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Tourists' Perception and Experience towards Fairs and Festivals in Himachal Pradesh: An Empirical Study

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Abstract: Fairs and festivals are central to the cultural heritage of Himachal Pradesh and serve as major attractions for cultural tourism. This study examines tourists' perception and experience of selected indigenous fairs and festivals of Himachal Pradesh using a Tourists' Perception and Experience (TPE) scale administered to 513 respondents selected through stratified multistage purposive sampling across Shimla, Sirmour, Chamba, Kullu, and Mandi districts. The TPE scale showed good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .895$; McDonald's $\omega = .908$). Respondents rated the fairs and festivals positively overall ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 0.41$ on a five-point scale), with cultural richness and authenticity rated highest and accessibility rated lowest. No significant differences emerged by age, education, or role (tourist versus local resident). Multiple regression showed that perceived socio-economic impact ($\beta = .443$) and marketing strategies ($\beta = .290$) significantly and positively predicted TPE, while perceived problems and challenges had a significant negative effect ($\beta = -.110$), together explaining 42.9% of the variance ($R^2 = .429$). The findings offer insights into the role of indigenous fairs and festivals in promoting cultural tourism in Himachal Pradesh, with implications for tourism managers and policymakers.

Introduction

Tourism has evolved from early travel undertaken for religious, commercial, and survival purposes into a diverse global activity encompassing business, adventure, sports, medical, and cultural tourism. Cultural tourism focuses on visitors' interest in the heritage, traditions, performances, and local identity of a destination. The United Nations World Tourism Organization recognizes cultural tourism as travel undertaken for cultural purposes, including visits to heritage sites, fairs, festivals, and cultural events (Florida Department of State, 2024). Fairs and festivals are therefore important tourism attractions because they bring together the cultural identity of a region and provide visitors with opportunities to engage with local traditions and heritage.

India's tourism sector has expanded considerably due to its rich cultural and architectural heritage and the promotion of the country as a destination for domestic and international tourists. Himachal Pradesh, popularly known as Dev Bhoomi, is one of India's prominent tourism destinations. In addition to its natural landscape and adventure activities, the state is known for a wide range of fairs and festivals spread across the Dhauladhar, Satluj, Beas, and Tribal tourism circuits (Himachal Pradesh Tourism Development Cooperation [HPTDC], 2024). Major events include Kullu Dussehra, Minjar Mela, Mandi Shivratri, Lavi Mela, Shimla Summer Festival, Renuka Fair, Holi Fair, and the Manali Winter Carnival. These events reflect local traditions and beliefs while also attracting visitors and supporting employment, small businesses, handicrafts, transport, and hospitality services.

Fairs and festivals also hold deep social and religious significance for local communities. Kullu Dussehra is associated with the gathering of local deities, Minjar Mela is linked with thanksgiving for the maize harvest, and Mandi Shivratri brings together deities from numerous temples across the district. Thus, these events function both as cultural expressions and as tourism products for domestic and international visitors.

Understanding tourists' perceptions and experiences is important because government agencies and festival organizers invest considerable resources in promotion, safety, infrastructure, and visitor services. However, such efforts are not always supported by systematic evidence regarding visitor satisfaction, preferences, accessibility, organization, hospitality, and perceived benefits. Since both tourists and local residents participate in these events, their views may also differ in relation to festival management and outcomes.

The present study addresses this need by examining tourists' perceptions and experiences through a multi-item Tourists' Perception and Experience scale. It also analyses the influence of perceived socio-economic impact, marketing effectiveness, and visitor-related problems and challenges, while examining differences across age, education, and respondent category. By doing so, the study contributes to the limited empirical literature on indigenous fairs and festivals in Himachal Pradesh and offers practical insights for tourism planners, festival organizers, and policymakers.

Review of Literature

The relationship between culture and tourism has been widely examined in both global and regional contexts. Cultural resources enhance destination attractiveness, while tourism contributes to employment, income generation, and economic growth, particularly in developing economies (Arzeni, 2009; Ardahaey, 2010; Shukla, 2016). Kumar and Rana (2019) further emphasized that tourism operates through close social, cultural, and economic linkages.

