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MARITIME TOURISM ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN PAKISTAN

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Abstract

One of the most important initiatives those are being used by Pakistan and China for increasing economic connectivity and development is the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The basis of this partnership is Pakistan's maritime tourism sector, which is being advanced with the transfer of technology, and the development of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) through Chinese expertise. Harnessing the cutting edge technological capabilities of Chinese companies such as the metaverse and virtual tourism, Pakistan has the opportunity to transform its maritime tourism sector. These technologies provide immersion into many different tourist or destination experiences and are engaging a global audience at the same time. In addition, the Chinese investments and knowledge sharing support should be given to maritime tourism service provider (MTSP) SMEs to invigorate local economies, create employment opportunities and promote sustainable tourism practices. This strategic cooperation under the auspices of CPEC not only seeks to improve the tourism industry of Pakistan, but also leads to economic progress, technological innovation and community development and puts Pakistan on the world map as a contemporary and attractive tourist destination. Incorporating these initiatives under the larger head of the blue economy, Pakistan will move towards supporting lasting innovation led economic growth.

This conceptual study argues that the adoption of advanced technologies from China—particularly metaverse-enabled platforms—in Pakistan's maritime tourism sector can serve as a catalyst for blue economy development. By leveraging China's experience in digital infrastructure, immersive tourism ecosystems, and innovation-oriented economic planning, Pakistan can enhance the value, efficiency, and global competitiveness of its maritime tourism assets. The integration of metaverse technologies enables virtual destination branding and smart tourism, creating new revenue streams and skilled employment opportunities. Drawing on China's transition from a market-driven to an innovation-driven economic model, the paper posits that technology transfer and adoption can help Pakistan shift toward an innovation-led blue economy, strengthening long-term resilience, inclusivity, and growth.

INTRODUCTION

The Arabian Sea is an awe-inspiring beauty, a rich cultural heritage and also geographically strategic, serving as a testimony to the enormous potential on the Arabian Sea coast of Pakistan. With the

blue economy gaining momentum in countries worldwide for economic growth through sustainable utilization of ocean resources, Pakistan is also in a unique position to benefit from this. Fisheries, maritime transport and coastal tourism are all part of the blue economy, and represent a promising pathway to economic rejuvenation. As Pakistan has an extensive 1,050 km coastline, incorporating blue economy principles (Rehman 2023) within the mainstream economic structure is not only an opportunity but also a necessity for achieving long term sustainable development and economic diversification.

Within this context, maritime tourism has great potential to stimulate the economic growth, employment opportunities and community development by the utilization of natural and cultural resources existing in coastal areas (Fatima and Akhtar 2020). Karachi, Gwadar, Pasni, Ormara and the Makran Coast are blessed with plenty of pristine and scenic beauty. There is also plenty of marine wild life to support exciting tourism activities. These parts of Pakistan also have lively cultural history and the tourism activities focused here will be offering exciting historical knowledge to incoming tourists. The tourism industry in the coastal belt is an excellent opportunity for diversification of Pakistan's economic base.

The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship project of the China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is central to the realization of this potential (Javed and Ismail 2021). The primary objective of CPEC is connectivity and economic integration accomplished through major infrastructure such as roads, railways and ports between Pakistan and China. This collaboration is essential for Pakistan's economic growth, especially in developing blue economy (Khan and Liu 2018). Development of Pakistan's coastal tourism sector, attracting investment and driving sustainable economic development can proceed through CPEC (Kanwal et al. 2019). This also provides a rare opportunity to bring new technologies into the tourism sector, creating new opportunities for innovation and improving the visitor experience. Pakistan can easily overcome present day hurdles and stand as a modern and attractive destination when we adopt latest solutions like virtual tourism and metaverse.

By adopting the blue economy, Pakistan is not just looking to the sea for sustenance and growth; it is also looking to it for a sustainable future. Through the CPEC strategic collaboration with China, such an unprecedented opportunity presents itself to exploit the economic, social and environmental dividends of the blue economy and chart a path for prosperity and resilience in the face of global difficulties. This conceptual paper discusses how the maritime tourism potential of Pakistan can be exploited using innovative technologies and strategic international partnerships to promote economic growth, environmental sustainability and community development.

