, Hunza residents perceive their own community as being staged, commodified, or otherwise repositioned by social-media-driven tourism is a central concern of the present study.

2.4 Mediatization and the resident–tourist exchange

Most directly relevant to this study, Nunkoo et al. (2020) propose a conceptual framework and set of research propositions specifically addressing how social media reshapes resident attitudes to tourism arguing that social media can alter residents' attitudes not only by changing the material scale and character of tourism itself, but by changing residents' own information environment, their sense of their community's external reputation, and the visibility of tourism's costs and benefits to other residents. This framework provides a direct conceptual bridge between the social-exchange literature on resident attitudes and the social-media literature on destination image.

Research on the mediatization of place provides a further conceptual resource. Törnberg and Uitermark (2022), tracing how the media visibility of a Rio de Janeiro favela reshaped its material and symbolic fate, argue that platform interfaces can "tilt power balances over place" by allowing a location to be experienced, consumed, and ultimately acted upon from a distance, independent of residents' own control over their neighbourhood's representation. Applied to a tourism setting, this suggests that a destination's online image is not simply a marketing asset but a site of contested authority: residents, visitors, and platforms all participate in producing it, but not on equal terms. This literature has not yet been brought into conversation with resident-perception research on tourism destinations, a gap the present study's theoretical framework addresses directly.

2.5 Hunza and Gilgit-Baltistan: context-specific evidence

A smaller, more geographically specific literature bears directly on the present study's setting. Hussain et al. (2018), studying a rural mountain region of Pakistan in close proximity to Hunza, found that social media use was closely bound up with residents' and small tourism operators' perceptions of what a "sustainable" tourism process should look like, though their analysis was survey-based and did not probe residents' own narratives in depth. Saqib et al. (2019) documented, from a local-community perspective, the environmental and social impacts of tourism growth across Gilgit-Baltistan more broadly, including pressures on water, waste management, and land use. Comparable resident-perception research from other rapidly touristified communities in South Asia and beyond for instance Halim et al.'s (2022) study of resident perceptions in Sylhet, Bangladesh, and Sánchez-Aguirre et al.'s (2024) study of residents' ambivalent reactions to temporal overtourism during the Day of the Dead in Mixquic, Mexico illustrates both the value and the limits of survey- and case-based approaches: such studies can establish that residents hold divergent or ambivalent views, but are less well suited to

explaining the interpretive and narrative processes through which those views are formed.

These pressures are not merely anecdotal. In June 2025, a video posted by a British travel vlogger alleging that a hotel on the shore of Attabad Lake was discharging untreated sewage into the lake went viral, prompting Gilgit-Baltistan's Environmental Protection Agency to seal part of the hotel and impose a fine of Rs1.5 million within days (Ali, 2025; ARY News, 2025). The following month, the Gilgit-Baltistan government announced a ban on new hotel construction near scenic lakes and other ecologically sensitive sites across the region (Pakistan Today, 2025). The episode is illustrative rather than settled: a subsequent government inquiry reported finding no evidence of sewage discharge at the site (ProPakistani, 2025), leaving the underlying environmental claim contested even as the governance response it triggered proceeded. Whatever the episode's factual resolution, it demonstrates concretely how a single piece of viral, visitor-produced content can precipitate rapid regulatory action in Hunza in a way that years of slower-moving survey evidence had not.

2.6 The gap this study addresses

Taken together, this literature establishes three things clearly: that social media measurably reshapes destination visibility and visitation (Section 2.1); that resident attitudes toward tourism are theorised, but vary importantly across individuals and positions within a community (Section 2.2); and that Hunza and its wider region are already recognised sites of tourism-related social and environmental pressure (Section 2.5). What it has not yet done is bring these three findings together through sustained, in-depth engagement with Hunza residents themselves, asking not simply whether they support or oppose tourism, but how they understand, narrate, and respond to the specific fact that their community has become an object of sustained social-media attention. This is the gap the present study is designed to address.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study adopts an integrative conceptual framework built from three complementary elements.

First, social exchange theory (Ap, 1992) provides the study's core sensitising logic: residents are treated as active interpreters who weigh perceived costs and benefits of tourism to themselves and their community, rather than as passive recipients of tourism impact. This framing directs the interview guide toward eliciting residents' own cost–benefit reasoning rather than imposing a predetermined list of impacts.