Festival tourism can produce both positive and negative outcomes depending on event management, government support, and community participation. Gnanapala and Sandaruwani (2016) observed that festivals may generate economic, social, and cultural benefits, although poorly managed events can also create adverse effects. Studies on religious tourism similarly indicate that festivals can strengthen local livelihoods and community development. Sahani (2019) reported such effects in Kullu Valley, while Nair and Babu (2022) found that religious festivals contributed to sustainable livelihoods in Kerala.

Research on Himachal Pradesh also highlights the developmental value of tourism. Pal and Pal (2016) found that tourism positively affected the socio-economic life of local communities in Shimla district. Kumar (2017) stressed the importance of local cuisine in cultural tourism, whereas Thakur (2022) documented more than 200 fairs and festivals in the state and underlined their tourism potential. Kumar and Sharma (2022) further noted that tourism infrastructure and related services generate direct and indirect employment for local people. Sharma (2022) also highlighted the state's historical, tribal, and oral cultural traditions as important tourism assets.

Tourism promotion has also played an important role in increasing the visibility of festivals. National campaigns such as Incredible India and Atithi Devo Bhava have supported the promotion of cultural events and destinations (Sujith & Jisha, 2017). Budovich (2023) similarly noted that religious tourism can make a significant contribution to destination economies. However, tourism development may also create environmental pressure, infrastructure demands, and risks to cultural heritage if growth is not properly managed (Mir, 2014; Budeanu et al., 2015; Kumar et al., 2023). Kumar and Parmar (2024) showed that supportive rural tourism policies can strengthen local art, culture, and heritage in Himachal Pradesh.

Overall, the literature confirms that indigenous fairs and festivals can promote cultural tourism, employment, local enterprise, and community development. However, limited empirical research has examined how visitors evaluate these events in terms of cultural experience, socio-economic impact, promotional effectiveness, and perceived challenges. The present study addresses this gap by analysing tourists' perceptions and experiences of selected fairs and festivals in Himachal Pradesh.

Conceptual Framework

Inspired by the review of the literature, the study explores tourists' perception and experience, conceptualized as an outcome variable determined by three categories of precursor factors. The first category comprises tourists' perception of the festival's socio-economic significance as an indicator of the event's general desirability to the local community (Gnanapala & Sandaruwani, 2016; Kumar & Sharma, 2022). The second category consists of the effectiveness of various promotional measures, both digital and traditional, government-led and privately initiated, including tourism ad campaigns and word of mouth (Sujith & Jisha, 2017). Finally, tourist problems comprise the third category of factors affecting the event's desirability and sustainability in the long run. Indeed, the sustainable-tourism literature highlights the risk of festivals becoming problematic for the destination due to an insufficient response to the increasing number of visitors (Budeanu et al., 2015; Kumar et al., 2023). Thus, the study focuses on how effectively festival organizers manage such problems as crowding and the overall burden on the local destination. The study then determines the effect size of each category of factors on the outcome variable in question. In addition, the study examines whether the effect size depends on the tourists' age, level of education, and status as either local residents or visiting tourists. The methodology and results sections below describe the procedure and findings of this exploratory investigation conducted among Himachal Pradesh locals and tourists.

Research Objective

This paper addresses the following objective, drawn from a broader doctoral research programme examining the impact of fairs and festivals on tourism in Himachal Pradesh:

- To study tourists' perception and experience regarding selected fairs and festivals in Himachal Pradesh.

In addition to descriptive analysis of this objective, the study examines whether perception and experience vary across key demographic groups, and estimates the relative contribution of perceived socio-economic impact, marketing-strategy effectiveness, and visitor-reported challenges to tourists' overall perception and experience.

Research Design and Methods

• Study Area and Population

The study was performed in the north Indian Himalayan state of Himachal Pradesh, which consists of twelve districts that can be grouped into the Dhauladhar, Satluj, Beas, and Tribal tourism circuits (HPTDC, 2024). The selection criteria were based on tourism significance and the global recognition of their local festivals. Hence, five districts (Shimla, Sirmour, Chamba, Kullu, and Mandi) and their summer, folk, and harvest festivals were selected for analysis. The study's population consisted of the local community of the selected Himalayan region and tourists who visited the district's festivals.