The Potential of Maritime Tourism in Pakistan

A treasure trove of development and exploration possibilities, Pakistan's coastal belt, from Karachi, Gwadar, Pasni, Ormara and the Makran Coast (Rehman 2023) is a potential tourism hub. Because these regions boast a special combination of natural beauty, historical significance and cultural richness, they easily captivate tourists from all over the world. The pristine beaches, diverse marine life and scenic landscapes are a heaven for nature lovers and adventure lovers. Moreover, the rich history and cultural heritage present in these coastal places offers a great opportunity to understand the past simply through absorbing its cultural roots that are appealing for history buffs and cultural tourists. With an eye to diversifying its economic base, Pakistan could profitably exploit these coastal assets through strategic tourism development. With the integration of advanced technologies, the implementation of sustainable practices, and the exploitation of the strategic collaboration with China under the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) the coastal belt of Pakistan can be transformed into a world class tourism hub, which can then propel economic growth and boost the global tourism profile of Pakistan (Ullah et al. 2009).

There are some of Pakistan's most famous beaches in Karachi, such as Clifton, Hawksbay and Sandspit. Local and tourists come to frequent these beaches and enjoy such recreational activities as camel rides, horse riding and beach sports. Karachi's coastal tourism experience further gains from Karachi's historical sites, including Quid-e-Azam's Mausoleum and Mohata Palace (Gallagher et al. 2014).

Gwadar with its pristine beaches such as Gwadar Bay, has unique water sports, fishing and eco-tourism opportunities. Under CPEC, the development of Gwadar has begun to attract more tourists to this once remote place (Hameed et al. 2020). The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and its infrastructural development in the Gwadar, which also bring a strategic location, can become a destination for international tourists and investors. Another promising destination is Pasni — with its ancient ruins and scenic coastline. Archaeologists and history lovers visit Pasni to visit the historic ruins of Balochistan's Harappan civilization (Shahzad 2022).

Ormara and the Makran Coast are less developed but with huge potential for tourism. Ormara Beach and the Hammerhead, a natural rock formation, are also notable. The Makran Coast, which runs along Balochistan, has its fame for its untouched beauty of sandy beaches, rocky outcrop and clear blue waters. These areas have potential for the development of eco-friendly resorts and the adventure tourism activities such as snorkeling and scuba diving (Shahzad 2022).

Although the infrastructure, policy making and technological backwardness have posed many challenges for maritime tourism but it has the potential to play a significant role in increasing Pakistan's GDP and creating employment opportunities by supporting the blue economy. Development of these coastal areas can be quite transformative for Pakistan's coastal tourism industry (Shahzad 2022). Coastal tourism brings jobs to the locality in hospitality, transportation and recreational services. Unlike other sectors of the blue economy, coastal tourism directly involves local communities, and generates immediate economic benefits (Rehman 2023). For instance, the development of Gwadar as a tourist center has already begun generating jobs for local people in the fields of hospitality and allied fields. Tourism well also incur a benefit of revenue generated to be reinvested into local development projects, such as infrastructure, healthcare and education in coastal communities. Tourism can also help decrease the number of people unemployed and poor, facilitate cultural exchange, and increase a sense of pride and belonging for the local people. Tourism development has emerged as a cornerstone of Pakistan's blue economic strategy (Rehman 2023) due to the broader economic and social advancement it has brought.

China Pakistan Collaboration in Maritime Tourism Development

Collaboration of Pakistan and China is strategic because of the historical context and current dynamics of Pakistan – China relations. The economic and technological prowess of China and the geographical advantages of Pakistan, form a synergic partnership. Strategic benefits from collaboration in coastal tourism are available for both nations: economic growth; connectivity; and cultural exchange. Such strengthening of this partnership can have a very positive impact on Pakistan's tourism sector (Wazi 2020).

For a long time, Pakistan and China have been allies in many fields, including infrastructure, technology and defense. The other side of the coin has been an additional deepening of economic ties between the two countries under CPEC partnership hence it is creating opportunities for joint ventures and investment in tourism. Chinese tourists are extremely important to Pakistan's coastal tourism industry (Sultan 2017).

