

Beyond the Peaks: Exploring the Socio-Spatial Dynamics of Mountaineering Tourism in Gilgit-BaltistanAli Rehmat^a, Muhammad Babar Akram^a, Bahr ul Amin^{a*}, Tehsin Fatima^b^a Department of Sociology, International Islamic University, Islamabad Pakistan.^b Department of Sociology, Government Islamia Graduate College for Women Cooper Road Lahore, Pakistan.**Abstract**

Gilgit-Baltistan, renowned as a "Mountain Paradise," hosts three of the world's highest mountain ranges the Karakoram, Himalayas, and Hindu Kush including five peaks above 8,000 meters, such as K2 (8,611m) and Nanga Parbat. This study explores mountaineering tourism in the region, examining existing facilities, accessibility, and the lived experiences of mountaineers and porters through qualitative research employing phenomenology. Using in-depth semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, the research investigates socio-economic backgrounds, communication methods, economic conditions, transport infrastructure, administrative constraints, and health/rescue services. The findings aim to enhance understanding of mountaineering tourism's challenges and opportunities in Gilgit-Baltistan, offering insights for sustainable development in this high-potential sector.

Keywords: Mountaineering Tourism, Gilgit-Baltistan, Porters' Experiences, Infrastructure and Accessibility, Sustainable Development.

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1. Introduction

Gilgit-Baltistan, formerly designated as the Northern Areas of Pakistan, represents one of the world's most spectacular mountainous regions. Characterized by its dramatic geography featuring high-altitude peaks, expansive glaciers, pristine lakes, and lush valleys, the region offers a striking contrast between verdant lowlands and snow-capped mountains (Ali, 2020). The area's primary geographical significance lies at the confluence of three major mountain systems: the Karakoram, Hindu Kush, and Himalayan ranges, which collectively contain some of the largest glaciers outside polar regions.

The region's mountaineering significance is underscored by its concentration of extreme-altitude peaks, including five exceeding 8,000 meters - most notably K2 (8,611 m), the world's second-highest mountain - and more than fifty peaks above 7,000 meters (Baig, 2007). This remarkable concentration of high-altitude terrain has earned Gilgit-Baltistan its reputation as a "mountain paradise" among mountaineering enthusiasts (Kari et al., 2021).

Mountaineering as Adventure Tourism

Contemporary scholarship defines mountaineering as encompassing hiking, trekking, and climbing activities, which have evolved from elite pursuits to mass tourism phenomena (Apollo & Andreychouk, 2020). Doran (2019) categorizes mountaineering activities along a continuum from "soft" (e.g., hill walking) to "hard" adventure (e.g., technical climbing), making the sport accessible to diverse participant groups.

The historical development of mountaineering tourism in the region traces back to British colonial administration of the Indian subcontinent. Colonial officials established hill stations in the lower Himalayan ranges as summer retreats from the plains' heat, constructing approximately 80 resorts that later transitioned to use by local elites post-independence (Rahman et al., 2013). However, exploration of the higher Karakoram, Hindu Kush, and Himalayan ranges remained limited until systematic mapping in the late 19th century facilitated subsequent 20th century mountaineering expeditions.

Geographical and Tourism Significance

Gilgit-Baltistan's unique position at the intersection of three major mountain systems creates unparalleled mountaineering opportunities. 1. The Karakoram range spans the borders of Pakistan, India, and China, 2. while the Himalayas extend across five Asian nations (Khan et al., 2021). This transboundary geography contributes to the region's global mountaineering significance, particularly with the presence of both K2 in Baltistan and Nanga Parbat (8,512 m) in the western Himalayas - the latter renowned as one of the world's most technically challenging peaks.

Socio-Economic Dimensions

The transformation of mountaineering from elite pursuit to mass tourism activity (Apollo, 2017) has significant implications for Gilgit-Baltistan's development. As noted by the late Pakistani mountaineer Muhammad Ali Sadpara, "Mountains demand passion. Your heart needs to be in love with the mountains" (Jija, 2021, p. 12). This passion drives tourism that can potentially improve local infrastructure and services, though ● Calaretu (2011) cautions about the ecological and socio-cultural impacts that require careful management. ●

The Karakoram Highway, connecting Pakistan and China, has enhanced accessibility to the region while providing spectacular scenic routes for visitors (Kari et al., 2021). This infrastructure development facilitates year-round adventure tourism, from summer mountaineering to winter snow sports, positioning Gilgit-Baltistan as a versatile adventure destination.