• Sampling Technique and Sample Size

The study employed a stratified multistage purposive sampling technique. The sampling frame was partitioned into three groups based on the divisions of Shimla, Kangra, and Mandi administrative circles. From each circle, one district with a higher percentage of tourism and recognized local festivals by the Himachal Pradesh Tourism Development Corporation (HPTDC) was selected. From each of the five chosen districts, 500 questionnaires were distributed to tourists and local communities in a ratio of 1:1 (i.e., 250 respondents per group). In total, 513 questionnaires were obtained with valid responses from 264 (51.5%) tourists and 249 (48.5%) locals, forming the final sample size used for the statistical analysis.

• Research Instrument and Data Analysis

A structured questionnaire was used to collect primary data from tourists and local residents. The questionnaire included demographic information and items measuring Tourists' Perception and

Experience (TPE), Perceived Socio-Economic Impact (SEI), Marketing Strategies for Festival Promotion (MSFP), and Problems and Challenges (PCFT) using a five-point Likert scale.

The data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Cronbach's Alpha and McDonald's Omega were used to assess reliability, while Welch's ANOVA, Games–Howell post hoc test, independent-samples *t*-test, and multiple linear regression were employed to examine group differences and identify factors influencing tourists' perceptions and experiences. Statistical assumptions of normality, homogeneity of variance, independence, autocorrelation, and multicollinearity were verified before analysis.

Results and Discussion

• Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the 513 respondents. The majority were aged 18–25 years (41.3%), followed by 26–35 years (27.1%). Male respondents (54.8%) slightly outnumbered females (44.6%). Most respondents were graduates (49.7%) or postgraduates (33.7%). Tourists constituted 51.5% of the sample, while 90.6% were from Himachal Pradesh. Regarding occupation, most respondents were engaged in service (46.0%), followed by business (24.6%) and farming (23.4%).

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 513)

Variable	Category	n	%
Age	18–25 years	212	41.3
	26–35 years	139	27.1
	36–45 years	102	19.9
	46–55 years	56	10.9
	56 years and above	4	0.8
Gender	Male	281	54.8
	Female	229	44.6
	Prefer not to say	3	0.6
Education	Primary	12	2.3
	Secondary	43	8.4
	Graduate	255	49.7
	Postgraduate and above	173	33.7
	Prefer not to say	30	5.8
Marital status	Single	235	45.8
	Married	277	54.0
Role	Tourist	264	51.5
	Local resident	249	48.5
Tourist origin	Himachal Pradesh	465	90.6
	Other Indian state	44	8.6
	International	4	0.8
Income source	Service	236	46.0
	Business	126	24.6
	Farming	120	23.4
	Artisan/craftsman	31	6.0

Note. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding and missing/undisclosed responses.