New Technological Trends in Maritime Tourism

Today, technology has a huge role in transforming the tourism landscape and Pakistan can benefit immensely from integrating technology through its collaboration with China (Ali et al., 2017). Using China's technological

prowess, Pakistan can greatly boost its tourism infrastructure and services, and transform its coastal regions into modern tourist friendly destinations. Examples of successful technology transfer projects, such as in smart city initiatives in Gwadar, show how Chinese innovations have been successfully used to bring about cutting edge, tourist centric environments. Investment in the sector and the sharing of the latest technological advancements can continue to take Pakistan's coastal tourism forward to new heights.

Pakistani and Chinese maritime tourism organizations share several structural and strategic similarities that make technology transfer both feasible and beneficial. In both countries, the maritime tourism sector is closely linked with strong state involvement and strategic development frameworks under the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and broader blue economy initiatives, emphasizing coordinated planning for ports, coastal zones, and tourism development (Gwadar Pro, 2025; Press Information Department [PID], 2025a). These shared institutional arrangements and emerging-market characteristics create comparable organizational capacities, enabling Pakistani maritime tourism organizations to effectively adapt Chinese digital and smart tourism technologies.

Moreover, both countries emphasize sustainable blue economy development, marine ecosystem protection, and innovation-led growth through technology adoption and institutional cooperation. Policy dialogues and joint maritime action plans highlight cooperation in eco-tourism, maritime research, smart port development, and technology exchange, reinforcing the relevance of China's experience for Pakistan's maritime tourism sector (Business Recorder, 2025; PID, 2025b). As a result, technology transfer from China is well aligned with Pakistan's objective of transitioning from a market-driven to an innovation-driven maritime tourism economy.

Key technological innovations (Sheldon 2004) that can transform Pakistan's maritime tourism include:

1. Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR):

Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) are changing the way people experience the tourism industry by giving potential tourists a chance to experience a destination before they ever step foot there. VR and AR have been used successfully in China to promote its cultural heritage and natural attractions: virtual tours of historical sites and scenic landscapes that attract global audiences (Hua et al. 2018). Pakistan can too adopt the same strategies to show the country's coastal beauty and historical landmarks. It is a potential for virtual tours of some areas in Pakistan's coastal regions, where some like Gwadar beaches may be virtual toured or some like Karachi's vibrant seaside market and so forth. It can make for a great first impression, and entice more travelers to come in person. On top of that, AR can also add interactive information over the real world views. For instance, in Pasni tourists can use AR to look at historical reconstructions of once prominent sites while on the Makran Coast tourists can access detailed information of local marine life and thus end up having a more interesting visit.

2. Internet of Things (IoT):

IoT can build smart tourism ecosystems through connection of the things for significantly better visitor experience. The country can offer a smooth, interactive experience for tourists to Pakistan's waterfronts by employing IoT technologies (Car et al 2019). The IoT enabled tourism applications include smart hotel rooms, which adjust settings based on the preferences of the guests, IoT enabled transportation systems to optimize routes and schedule, real time data analytics of tourist behavior and preferences (Verma et al. 2021). An example could be smart resorts in Gwadar, where guests can control room settings like lighting and temperature through their smartphones, get personalized service suggestions and get real time information about local attractions and events. This degree of personalization and convenience can really step up the tourist experience, turning Pakistan's

coastal locations into more attractive and competitive destinations on a worldwide basis.

3. Artificial Intelligence (AI):

The potential of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the tourism sector is in the improvement of services efficiency and personalization (Pillai and Sivathanu 2020). With chatbots and customer service robots powered by AI, handling tourist inquiries, suggesting itineraries based on individual preferences and language translation makes travel more convenient to visiting international tourists. Application of China's AI advancements can be made in the tourism sector of Pakistan to improve customer satisfaction and operational efficiency (Wang et al. 2016). With all of the many tourist questions about Pakistan's coastal regions, AI can handle large quantities of inquiries, so can provide customized travel recommendations and aid with language barriers so that international tourists can travel easier into Pakistan's coastal regions (Kong et al. 2022). An example could be an AI travel chatbot able to offer personalized travel itineraries with must see coastal attractions, dining options, and cultural experience offerings that fit what the tourist has expressed interests in or prefers. Such a level of service can really improve the tourist experience and create repeat visits and positive word of mouth promotion.