Second, Doxey's (1975) Irridex is used as a heuristic not a predictive stage model for organising residents' accounts of change over time, from initial enthusiasm about outside recognition through to any apathy, irritation, or antagonism that residents describe as tourism volume has grown. Consistent with Šegota et al.'s (2022) critique, the Irridex is treated in this study as one axis of variation among several, expected to differ across residents according to their economic position, rather than as a single trajectory that the community as a whole is assumed to follow.

Third, the study extends both frameworks through attention to the mediatization of the resident–tourist exchange: the proposition, developed from Nunkoo et al. (2020) and the destination-image literature, that social media does not simply add a new "cost" or "benefit" to the classic exchange calculus, but changes the terms of the exchange itself compressing the time between a place becoming known and becoming crowded, exposing residents' home and daily life to an unbounded and often anonymous audience, and making the community's public image itself a contested resource. Read alongside MacCannell's (1973) account of staged authenticity, this suggests that Hunza residents may be negotiating not only the material costs and benefits of tourism, but questions of representation, consent, and self-presentation that classical resident-perception frameworks were not designed to capture.

These three elements are integrated into a single conceptual model in which social exchange and Irridex-style attitude formation are shown as processes now mediated by residents' own and

others' social media practices, with authenticity/commodification concerns operating as a distinct but related axis of resident experience. The analysis that follows is organised around this integrated framework, treating the mediatized exchange as the study's central theoretical contribution.

4. STUDY AREA

Hunza is a mountain valley in Gilgit-Baltistan, in northern Pakistan, lying along the Karakoram Highway between Gilgit and the Khunjerab Pass on the border with China. Administratively separated from neighbouring Nagar in 2015, Hunza is home to a predominantly Ismaili Muslim population, with Burushaski, Wakhi, and Shina among the languages spoken across its constituent settlements, including Karimabad, Aliabad, Ganish, Altit, Gulmit, and Passu. The valley's modern development trajectory is often periodised around three moments: the end of the local Mir's rule in 1974; the opening of the Karakoram Highway in 1978–1979, which ended the valley's relative isolation; and the arrival of the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme from 1982 onward, which is widely credited with catalysing participatory, community-based development, including an early and locally distinctive model of community-based tourism built around guesthouses, trekking guides, and small-scale hospitality rather than large external operators.

This history matters for the present study because it means Hunza already had, prior to the social media era, a comparatively well-established, locally embedded tourism sector and a strong tradition of community organisation making it a theoretically informative case for examining how an existing, locally managed tourism model absorbs a newer, externally generated, and much less locally controllable driver of visitation. The valley's recent visibility as a filming and photography destination driven by improved road access, post-2015 domestic tourism growth, and the post-pandemic recovery of travel has coincided with documented concerns about waste management, water availability, unregulated construction, and the strain of peak-season crowding on villages such as Karimabad and on sites such as Attabad Lake and the Passu cones, including the 2025 Attabad Lake hotel controversy discussed above.

5. METHODOLOGY

5.1 Research design and paradigm

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretivist research design, grounded in a social constructionist epistemology consistent with the study's central concern: not whether tourism impacts are objectively positive or negative, but how residents themselves construct meaning around their community's social-media-driven visibility. A qualitative case study design Hunza as a bounded, information-rich case is judged appropriate because the research questions are exploratory and concerned with process, meaning, and variation across resident subgroups, rather than with testing pre-specified hypotheses about the magnitude of tourism's impacts.

5.2 Study site and sampling strategy

Fieldwork was conducted across a purposive selection of Hunza settlements chosen to capture variation in tourism intensity and infrastructure: Karimabad and Aliabad (the valley's highest-density tourism hubs), Ganish and Altit (heritage-tourism sites with active conservation and visitor-management structures), and Gulmit and Passu (comparatively lower-tourism-intensity settlements further up-valley). This selection was designed to avoid over-representing the experience of residents already most immersed in tourism while still capturing the perspectives of those most directly affected.