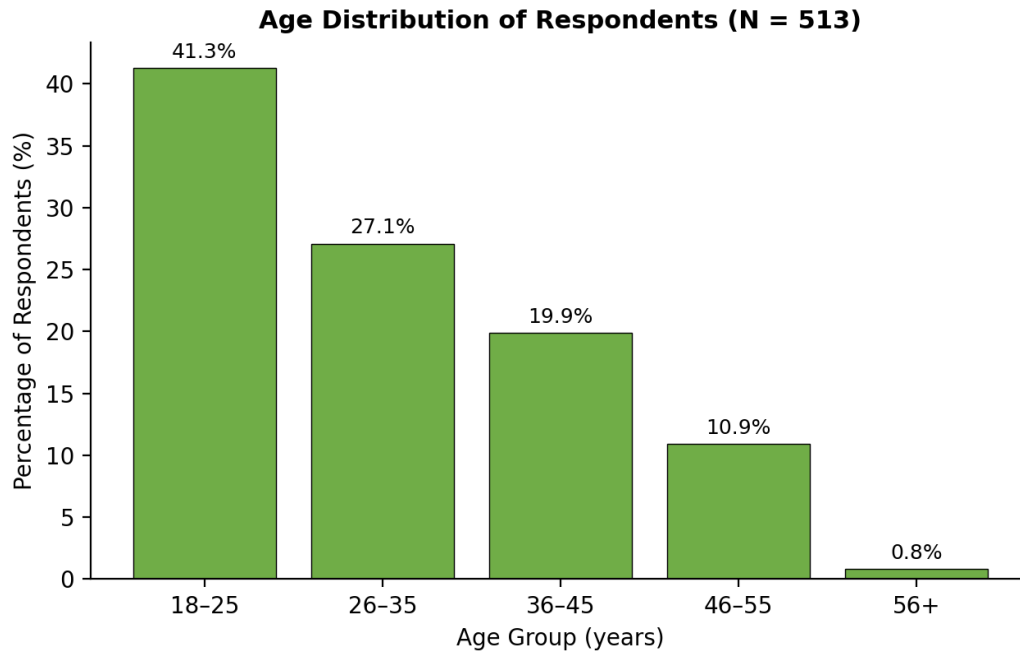


Figure 1: Age distribution of respondents (N = 513)

The sample is skewed towards younger adults as can be seen from Figure 1, with over two-thirds (68.4%) of respondents between the ages of 18 and 35. This is consistent with the overall youth demographic of the festival tourism phenomena in North India and the participation of the youth in these indigenous fairs and festivals of Himachal Pradesh, indicating that the indigenous fairs and festivals in the state are especially effective in bringing a socially active segment of its younger population, both into the physical space and onto the social networks, for their enjoyment.

- Festival Attendance Patterns**

The number of respondents attending the different fairs and festivals did not follow a regular pattern. Shivratri Mela was the largest with 48.7% of the participants, followed by Kullu Dussehra with 35.5% and Minjar Mela with 31.0%. Lesser participation was found in Summer Festival (11.1%), Lavi Mela (14.0%) and Holi Fair (6.6%) and Renuka Fair (12.1%) had moderate participation (Table 2). The attendance pattern was almost balanced with the first-time attendance being 47.0% against repeat visitors who made 48.3%, thus reflecting the fact that indigenous fairs and festivals in Himachal Pradesh lure not just first-timers but also repeat visitors as well.

Table 2: Attendance at Selected Fairs and Festivals (N = 513)

Festival	% Attended
Shivratri Mela (Mandi)	48.7
Kullu Dussehra	35.5
Minjar Mela (Chamba)	31.0
Winter Carnival (Manali)	14.6
Lavi Mela (Shimla)	14.0
Renuka Fair (Sirmaur)	12.1
Summer Festival (Shimla)	11.1
Holi Fair (Hamirpur)	6.6
Nalwari Fair (Bilaspur)	0.8

Source: Field survey data compiled by the authors (N = 513).

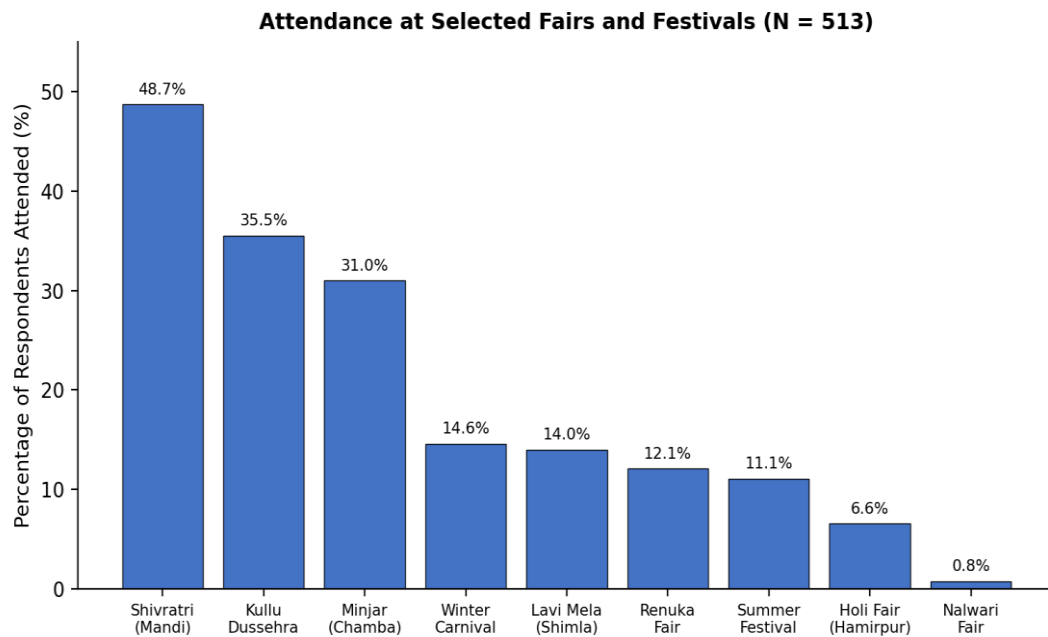


Figure 2: Attendance at selected fairs and festivals in Himachal Pradesh (N = 513).