Statement of the Problem

Mountaineering tourism, as defined by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2020), encompasses outdoor climbing, trekking, skiing, and related activities where tourists engage purposefully with natural environments. This form of tourism represents a significant economic driver for mountainous regions worldwide, offering substantial benefits for local economies through employment generation and infrastructure development. In Gilgit-Baltistan, mountaineering and adventure tourism hold immense potential as sustainable income sources for local communities (Khan et al., 2021). However, the sector faces multiple challenges that hinder its growth, including inadequate infrastructure, limited rescue services, and insufficient government support (Apollo & Andreychouk, 2020). Without targeted interventions from both local and federal Pakistani authorities, these obstacles may continue to restrict the region's ability to capitalize on its unique mountaineering assets.

Objective of the Study

To analyze the mountaineering tourism in Gilgit Baltistan by evaluating the existing infrastructure and support services, and explore the lived experiences and challenges of local and international mountaineers and porters.

Research Questions

This study seeks to answer the following research questions regarding mountaineering tourism in Gilgit-Baltistan:

This study will address the following key research questions:

1. How suitable and operative are the existing infrastructure, professional support services, transportation networks, communication systems and emergency response mechanisms in supporting the safety, logistics and operational needs of mountaineering in GB.
2. What are the key challenges influence the safety, efficiency and success mountaineering in GB.

Conceptual Foundations of Mountaineering Tourism

Mountaineering encompasses a spectrum of outdoor activities ranging from hiking and trekking to technical climbing (Doran et al., 2018). Scholars typically categorize these activities along a continuum:

Soft adventure activities: Including hill walking and moderate trekking
Hard adventure activities: Involving technical skills for rock climbing and high-altitude expeditions (Apollo, 2017)

The growing popularity of mountaineering tourism reflects broader trends in experiential and adventure tourism (Higham et al., 2015). This sector has evolved from an elite pursuit to a more accessible form of mass tourism, though significant barriers remain in developing regions (Mackenzie & Kerr, 2012).

The Case of Gilgit-Baltistan

Gilgit-Baltistan's unique geographical position at the confluence of three major mountain ranges - the Karakoram, Himalayas, and Hindu Kush - makes it one of the world's premier mountaineering destinations (Baig & Khan, 2021). Key geographical features include:

- Five of the world's fourteen 8,000-meter peaks, including K2 (8,611m)
- Over fifty peaks exceeding 7,000 meters

- Some of the world's longest glaciers (Rehman et al., 2013)

The region's tourism potential remained largely untapped until the construction of the Karakoram Highway (1958-1978), which dramatically improved accessibility (Hussain et al., 2017). However, despite these natural advantages, the region faces several development challenges.

Theoretical Foundations of Mountaineering Tourism

This research papers guided by the theory of Adventure Tourism given by Ralf Buckley, 2010. He linked this theory with risk management,

environmental sustainability and commercial adventure operations which is particularly relevant for high altitude mountaineering context like Pakistan. In the Pakistan context peak, such as K2, Nanga Parbat and Broad Peak attract climbers seeking technical difficulty, prestige, and personal achievement. This theory explains why infrastructure, safety systems and skilled support services are critical, as adventure tourists accept risk but still expect professional organization and emergency preparedness.

Area of the Study

Gilgit-Baltistan a mountainous territory having an area approximately 85,793 km was known as “Northern Areas” situated between Karakoram and Hindu Kush ranges in the northern side and Himalayas in the south was the area of the study. This mountainous region also has a confluence of three great mountain ranges, Himalayas, Karakoram and Hindu Kush at Bonji which lies in the footstep of Mount Godwin Austin also known as K2 the second highest mountain on earth, after the Mount Everest.

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of individuals engaged in mountaineering tourism in Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan. The phenomenological approach was selected to capture participants’ subjective meanings, perceptions, and interpretations of their professional realities in high-altitude environments.