4. Metaverse:

Metaverse offers a form of virtual tourism and tourist activities where tourists can visit a destination virtually (Buhalis et al. 2023). Chinese tech giants like Tencent and Alibaba are spending a lot of money on the metaverse, building platforms to host virtual tours and experiences (Pillai and Sivathanu 2020). These advanced technologies can be used by Pakistan to attract tech savvy tourists from all over the world (Dhingra and Abhishek 2024). Pakistan could develop a metaverse version of Karachi's beaches or Gwadar's coast to give potential tourists a glimpse of what awaits them in a captivating virtual way, a metaverse version of these beaches. Virtual engagement can create interest and excitement and result in an increase in Pakistan's coastal tourism hot spots. The metaverse can also be a platform for virtual events, the exhibitions and cultural showcases of Pakistan's coastal areas, which get promoted to a global audience.

5. Biometric Technology:

Biometric identification and pay systems include facial recognition and fingerprint scanning that can ease tourist services and boost security (Neo and Teo 2021). Pakistan can use China's expertise in biometric technology for implementation of these systems. Hotel and tourist attraction biometric check ins reduce wait times and improve security, resulting in a smoother and more secure experience for visitors (Harun et al. 2022). For instance, tourists at a coastal resort like Gwadar can skip tedious registration with facial recognition technology, speeding up the check-in process. Biometric payment systems, similarly, can allow secure and efficient transactions whereby tourists can find it convenient to make purchases without the usual burden of cash and credit cards. Not only is convenience improved, but safety and security in Pakistan's coastal destinations are also enhanced, thereby making Pakistan's coastal destinations more attractive to international tourists.

Integration of these advanced technologies in its maritime tourism sector will not only solve existing problems but also put Pakistan on the forefront of modern tourist destinations. With strategic collaboration with China behind it, this technological transformation will help lift the tourism industry of Pakistan and help it grow economically, innovate and develop sustainably along its beautiful coastline. These innovations, when incorporated into the broader context of the blue economy, will provide a means of sustainable ocean resource use, leading to long term economic and environmental growth.

The Role of Maritime Tourism Service Provider (MTSP) SMEs

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) are indispensable to innovation, job creation and the promotion of local culture and products in the tourism industry. Among maritime tourism service provider (MTSP) SMEs are particularly

important for the development of sustainable development in the context of maritime tourism. Chinese SMEs, famous for their efficiency and innovation in tourism-related service, such as hospitality and adventure tourism, are a good opportunity for collaboration (Li et al. 2017). Through the involvement of Pakistani and Chinese SMEs in joint ventures, service quality can be improved, new tourism products introduced and sustainable practices can be ensured along Pakistan's coastlines. Partnership with Chinese SMEs would help Pakistani business to gain new market, advanced technology, and best practices in tourism management (Shah et al. 2021).

One example, for instance, is digital payment systems such as Alipay and WeChat Pay, which can be adopted to service Chinese tourists to improve their experience and convenience. In addition, training and capacity building programs are helpful in equipping local entrepreneurs and workers with the necessary skills as a leverage of the Chinese expertise on hospitality and tourism management. Moreover, Chinese inspired sustainable practices that can also be adopted by Pakistani SME's can attract environmentally conscious tourists.

In addition, SMEs can also market local handicraft and cookery, and other cultural products to the tourists to make a market for local artisans and producers. As an example, consider promoting local crafts — like pottery, textiles and jewelry — in Gwadar and Karachi by presenting it to tourists in a way they have never seen them before and yet a taste of traditional crafts.

Key areas where SMEs can benefit from collaboration include:

1. Adoption of Digital Payments:

Facilitating Transactions: And Pakistan's small and medium sized (SME) businesses can use the mobile payment systems like Alipay (Chew et al. 2020), WeChat Pay (Xu 2020) which are ruling the Chinese market to help them offer the simple and easy payment options to their Chinese tourist customers. This then not only helps with smoother transactions, but it also improves the tourist experience through way of alignment with their preferred payment method.