The pattern of attendance demonstrated in Figure 2 broadly matches the size and geographical reach of the festivals sampled. The three most frequented festivals namely, Shivratri Mela, Kullu Dussehra Mela and Minjar Mela, are also the festivals most commonly mentioned in the literature pertaining to tourism promotion in Himachal Pradesh (HPTDC, 2024; Thakur, 2022) thereby providing strong evidence to suggest a possible relationship between the scale of the festival and its actual visitations. In contrast, smaller-scale or more localized activities like the Nalwari Fair had very few visitors in this sample; this may be due to fewer visitors being interested in these events or due to a smaller size, and can therefore not be separated from the present cross-sectional sample data, but is mentioned as a direction for future research.

- **Reliability of the Tourists' Perception and Experience Scale**

The ten items TPE scale had a very good internal consistency Cronbach's $\alpha = .895$; McDonald's $\omega = .908$; both indices were above the required .70 indicating good internal consistency of the scale for further analyses. The mean scores for the five point response format ranged from 3.35 to 4.03 (SD = 0.41) which shows that the respondents' response towards the fairs and festivals surveyed is fairly favourable. Prior to computing the scores, one item needed to be reverse coded; this was done before calculation of the scale mean.

- **Tourists' Perception and Experience: Descriptive Analysis**

Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics for the TPE scale. Overall, respondents reported a positive perception and experience of the selected fairs and festivals. The highest mean score was recorded for rich cultural experience (M = 4.32, SD = 0.70), followed by revisit intention (M = 4.20), recommendation intention (M = 4.20), entertainment value (M = 4.19), and authenticity of local traditions (M = 4.15). In contrast, accessibility of festival venues received the lowest rating (M = 3.18, SD = 1.24), indicating that transportation and accessibility remain areas requiring improvement.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics for Tourists' Perception and Experience (TPE) Items (N = 513)

TPE Item (abbreviated)	M	SD
Rich cultural experience	4.32	0.70
Authenticity of traditions/customs	4.15	0.66
Entertainment value of activities/performances	4.19	0.65

Accessibility of festival location	3.18	1.24
Quality of festival organization	4.03	0.74
Safety and security arrangements	3.96	0.75
Hospitality of local community	4.00	0.80
Quality of local food and crafts	4.04	0.75
Recommendation intention	4.20	0.75
Future revisit intention	4.20	0.77
Overall TPE (scale average)	4.03	0.41

Source: Field survey data compiled by the authors (N = 513).