2.2 Sampling and Participants

Using purposive sampling, a total of 30 participants were recruited, comprising 17 mountaineers and 13 porters from the Karakoram, Himalayan, and Hindu Kush ranges. Participants were selected based on their direct involvement in mountaineering expeditions and their experiential knowledge of tourism-related infrastructure, risks, and operational practices in the region.

2.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately 40–60 minutes. Interview questions focused on themes such as:

- i. Entry into mountaineering tourism
- ii. Infrastructure and destination accessibility
- iii. Equipment, training, and economic conditions
- iv. Communication, health, and rescue facilities
- v. Administrative, political, and environmental challenges

The researcher’s familiarity with the local context facilitated rapport-building and ensured representation of diverse perspectives. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

2.4 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase thematic analysis, involving:

1. Familiarization with data
2. Initial code generation
3. Theme identification
4. Theme review
5. Theme definition and naming
6. Report production

This systematic process enabled the identification of both anticipated and emergent themes related to mountaineering tourism operations and challenges. Credibility was enhanced through iterative coding and constant comparison across participant groups.

3. Results

Where appropriate, findings are contextualized within existing literature on adventure and high-altitude tourism.

Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Participants

The study sample (N = 30) consisted predominantly of male participants (86.7%, n = 26), with female participants (13.3%, n = 4) exclusively represented among mountaineers. No female porters were identified, reflecting strong gender asymmetries within the sector.

Participants’ ages ranged from 16 to 61 years. Mountaineers had a mean age of 32.4 years (SD = 12.7), while porters averaged 28.9 years (SD = 10.3). Monthly income disparities were pronounced: mountaineers earned between PKR 50,000–100,000 (M = 72,500), whereas porters earned PKR 15,000–30,000 (M = 22,100). Notably, 84.6% of porters reported reliance on supplemental income sources.

The present’s findings derived from the thematic analysis of interviews with mountaineers and porters in Gilgit-Baltistan’s mountaineering tourism sector. Four major thematic clusters emerged:

1. Pathways into Mountaineering Tourism
2. Operational and Environmental Challenges
3. Infrastructure, Accessibility, and In Situ Services
4. Communication, Health, and Rescue Systems

1. Pathways into Mountaineering Tourism

Most participants reported that their involvement in mountaineering stemmed from geographical proximity, cultural familiarity with mountains, and early exposure to trekking and climbing. For local porters, mountaineering tourism often began as a livelihood strategy rather than a voluntary career choice. While some mountaineers described mountaineering as the fulfillment of childhood aspirations, many porters emphasized economic necessity, unemployment, and limited livelihood alternatives in Gilgit-Baltistan. Several participants highlighted that although mountaineering provides seasonal income, it is accompanied by significant physical risk, social marginalization, and psychological stress.

Female mountaineers reported familial support and inspiration, particularly from fathers who were themselves involved in mountaineering. Their participation, however, remains limited and exceptional.

2. Operational Challenges and Risk Management

Equipment and Training

Participants consistently identified the **high cost of mountaineering equipment** as a major barrier, particularly for porters, many of whom rely on **used or substandard gear**. The absence of **formal mountaineering training institutions** was highlighted as a critical gap, with most skills acquired informally through experience.

Environmental and Safety Risks

Respondents emphasized exposure to **avalanches, landslides, extreme weather, and altitude-related illnesses**. Weather unpredictability remains a serious concern, despite growing awareness of forecasting technologies.

Economic Insecurity and Insurance

A recurring concern was the lack of life insurance and social protection mechanisms for mountaineers and porters. Participants noted that fear of injury or death, coupled with uncertainty about family welfare, negatively affects performance and morale.