Within these sites, participants were recruited through purposive, maximum-variation sampling, followed by snowball referral, to ensure representation across the following resident subgroups identified in the literature and framework as likely to hold divergent perspectives:

- Tourism entrepreneurs and employees: guesthouse and restaurant owners and staff, tour guides, drivers, and handicraft sellers.
- Residents with limited or no direct stake in tourism: subsistence farmers, orchard owners, residents employed outside the tourism sector.
- Women: whose relationship to visibility, mobility, and income from tourism may differ

systematically from men's, given documented gender dynamics in Gilgit-Baltistan's tourism economy.

- Youth and young adults: typically the most active producers and consumers of social media content about their own community.
- Community elders and local governance figures: village council members and heritage-site custodians who can speak to change over a longer time horizon.

An indicative target of 24–30 individual interviews was set, continued until thematic saturation was judged to have been reached, supplemented by two to three focus group discussions. In total, 27 individual interviews (ranging from 45 to 75 minutes) and three focus group discussions (one with tourism-sector workers, one with non-tourism residents, and one with youth) were conducted. Eligibility was limited to adult residents (18 years or older) who had lived in Hunza for at least five years, to ensure participants could speak to change over time. The final sample comprised 16 men and 11 women, with ages ranging from 19 to 74 years. Thirteen participants were directly employed in tourism-related activities, while fourteen had limited or no direct tourism stake. All interviews were conducted in Urdu, Burushaski, or Wakhi according to participant preference, with translation support as needed.

5.3 Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews of approximately 45–60 minutes, conducted in Urdu, Burushaski, or Wakhi according to participant preference, audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. An interview guide was organised around the study's four research questions and the theoretical framework, covering: (a) participants' own social media use and their perception of Hunza's online visibility; (b) perceived changes in tourism volume, visitor behaviour, and community life since Hunza's rise in online popularity; (c) perceived benefits, including income, infrastructure, and recognition; (d) perceived costs and concerns, including environmental strain, price inflation, loss of privacy, and cultural commodification; (e) perceptions of how benefits and costs are distributed across different residents; and (f) coping strategies already adopted, and governance responses participants would like to see. The guide was piloted with three participants and revised prior to full data collection. Where appropriate, and consistent with the researcher's prior fieldwork practice in the region, photo-elicitation was used to prompt discussion of specific, widely circulated images of Hunza.

5.4 Data analysis

Interview and focus group transcripts were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, following the six-phase approach of Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019): familiarisation with the data; generation of initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and producing the final analytic narrative. Coding proceeded abductively: an initial coding frame was informed by the theoretical framework for example, codes tracking cost–benefit reasoning, Irridex-consistent attitude change, and authenticity/commodification concerns while remaining open to inductive codes capturing themes not anticipated by the framework. Coding and theme development were supported by NVivo 14. A subset of transcripts (n = 8) was double-coded by the author and a research assistant, with discrepancies resolved through discussion to support analytic consistency. Where useful, matrix displays were used to compare themes across the resident subgroups identified in Section 5.2, directly addressing RQ3.

The analytic process moved through several iterations. Initial open coding generated 147 discrete codes. Through constant comparison and focused coding, these were consolidated into 23 sub-themes, which were subsequently grouped under four overarching themes corresponding to the study's research questions. The themes were refined through member-checking with a subset of nine participants, whose feedback helped sharpen the distinction between residents' *perceptions* of social media's role and their *normative prescriptions* for governance a distinction that became important in the final analysis. The four themes are: (1) *"You come for the photo": the compression of*

visitation and the rise of check-box tourism (RQ1); (2) *"The money goes out": uneven economic distribution and the limits of the exchange* (RQ2); (3) *"We are just background": environmental strain, cultural commodification, and the felt loss of control* (RQ2); and (4) *"We do it ourselves": ambivalent agency, exclusion from governance, and the desire for locally embedded regulation* (RQ3 and RQ4). These themes are presented in detail in Section 6.