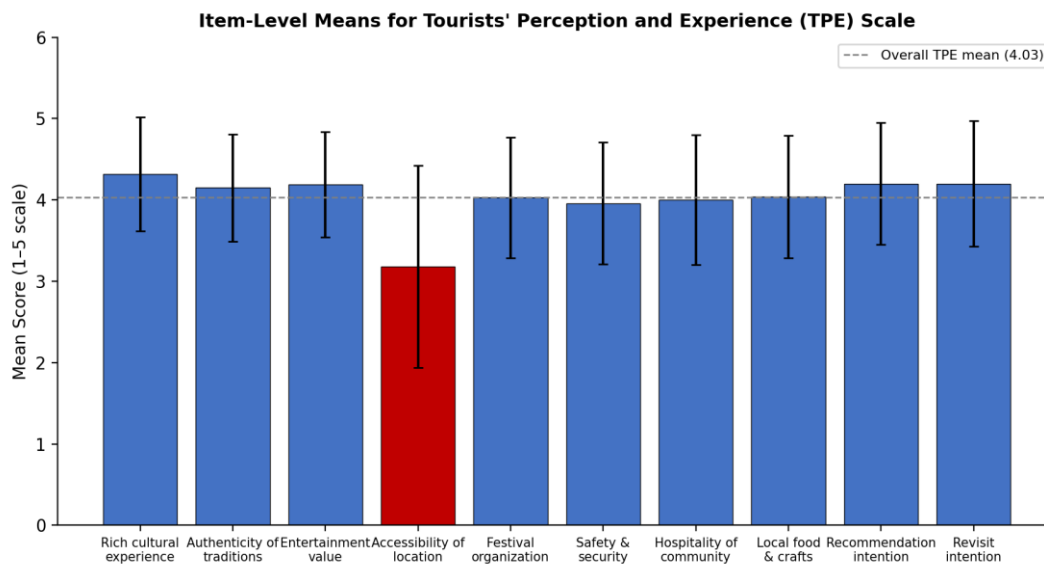


Figure 3: Item-level means for the Tourists' Perception and Experience (TPE) scale, with standard deviation error bars (N = 513). The dashed line marks the overall scale mean (4.03).

Figure 3 show that respondents reported consistently positive perceptions across most TPE items. However, accessibility of festival venues received the lowest mean score ($M = 3.18$, $SD = 1.24$), indicating that transportation and accessibility remain the main areas for improvement.

• Comparison across Demographic Groups

No significant differences were observed in tourists' perception and experience across age groups or educational qualifications. Similarly, the independent-samples t-test indicated no significant difference between tourists ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 0.43$) and local residents ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 0.37$), $t(511) = -0.03$, $p = .972$. These findings suggest that the selected fairs and festivals were perceived positively across different respondent groups.

Although overall TPE scores did not differ significantly by tourist origin, respondents from other Indian states reported significantly higher perceptions of socio-economic impact (SEI) than respondents from Himachal Pradesh (Games–Howell, $p = .017$). Due to the very small number of international respondents ($n = 4$), meaningful statistical conclusions could not be drawn for this group.

• Predictors of Tourists' Perception and Experience

A multiple linear regression analysis was performed to examine the influence of perceived socio-economic impact (SEI), marketing strategies (MSFP), and problems and challenges (PCFT) on tourists' perception and experience (TPE). The regression model was statistically significant ($R^2 = .429$, Adjusted $R^2 = .425$), indicating that the predictors explained 42.9% of the variance in TPE (Table 4). Diagnostic tests confirmed the suitability of the model, with no evidence of autocorrelation (Durbin–Watson = 1.97) or multicollinearity ($VIF = 1.04–1.69$).

Table 4: Regression Results: Predictors of Tourists' Perception and Experience

Predictor	B	SE	B	t	p
Intercept	1.831	0.131	—	14.02	< .001
Socio-economic impact (SEI)	0.366	0.036	.443	10.27	< .001
Marketing strategies (MSFP)	0.235	0.035	.290	6.67	< .001
Problems/challenges (PCFT)	-0.062	0.019	-.110	-3.22	.001

Note. $R^2 = .429$, adjusted $R^2 = .425$, $N = 513$.