Tourist Confidence: Familiar payment technologies are integrated which build confidence in tourists to spend on local goods and services. Increased revenue for local businesses, greater stimulation to the economy in coastal areas, can follow.

2. Training and Capacity Building:

Skill Development: Using Chinese expertise in hospitality and tourism management, skills of local entrepreneurs and the workforce can be greatly enhanced. Areas like customer service, management practices and operational efficiency can be trained in Pakistani MTSP SMEs, so that they meet international standards (Kanwal et al. 2019).

Enhanced Service Quality: By improving the capacity of local workforce, SMEs can deliver high quality services that will attract and retain tourists. It could be from the services of hotels were they will be offered better; better guided tours and recreational activities to make the tourist satisfied and they will have a memorable experience as they would have remembered for quite some time.

3. Sustainable Practices:

Eco-Friendly Operations: Successful sustainable tourism models from China can inspire Pakistani SMEs to adopt eco-friendly practices such as waste management systems, water conservation techniques and the use of renewable energy sources (Sofield and Li 2011). These measures not only reduce the environmental footprint of tourism activities but also attract the increasing segment of eco conscious travelers (Li et al. 2017).

Community Engagement: Often sustainable practices have something to do with working with local communities to conserve cultural heritage and natural resources. By working closely with local populations, SMEs can help promote a sustainable form of tourism that is good for the environment and the community, fostering a sense of stewardship and pride among residents (Unhasuta et al. 2021).

4. Metaverse and Virtual Tourism Services:

Technological Integration through the Metaverse: The integration of emerging technologies such as the metaverse, virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and smart tourism applications is transforming the tourism experience (Buhalis et al. 2023). Through metaverse-enabled platforms, visitors can explore digital replicas of destinations, historical landmarks, or underwater ecosystems before visiting them physically (Dhingra and Abhishek 2024). This immersive engagement not only enhances visitor satisfaction but also allows small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to showcase their offerings globally at relatively low cost. By adopting metaverse technologies, SMEs can attract new customers, personalize experiences, extend their market reach beyond physical limitations, and generate new revenue streams through virtual tours, digital services, and interactive storytelling.

Unique Offerings: Kanwal et al. (2019) suggests that SMEs can implement innovative tourism products and services, which represent the special cultural and natural features of Pakistan's coastal areas. Adventure tourism activities, eco-tours, cultural heritage tours and marine based recreational services would be some of the things they could include. This will enhance the positive destination image of Pakistan's maritime and coastal areas on international platforms.

5. Local Product Promotion:

Handicrafts and Souvenirs: A collaboration between SMEs covering coastal towns such as Karachi and Ormara with local artisans can create a space for sharing tourists' homemade souvenirs that are unique to the region's cultural heritage. Not only does this support local craftsmanship but it also enriches the tourism experience with meaningful, locally sourced, memorabilia.

Farm-to-Table Initiatives: Locally grown seafood and produce can be the focus of Pasni and Ormara's farm to table dining experiences. By playing a role in facilitating these initiatives, SMEs are essential to the tourist experience: experiencing reality when dining on fresh, sustainable cuisine and to support local farmers and fishing. Not only is this approach good for supporting local economies, but it is also great for responsible sourcing and environmental stewardship.

6. Collaboration with Chinese SMEs:

Joint Ventures: The joint ventures with Chinese SMEs can provide new business models, increase operational efficiency and introduce more innovative tourism products. The partnerships can also help the companies open up to access international markets and help in the exchange of cultures.

Technology Transfer: Moreover collaborating with Chinese SMEs can offer access to advanced technologies as well as to the innovative business practices. It is digital marketing strategies, sustainable tourism practices, customer management systems that can be adopted in the local context.

Collaboration with China will enable Pakistan's hospitality, transport and recreational SMEs to provide customized services and unique experiences to coastal tourism in Pakistan, differentiating them from other destinations. The Pakistani SMEs will also be helped in thriving through government support like the financial incentives, training programs and marketing assistance in enhancing the overall growth of maritime tourism sector.