5.5 Trustworthiness and rigour

The study's trustworthiness was established using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria. Credibility was supported through prolonged engagement across multiple settlements, triangulation across individual interviews, focus groups, and photo-elicitation material, and member-checking of preliminary themes with a subset of participants. Transferability was supported through thick description of the study area, sampling, and participant characteristics, allowing readers to judge the applicability of findings to other high-mountain or community-based tourism destinations. Dependability and confirmability were supported through an audit trail documenting coding decisions and analytic memos, and through reflexive attention to the researcher's own position in the field. Authenticity was supported by ensuring that the range of resident perspectives including those critical of tourism and those who benefit from it is represented in the analysis.

5.6 Positionality, ethics, and cultural considerations

The researcher is a Pakistani sociologist with prior fieldwork experience in Hunza and Nagar, a position that offers linguistic and cultural familiarity but also required active reflexivity regarding assumptions about the region formed through prior research. All procedures were reviewed and approved by the relevant institutional research ethics committee prior to data collection. Participants provided informed consent (written or oral, as culturally appropriate and recorded), were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage, and have had their identities anonymised in all reporting, with particular care taken around any material that could identify individual households or businesses. Given the study's setting within a predominantly Ismaili community with specific norms around gender and public visibility, female research assistants were engaged to support the recruitment and interviewing of female participants.

5.7 Limitations

The study's qualitative, single-destination design supports analytic and theoretical generalisation rather than statistical generalisation. The sample, while purposively selected for maximum variation, is not probabilistically representative of Hunza's population. The research was conducted during a period of particularly rapid tourism growth, and residents' accounts may reflect the intensity of that moment. Finally, the researcher's positionality, while an asset for access and rapport, required ongoing reflexivity to avoid over-identification with particular resident perspectives.

6. FINDINGS

Overview. Thematic analysis yielded four themes. Together, they show that social media has not simply increased visitor numbers in Hunza; it has altered the terms of the resident–tourist exchange. Visitation is temporally compressed, economic benefits are unevenly distributed, environmental and cultural costs are intensifying, and residents increasingly demand locally embedded regulation. Table 1 summarises the themes; the sections below briefly elaborate each.

6.1 Check-box tourism (RQ1)

Residents across subgroups described a shift from pre-platform tourism guidebook-led, longer stays, trekking and climbing to social-media-driven visitation organised around replicating a pre-formed image. Visitors now arrive with the photograph already in mind, stay briefly, and leave. GH-01 captured this: "They have the photo already in their mind. We are just… background." TW-01 described the same logic as "check the box" tourism: "They take the photo, they put it on their story, and then they want to go back to the hotel."

This finding extends the mediatization thesis: social media compresses not only the discovery-to-visitation cycle but also the depth of host–guest engagement. EL-01's observation that "they see only the screen" captures the paradox of viral visibility greater external attention has not produced deeper understanding. Young residents also participate in this visual economy, but contest its objectifying gaze; YW-01 insisted of her grandmother, "She is not a thing. She is a person."

6.2 Uneven economic benefits (RQ2)

Economic benefits are concentrated among guesthouse and restaurant owners, drivers, and those with capital to invest in tourism. Subsistence farmers and orchard owners receive little or nothing despite bearing costs. GH-01 described his cousin in Altit: tourists walk through his apricot trees, block the water channel, and leave plastic, yet "He gets nothing." NF-01 summarised his own position: "Sometimes they give my grandson a pen or a chocolate. That is all."

Residents also identified an extractive platform logic. GH-01 argued that external influencers capture value from Hunza's image while paying nothing locally: "The money goes out, and the pressure comes in." Even beneficiaries expressed ambivalence. GH-01 acknowledged that tourism income had brought his son home, but lamented that visitors "don't even look at the stones" his father built with his hands. This supports social exchange theory but shows that economic gain does not neutralise cultural loss.

6.3 Environmental strain and cultural commodification (RQ2)

Three linked costs emerged. First, environmental strain: hotels and guesthouses take water at night, leaving farmers' fields dry; waste overwhelms local capacity, and burning creates smoke that disrupts domestic life. NF-01 explained that he cannot complain because the offenders are neighbours: "They are Hunza people also. But it is not fair." Second, cultural commodification: residents describe feeling staged for external consumption. YW-01 said, "I feel like a character in a movie. Like I am performing." GH-01 reduced this to: "We are just… background." EL-01 warned that tourists "take the image, but they don't take the meaning," and feared residents might eventually forget the meaning themselves. Third, privacy and consent: tourists photograph women and elders without asking. TW-01 protested, "This is our home. Not a zoo," but admitted, "I cannot stop them." These costs are not merely added to a ledger; they disrupt everyday life, social institutions, and self-presentation.