3. Destination Accessibility and In Situ Services

Transport Links

Participants acknowledged significant improvements in road and air connectivity, particularly following upgrades to the Karakoram Highway and Skardu Road. However, weather-related disruptions, road safety issues, and flight cancellations remain common

Table 2
Thematic Analysis (N=30)

Theme	Sub-Themes	Description / Key Findings	Illustrative Evidence (Summarized)
Pathways into Mountaineering Tourism	Geographical proximity• Cultural familiarity with mountains• Economic necessity• Family influence	Entry into mountaineering is shaped by early exposure to mountainous environments. Mountaineers often view participation as passion-driven, whereas porters primarily enter the sector due to poverty, unemployment, and lack of alternative livelihoods. Female participation is largely facilitated through family support.	Participants reported growing up in mountainous regions, observing expeditions, and joining initially as porters for financial survival. Female mountaineers cited inspiration from fathers already involved in the field.
Economic Conditions and Social Inequality	Income disparities• Seasonal employment• Lack of social recognition• Supplemental income sources	Significant income inequality exists between mountaineers and porters. Porters experience economic insecurity, low wages, and limited societal recognition despite high-risk labor. Many rely on secondary income sources.	Porters described mountaineering as financially necessary but socially undervalued work, undertaken to support families despite life-threatening risks.
Equipment and Training Deficiencies	High cost of equipment• Use of substandard gear• Absence of training institutions• Informal skill acquisition	The lack of affordable equipment and formal training facilities increases vulnerability, particularly for porters. Skills are mostly learned informally through experience, increasing safety risks.	Respondents reported using old or borrowed equipment and emphasized the absence of government-supported mountaineering schools or training centers.
Environmental and Operational Risks	Extreme weather• Avalanches and landslides• Altitude-related illness• Psychological stress	Mountaineering involves constant exposure to natural hazards and uncertainty. Fear of accidents and concern for family welfare significantly affect performance and mental well-being.	Participants emphasized unpredictability of weather and the constant threat to life during expeditions.
Destination Accessibility and Transport Infrastructure	Road connectivity• Air travel reliability• Weather-related disruptions• Last-mile access to base camps	Transport infrastructure has improved due to road reconstruction and increased flights. However, accessibility remains fragile due to harsh weather, road safety concerns, and flight cancellations.	Participants acknowledged improved highways and roads to base villages, but noted frequent disruptions and safety concerns.
In Situ Services and Logistical Support	Basic accommodation• Local gastronomy• Pack animals and porters• Limited porter welfare	Basic services are generally adequate in major hubs, meeting mountaineers' modest needs. However, porters often lack adequate food, equipment, and welfare support during expeditions.	Respondents highlighted availability of guesthouses, dried foods, and pack animals, while noting inadequate support for porters.
Communication Systems	Satellite phones• Mobile and 4G services• Cost barriers	Satellite phones remain essential at high altitude but are expensive. Expansion of mobile and 4G services has significantly improved communication, including at some base camps.	Mountaineers reported improved connectivity due to mobile towers, while porters faced limited access due to cost.
Health and Rescue Facilities	Absence of medical infrastructure• Lack of formal rescue agencies• Reliance on military assistance	There is no dedicated health or rescue system for mountaineering tourism. Emergency response depends largely on self-arrangements or military intervention during major incidents.	Participants reported no specialized hospitals or rescue units for mountaineers in Gilgit-Baltistan.
Administrative and Political Constraints	Temporary bans due to security incidents• Border-related restrictions• Absence of religious constraints	While most mountains are currently open, political restrictions persist in disputed border regions. No religious barriers to mountaineering were reported.	Respondents referenced past temporary bans and ongoing restrictions in Siachen due to geopolitical tensions.
10 Gilgit-Baltistan as a Global Mountaineering Destination	Unique geographical convergence• High-altitude peak density• Optimal climbing season	Gilgit-Baltistan is regarded as a premier mountaineering destination due to the convergence of major mountain ranges and numerous 7,000–8,000 m peaks. June and July are considered optimal climbing months.	Participants described the region as a "mountaineering paradise" with global significance.

In Situ Services

Basic in situ services—such as guesthouses, local food, pack animals, and porters—were generally considered adequate in major hubs like Gilgit, Skardu, and Hunza. Mountaineers reported modest service expectations, while porters highlighted limited access to food and equipment during expeditions.

4. Communication Systems

Satellite phones remain the primary communication tool in high-altitude expeditions, though they are financially inaccessible to most porters. The expansion of mobile and 4G services, including connectivity near K2 Base Camp, has significantly improved communication for mountaineers and support staff.