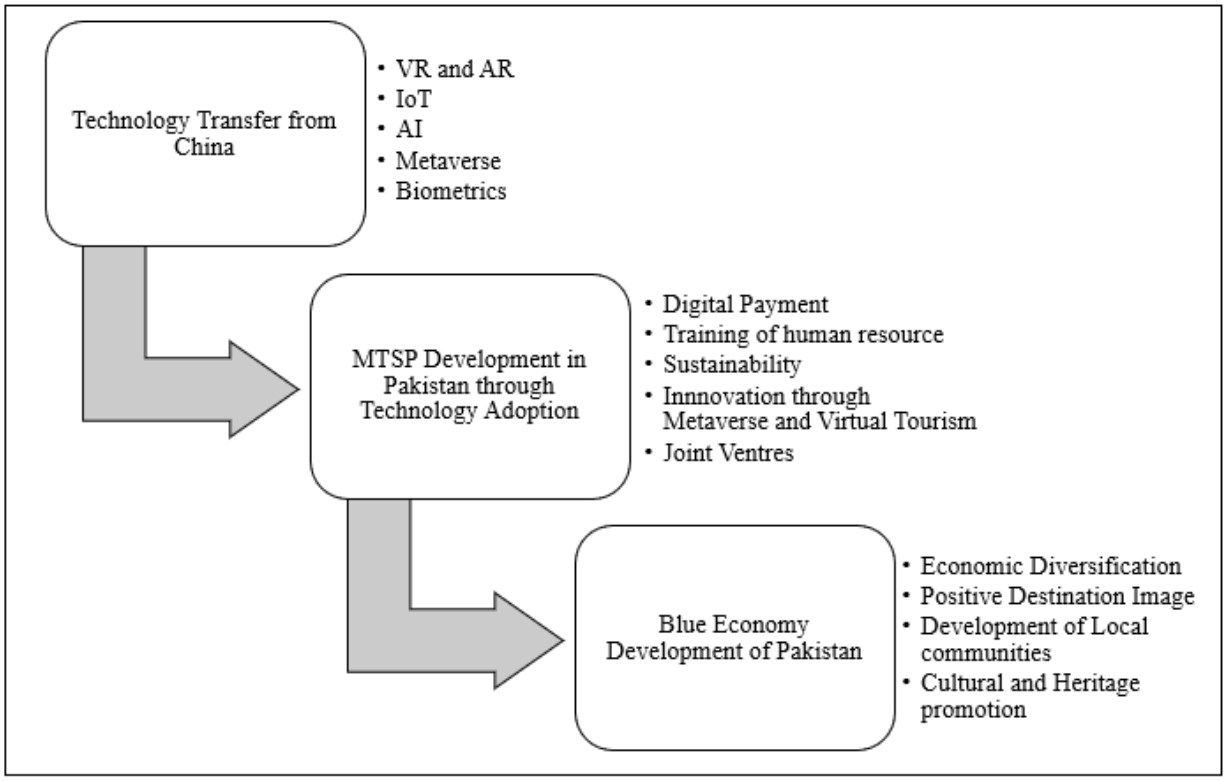


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Article

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Conclusion: Future Prospects and Vision

Sustainable use of ocean resources provides Pakistan with a great opportunity to boost economic growth through the blue economy. Maritime tourism is a key part of the blue economy and has the potential to generate economic development, create jobs and advance community development. Working with China in the context of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Pakistan can use these advanced technologies and Chinese expertise to upgrade its maritime tourism sector (Arshad and Haidong 2017).

On the journey ahead for Pakistan, one must think strategically about infrastructure development, regulatory frameworks for sustainable tourism, security measures for tourists and SME related support. Through technological innovation and collaboration with China, Pakistan can fully tap its maritime tourism potential to achieve long term economic growth, technological advancement and sustainable development along its coastal line (Anwar et al. 2022). MTSPs should move towards adoption of new technologies especially virtual tourism and metaverse tourism. Researchers should explore the readiness of MTSPs in this regard and analyze the critical factors that affect the adoption of new technologies by maritime tourism service providers in Pakistan. By integrating these efforts within the blue economy framework, the sustainable use of ocean resources will be ensured to the nation in the future for generations (Rehman 2023).

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