6.4 Governance gap and desired regulation (RQ3 and RQ4)

Perceptions vary by position. Tourism-dependent residents generally see the exchange as net positive or manageable; non-tourism farmers are more critical. Women and youth negotiate new opportunities alongside new surveillance and cultural tension. YW-01 maintained a public account for scenery and a private one for her face; GH-01 observed, "Always tension now." Youth are excluded from governance despite their platform expertise: "Nobody asks us… They don't understand the algorithm" (YW-01).

Doxey's Irridex receives only partial support. Older residents describe a movement from euphoria to resigned ambivalence rather than linear antagonism. Social media appears to have compressed the trajectory, making the busy season feel permanent. Coping strategies include individual self-censorship, silence, and accommodation; collective self-organisation through village councils and the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme legacy; and demands for external regulation. Residents do not seek to end tourism. They seek to renegotiate its terms: fees for commercial filming, a local tourism office, visitor caps, equitable benefit distribution, and protection for "quiet" places. As YW-01 put it: "Don't just let it happen. Plan it."

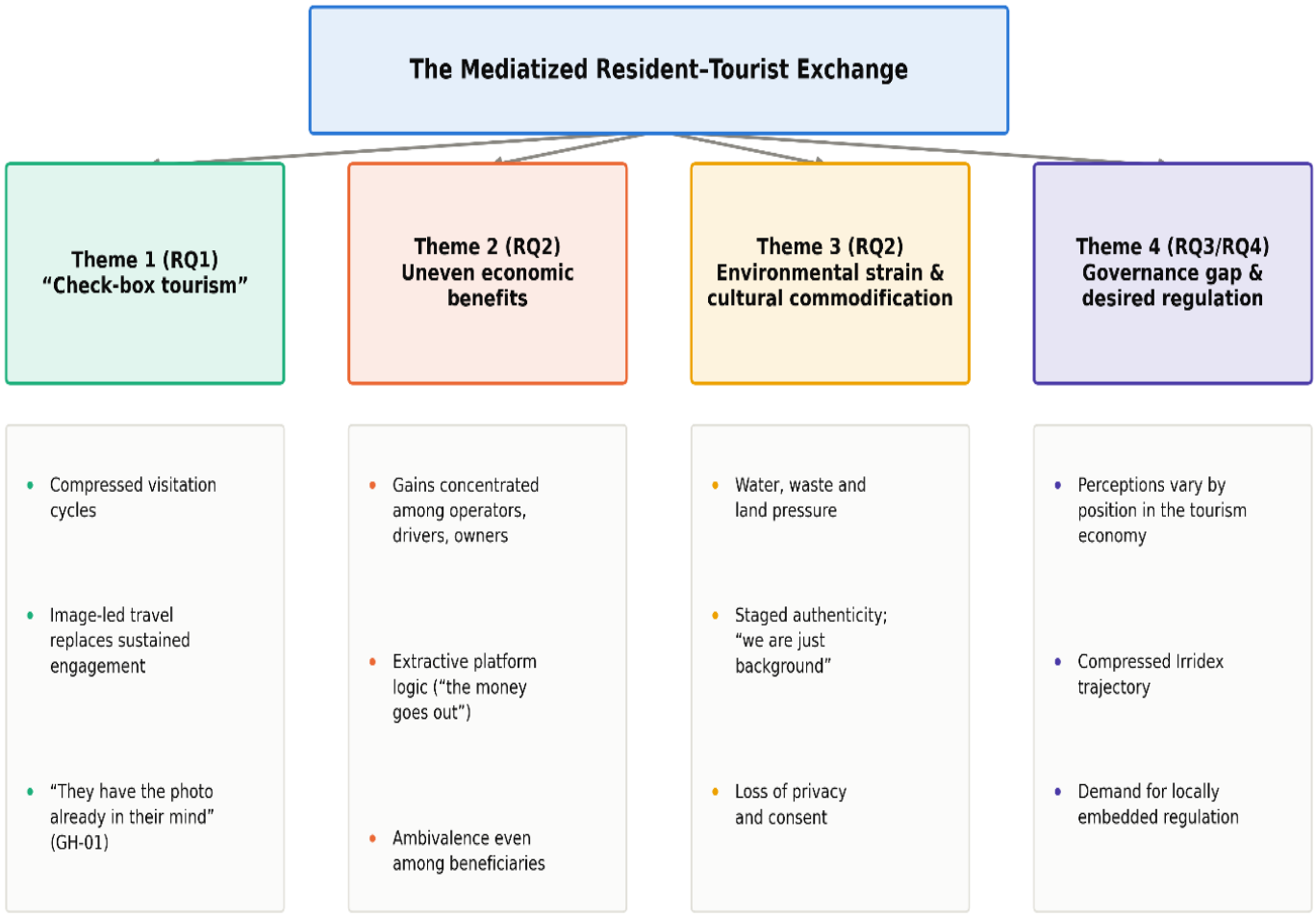


Figure 1 Thematic Map of Findings

7. DISCUSSION

7.1 Social exchange theory and the mediatized calculus

The findings confirm that residents evaluate social-media-driven tourism through a cost–benefit calculus broadly consistent with social exchange theory (Ap, 1992), but they also reveal that the terms of that calculus have been fundamentally altered by mediatization. Residents who perceive themselves as net beneficiaries primarily those with direct economic stakes in tourism do tend to express more favourable attitudes, as SET would predict. However, the ambivalence expressed even by beneficiaries like GH-01 suggests that economic satisfaction and cultural loss are not fungible; they are held in simultaneous tension, echoing Allaberganov and Catterall's (2023) findings in Uzbekistan.

More significantly, the findings show that social media introduces new dimensions of evaluation that classical SET was not designed to capture. Residents evaluate not only what they receive from tourism but also how their community is represented, who controls that representation, and what it means for their sense of self and place. These evaluative dimensions representation, consent, meaning are not reducible to costs and benefits in the traditional sense. They are constitutive of a different kind of exchange, one in which the community's very image is the object of negotiation. This supports Nunkoo et al.'s (2020) proposition that social media reshapes resident