Health and Rescue Facilities

Participants unanimously reported the absence of dedicated health facilities and formal rescue systems for mountaineering tourism in Gilgit-Baltistan. Emergency response largely depends on self-managed

arrangements or military assistance, particularly helicopter evacuations during major incidents.

Administrative, Political, and Religious Constraints

While no mountains are currently subject to administrative or religious restrictions, **political constraints persist** in disputed border regions, particularly in the Siachen area. Temporary bans following security incidents were acknowledged as necessary but disruptive to tourism activities.

Gilgit-Baltistan as a Mountaineering Destination

Participants consistently described Gilgit-Baltistan as a globally significant mountaineering destination, owing to the convergence of the Karakoram, Himalayan, and Hindu Kush ranges, extensive glaciation, and numerous high-altitude peaks. The months of June and July were identified as the most suitable for mountaineering due to favorable weather conditions.

Summary

Overall, the findings reveal that while Gilgit-Baltistan possesses exceptional natural potential for mountaineering tourism, systemic challenges related to training, safety, economic inequality, and institutional support continue to undermine the sustainability and equity of the sector.

4. Discussion

The current study highlights that how did mountaineers and porters get involved in mountaineering? As some people involved in mountaineering because they think that there are abundant benefits of mountaineering. The most apparent benefits are improving both your physical fitness and pulmonary fitness levels as well as reducing body fat through aerobic exercise. In other words mountaineering is one of the most popular and very expensive sport activity in the world mainly played for the pleasure of mind. As mountain climbing increased the sport of mountaineering became more accessible. Now some people compare world's highest peak Mount Everest to highway, because every year incredible number of mountaineers attempt to summit.

Mountaineering accessibility is possible only when the visitors or climbers are mentally as well as physically prepared for fundamental limitations and short term challenges. As this study as well as the other research articles highlights the fact that access to the mountains or mountaineering is not possible if appropriate means of transport links and real physical accessibility is not available. Both are these factors are simultaneously necessary but physical accessibility is important one. For the proper access of mountains a comprehensive assessment of all contributing factors is necessary.

For proper mountaineering accessibility, proper planning and availability of supporting services is thorough necessary. Fundamental limitations and short-term challenges may jeopardise the whole plan for mountaineering. Mountaineering become only possible when all the supporting components are available. Social accessibility is another factor that seems mandatory to be fulfilled. If it laces, mountaineering permits may not be issued to access the destination. For example, china has banded the mountaineers below sixteen years and above seventy-five years while Nepalese officials are considering it keenly.

Challenges for Mountaineering

Even if, accessibility links are properly available, access to any mountain can be interrupted by some other factors like a massive avalanches, a landslide or an earth quick. Even if all other requirements and services are up to the mark but there is in harmony and disagreement with the mountaineering operators, expeditions may result into premature finish. Attack of sharps in 2013 at Mount Everest is one of the example.

Sudden and unexpected weather conditions may also effect mountaineering even if it was well planned during the prime season. Due to several expected conditions, authorities may reschedule or cancel the trip. Airplane crash in 2008 is the example.

Conclusion

This study explored the current state of mountaineering tourism in Gilgit-Baltistan, focusing on available facilities and the lived experiences of mountaineers and porters. It revealed that despite improvements in infrastructure—such as better road access via the Karakoram Highway and increased air travel options—porters continue to face significant economic hardship, often working under tough conditions due to poverty and lack of alternatives. While accommodation and communication facilities, including mobile and 4G services even at high-altitude camps like K2 base camp, have improved considerably, issues remain in areas such as health services, safety, and proper training infrastructure. Equipment costs are prohibitively high for many porters, who resort to using risky secondhand gear. Moreover, while administrative restrictions on mountaineering have lessened, geopolitical tensions still limit access to some peaks. The natural beauty

and unique convergence of the Karakoram, Himalaya, and Hindu Kush mountain ranges make the region ideal for mountaineering tourism. The study concludes that with proper support—such as life insurance, training centers, and fair compensation—the sector could flourish further, improving both tourism and the livelihoods of those who support it.

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