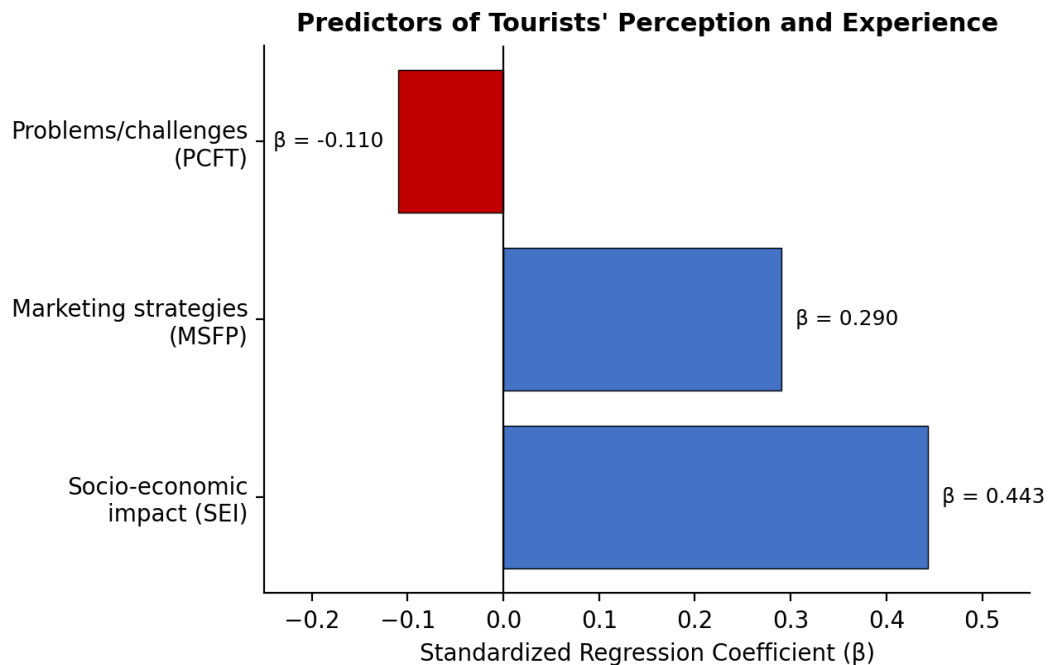


Figure 4 illustrates the standardized regression coefficients of the predictors of tourists' perception and experience. Perceived socio-economic impact ($\beta = .443$, $p < .001$) emerged as the strongest positive predictor, followed by marketing strategies ($\beta = .290$, $p < .001$). In contrast, problems and challenges ($\beta = -.110$, $p = .001$) had a significant negative influence. These findings indicate that socio-economic impact and effective marketing enhance tourists' perceptions and experiences, whereas perceived challenges reduce them.

• Discussion

This study has added some more dimensions to the existing study on cultural and festival tourism in the state of Himachal Pradesh. The findings support Thakur (2022) and Kumar (2017) that indigenous fairs and festivals are seen as culturally rich and authentic experiences with good potential to promote tourism. The above ratings are especially high; cultural tourism has been seen in the literature as a means by which visitors can engage with host communities as participants rather than passive consumers and is therefore in keeping with these ratings.

This is a significant result, as there were no differences in perception between age, education or role as a visitor. Although Gnanapala and Sandaruwani (2016) noted that the outcome of tourism would significantly rely on how the events are managed, it is concluded from the present results that among the districts and festivals analyzed the perceived outcomes of tourism are similar for a diverse group of respondents, comprising both tourists and residents. This integration of local and tourist perception is also similar to Pal and Pal (2016) and Kumar and Sharma (2022) who also concluded that festival related tourism activities is not an extractive enterprise focused only on visitors, but directly on the local communities of Himachal.

The results of the regression analysis will provide a finer-grained account of the factors that contribute to positive tourist experience. The perceived socio-economic benefit with a positive sign aligns with Kumar and Rana (2019) and Sahani (2019) who closely associated positive socio-economic impact of tourism with positive perceptions of the tourist sector. Similarly, the positive impact of marketing strategy effectiveness has been firmly established in the current studies, which is corroborated by Sujith and Jisha (2017) who found that coordinated promotional activities have a positive effect on the perception of tourist in the national level, and the current study has shown that this is also true for the individual level of regional festivals. Lastly, the negative, but relatively small, impact of perceived problems and challenges (mainly accessibility related) echoes the findings of Budeanu et al. (2015) and Kumar et al. (2023) who found that unmanaged growth will adversely affect the overall experience, but also suggests that in this sample, the level of perceived problems and challenges has not reached a point to significantly impact overall satisfaction.

The results are also relevant to the conceptual model presented earlier in this paper. The regression findings highlight the relative importance of the factors and are an improvement over the many of the studies in the literature that had examined one factor alone in their analyses, as a limitation noted in the review of literature. One of the most interesting of these findings is the significant importance of socio-economic impact over the marketing effectiveness as a predictor: this indicates that the marketing of a festival, irrespective of its effectiveness, is not likely to be able to help visitors maintain a positive impression of that festival unless it can also be seen and felt as a positive socio-economic benefit in the community. This changes the perspective on festival marketing from being an alternative approach to the real socio-economic development at the local level to one that is complementary — something directly relevant to Himachal Pradesh's tour policy making, and perhaps to other similar scenarios in the Himalayas.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, this study helps bridge the gap between the literature on festival tourism and the new field of indigenous/community-based festivals in the context of the Himalayas, which have not so far been researched in as much detail as urban festival or purely commercial contexts internationally. The high reliability of the TPE scale ($\alpha = .895$, $\omega = .908$) implies the possibility of using the instrument developed in this study in similar research and studies of festivals and events in tourism in the Indian Himalayan region in the future, and the developed predictive framework—socio-economic impact of festivals and events to marketing effectiveness combined with overall perception, net of perceived challenges,—provides a sufficiently economical model for future studies that can be tested and expanded by adding other factors that influence festivals and events in the tourism sphere, such as destination image, cultural distance, or service quality.