attitudes by changing residents' information environment and their sense of their community's external reputation.

7.2 Doxey's Irridex and temporal compression

The findings offer partial support for Doxey's (1975) Irridex while also suggesting that social media may have compressed the trajectory it describes. Older residents' accounts of moving from euphoria at the valley's opening to a more ambivalent present align with the Irridex's early stages. However, the linear progression toward antagonism that the model predicts is not clearly evident. Instead, residents express a resigned ambivalence that combines elements of irritation with acceptance and a desire for constructive engagement.

The more important finding is that the speed of change has been accelerated by social media. The interval between Hunza becoming visible online and becoming crowded was far shorter than the pre-platform discovery-to-visitation cycle that the Irridex implicitly assumes. This temporal compression has consequences for residents' capacity to adapt: there has been less time for the gradual adjustment that the Irridex's stage model presupposes. The mediatized exchange, in other words, does not just accelerate visitation; it accelerates the social processes through which residents make sense of and respond to tourism. This finding extends the mediatization literature (Nunkoo et al., 2020; Törnberg & Uitermark, 2022) by demonstrating how platform dynamics reshape the temporalities of resident–tourist relations.

7.3 Authenticity, commodification, and representational dispossession

The findings strongly support MacCannell's (1973) account of staged authenticity, but they also show how social media intensifies and transforms the staging process. Where MacCannell described episodic, geographically bounded encounters, the mediatized exchange exposes residents' homes and daily lives to continuous, unbounded visibility. Residents describe being photographed without consent, having their cultural practices reduced to "exotic" spectacle, and experiencing their community as "background" for others' content production.

The concept of representational dispossession captures this experience: residents feel that their community's image has been taken from them, that it circulates and generates value without their consent or participation, and that they have limited capacity to contest or revise it. This finding resonates with Törnberg and Uitermark's (2022) argument that platform interfaces "tilt power balances over place" by allowing a location to be represented and acted upon from a distance. In Hunza, the power to represent the valley is distributed across visitors, influencers, and platforms, but it is not held by residents themselves even as they bear the material and cultural costs of that representation.