Practically the findings suggest some concrete suggestions for the tourism authorities, festival organizers and local self-government bodies of Himachal Pradesh. Furthermore, because access to the festival areas was the lowest-rated dimension of the visitor experience and it was also the most variably-rated dimension, targeted investments in shuttle services, signage, parking management, and last mile connectivity to the major festival sites is likely to be most cost-effective at improving the overall rating for visitors' satisfaction.

Second, since the perceived socio-economic impact of the festival was the single most important predictor of a positive experience, tourism planners should try to highlight for visitors at least some of the socio-economic benefits, for instance through signage, or guided commentary on the local involvement of vendors, artisans and community revenue sharing arrangements, making an underlying structural benefit of the festival visible to the visitors themselves. Third, the positive impact of marketing strategies continues to encourage investment in marketing state events and destinations, especially in the context of the lack of visible marketing expenditure on over two hundred fairs and festivals in the state as identified by Thakur (2022) which remain under-marketed relative to flagship events like Kullu Dussehra. Using strategies that work at high-use festivals for smaller less-popular festivals may help to fill the gaps in the festival season and dilute the crowd pressure at the most popular ones. Finally, the descriptive results of this study, which show festival perceptions to be fairly consistent across the board (tourist versus resident, education, age) point to a need for festival promotion campaigns not to be narrowly targeted, but rather focus on the dimensions of cultural authenticity and entertainment value that resonate with festival viewers overall.

Conclusion and Implications

This study shows that tourist and resident attitude towards indigenous fairs and festivals is very positive and the key points in improvement are cultural richness, authenticity and entertainment value of the indigenous fairs and festivals. The strongest positive influence on tourists' overall perception/experience is perceived socio-economic impact, as well as perceived marketing effectiveness, while perceived problems and challenges had a slight but significant negative influence. The results have several practical implications. In addition, actions to improve infrastructure and mobility in the immediate vicinity of key festival sites should be undertaken, where accessibility was the least positive aspect of the tourist experience. Secondly, since there is a positive relationship between the perceived socio-economic benefit and tourists' satisfaction, it is suggested that further investment in socio-economic linkages with the tourists like the involvement of local vendors, promotion of local handcrafts, and development of community-based hospitality will boost the satisfaction of tourists and contribute to the betterment of community welfare. Thirdly, the importance of the effectiveness of the marketing strategy is implicitly encouraging the further investments made in the promotion of Himachal's festival calendar through digital channels and cultural events, which have already taken the form of over 200 recorded fairs and festivals in the state (Thakur, 2022). Lastly, the findings presented here show that festival promotion does not have to be age- or education-specific but rather can be viewed as a general policy aimed at enhancing cultural tourism image for Himachal Pradesh.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

There are several limitations to this study. The sample (N = 513) was relatively large but was purposively sampled from five districts with high numbers of tourists, so generalizability to other districts - and to other, lower footfall festivals - may be limited. The majority of respondents were from within the state (90.6%) limiting understanding of international tourists' perceptions specifically; although some differences emerged based on supplementary analysis (e.g. lower perceived socio-economic impact) - the number of respondents in these sub-samples was too small (n = 4) for robust conclusions. Limitations of the current study include the need for further research to include more international visitors or for longitudinal designs that could provide a better understanding of visitors' perceptions over the course of the festival cycles, and the need to employ methods of qualitative research such as interviews, focus groups, and participant observation reported elsewhere in this wider research programme to illuminate and contextualise the patterns of quantitative data revealed here, especially the difficulties of access identified as a priority area for intervention.

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