The demand for fees on commercial filming and for "quiet" places that should not be on Instagram (YW-01) represents a nascent form of representational resistance an attempt to reclaim authority over the community's image. This finding contributes to the literature on the commodification of photogenic sites (Siegel et al., 2025) by showing how residents themselves, not just destination managers, are beginning to articulate demands for control over visual representation.

7.4 The mediatized resident–tourist exchange: a four-dimensional model

On the basis of these findings, and extending the theoretical framework developed in Section 3, this paper proposes the concept of the mediatized resident–tourist exchange as a contribution to sustainable tourism theory. This concept is offered as a refinement of classical resident-perception frameworks for the platform era. It has four dimensions:

(1) Temporally compressed. The interval between a place becoming known and becoming crowded is radically shortened relative to pre-platform tourism. This compression affects not only visitation patterns but also residents' capacity to adapt and to organise collective responses. The Irridex's stage model, which assumes a gradual progression, requires revision for mediatized contexts.

(2) **Representationally contested.** Authority over the community's public image is distributed across residents, visitors, and platforms rather than held by any one party. Residents experience this as representational dispossession a loss of control over how their home is seen and understood. This dimension extends SET by introducing a form of evaluation that is not reducible to costs and benefits.

(3) **Materially consequential.** Representational dynamics translate directly into demands on water, waste, land, and labour. The 2025 Attabad Lake episode demonstrates how viral content can precipitate rapid regulatory action, but residents' accounts show that the everyday material consequences of mediatization dry fields, uncollected garbage, unconsented photography are continuous rather than episodic.

(4) **Unevenly experienced.** Residents positioned differently within the tourism economy experience the same mediatized exchange as opportunity, burden, or both at once. Economic dependence on tourism shapes both the cost–benefit calculus and the capacity to articulate grievances. Women and youth occupy distinctive positions, experiencing new opportunities alongside new forms of surveillance and exclusion.

This four-dimensional model offers a theoretical vocabulary for analysing resident experiences in social-media-driven destinations beyond Hunza. It suggests that sustainable tourism governance in such contexts must address not only the material management of visitor flows but also the representational politics of place questions of who has the authority to produce and circulate images, on what terms, and for whose benefit.

Figure 4. A Four-Dimensional Model of the Mediatized Resident–Tourist Exchange

The study's theoretical contribution (Section 7.4)

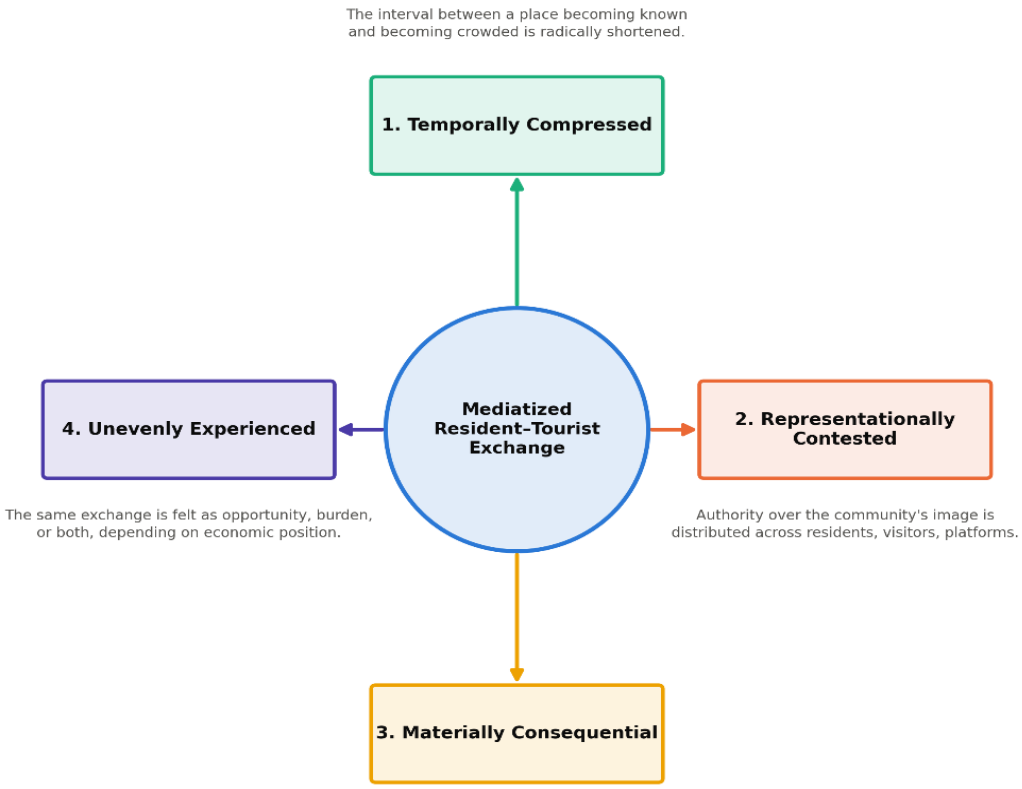


Figure 2 Four Dimensional Model of the Mediatized resident–tourist exchange

7.5 Comparison with prior studies and the 2025 Attabad Lake episode

The findings converge with Hussain et al.'s (2018) survey-based finding that social media is closely bound up with residents' and small operators' perceptions of sustainable tourism in the region, but they extend that work by providing the in-depth narrative evidence that survey methods cannot supply. The findings also align with Saqib et al.'s (2019) documentation of environmental and social pressures across Gilgit-Baltistan, while adding specificity about how residents themselves interpret and narrate those pressures.

The 2025 Attabad Lake hotel controversy provides a concrete illustration of the mediatized governance dynamic that residents describe. A single viral video precipitated rapid regulatory action the sealing of part of the hotel and a Rs1.5 million fine followed by a government inquiry that found no evidence of the alleged sewage discharge. This episode demonstrates both the power and the precarity of mediatized governance: viral content can force action where slower-moving evidence could not, but the action may be based on contested claims. For residents, this episode may reinforce their sense that decisions about their community are made in response to external pressures by visitors, by platforms, by distant government offices rather than through locally embedded processes of deliberation and planning.

7.6 Implications for sustainable destination governance

The findings suggest several practical implications for tourism governance in Gilgit-Baltistan and comparable destinations:

Community-led visitor management. Residents consistently expressed a desire for local tourism offices with the authority to set visitor limits, manage peak-season flows, and collect fees for infrastructure and environmental management. Such bodies should include representation from youth, women, and non-tourism residents, not only established tourism entrepreneurs.

Representation and consent protocols. The findings highlight the need for locally developed guidelines on photography and content creation including clear expectations around consent for photographing individuals, respectful engagement with cultural practices, and the designation of "quiet" areas or practices that should not be promoted on social media.

Equitable benefit distribution. The concentration of economic benefits among a subset of residents, combined with the diffusion of costs across the community, suggests the need for mechanisms such as community tourism funds, revenue-sharing arrangements, and support for farmer-to-tourist direct sales that distribute tourism revenue more broadly.

Youth engagement in governance. The governance gap identified by young participants their skills and knowledge are essential to managing social-media-driven tourism, yet they are excluded from decision-making represents a significant missed opportunity. Youth advisory roles and training programmes could help bridge this gap.

Platform engagement. Residents' concerns about the extractive logic of influencer content suggest that destinations might explore ways to engage platforms and content creators in revenue-sharing or contribution mechanisms for example, a voluntary or mandatory fee on commercial filming that is reinvested in community infrastructure.

8. CONCLUSION

This qualitative study reveals that social-media-driven tourism compresses visitation, unevenly distributes economic benefits, and imposes environmental and cultural costs that residents experience as dispossession. It contributes the concept of the mediatized resident–tourist exchange characterised by temporal compression, representational contestation, material consequence, and uneven experience thereby extending social exchange theory and Doxey's Irridex for the platform era. Practically, residents demand locally embedded regulation, youth and women's inclusion in governance, and equitable benefit sharing. While the single-destination design limits generalisability, future longitudinal, comparative, and quantitative work is needed. Ultimately, residents seek to be seen as more than background, challenging sustainable tourism scholarship to support their call for control over representation and future.

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