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Nature of Motorcycle Tourism in Trans Himalayan Region of Spiti and Kinnaur

*¹Barjesh Kumari, ¹Sushma Rewal Chugh

About Article

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About Author

¹ Himachal Pradesh University, Shimla, India

Contact @ Barjesh Kumari
kumaribarjesh7@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Motorcycle tourism is recognized within the frameworks of drive, eco, adventure, mountain, and special interest tourism. To explore its specific nature in the Trans-Himalayan region, a survey was conducted with 400 tourists. The findings reveal a distinct demographic profile and highlight the unique characteristics of motorcycle tourism in this rugged terrain characterized by freedom in travel planning, extended tours, and a mix of adventure and authentic cultural experiences. This research underscores the importance of developing targeted tourism strategies and enhancing infrastructure to meet the preferences of this vibrant, young, and domestic segment presenting key opportunities for tourism operators and policymakers.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The existence of Sanskrit words *Deshatan*, *Tirthatan*, and *Paryatan* meaning travel for seeking economic gains, fulfilling religious obligations, and attaining knowledge respectively suggests that tourism in the form of an economic, religious, or seeking activity existed in India. Bharat the other name for India itself is an amalgam of *Bha* the light and *Rat* taking pleasure in. *Deshbhramn* in Bengali writings also means broadening the knowledge of the world. West came up with the word Tour derived from the *Torah* of Hebrew meaning studying, learning, or searching suggesting a knowledge-seeking activity (Sharma, 2011), or from French, Latin, and Greek words meaning tower, lathe, and circle respectively. Another theory proposes its evolution from *de la tour* a proprietor name of Burgundy into the generic phrase of taking a tour in the 16th century. In Nineteenth-century dictionaries, it was adventure, fun, and curiosity. The grand tours were a traditional custom in Europe around that period. Leiper, (1983) says every era has and will bring new forms of tourism necessitating continual evolutionary changes in the travel and tourism industry.

Tourism has been approached from diverse perspectives, with scholars like Cohen (1974) defining tourists by their voluntary, temporary, long-distance, and pleasure-seeking nature. Leiper (1979) critiqued narrow economic models and proposed an open system that incorporates the human element, geographic regions, and the tourism industry, all interacting within social, cultural, and technological contexts. Earlier definitions, such as those by Hunziker and Krapf (1941) and Guyer Feuler (1905), emphasized tourism as a socio-economic phenomenon driven by the desire for novelty, relaxation, and cultural exchange, while McIntosh and Geolender or Jafari highlighted the complex relationships between tourists, businesses, and host communities.

Tourism, as in International Recommendations on Tourism Statistics, refers to the activity of visitors traveling outside their usual environment for less than a year, primarily for leisure, business, or personal purposes, without being employed at the destination (United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2008). This definition includes time, place, and purpose dimensions, classifying visitors as tourists or excursionists. The 1980 Manila Declaration emphasizes the spiritual aspects of tourism, highlighting human fulfillment, education, cultural respect, and dignity over material concerns (UNWTO, 1980).

While traditional definitions emphasize physical travel, modern advancements such as virtual tourism are challenging these perspectives. Unlike other industries, tourism is defined by the consumer's activity rather than the product consumed (Chaudhary, 2010). Sykes *et al.*, (2012) propose a straightforward definition of a motorcycle tourist that aligns with the UNWTO criteria, adding the motorcycle as a mode of transportation. This includes on-road or off-road travel, whether for a full tour or a day trip, between destinations, either as a rider or a pillion, for charity or other recreational events, but not for commuting purposes.

The Trans-Himalayan region of Spiti and Kinnaur in Himachal Pradesh, characterized by its rugged terrain and scenic landscapes, has substantially evolved tourism over the past decade. From 2012 to 2022, tourism activities in the Kinnaur

and Lahaul-Spiti districts increased with a growth rate of 25% especially, Lahaul-Spiti experienced a remarkable growth rate of 68%. However, foreign tourist arrivals particularly decreased, and domestic tourism has seen a surge of 33.5% during the same period. Motorcycle tourism, in particular, has emerged as a prominent and dynamic segment. Motorcycle tourism in this region signifies a blend of adventure and gaze. The visually captivating landscapes and challenging geography pull motorcycle enthusiasts to the area. This paper aims to explore the nature of motorcycle tourism in the Trans-Himalayan region of Spiti and Kinnaur, analyzing the profile of motorcycle tourists, and the characteristics of the tour. By examining its nature, we can gain insights into the broader tourism patterns in these regions and identify opportunities for sustainable development and enhanced visitor experiences.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Motorcycle tourism is put into various forms. Cappelloni *et al.*, (2019) argue that moto-tourism is a subset of drive tourism, but is distinct due to its focus on the pleasure of riding. Referencing Prideaux & Carson (2011), they highlight drive tourism's flexibility and freedom, typically involving cars. Moto-tourism is considered more sustainable, as motorcycles are fuel-efficient and riders contribute to local economies by purchasing goods en route (Cater, 2017). Motorcyclists' experience is more immersive, with physical engagement and a closer connection to nature, distinguishing it from car-based drive tourism. The key motivation for motorbike tourists is the enjoyment of riding, with 82.4% of Italian riders identifying it as their primary reason for travel (Cappelloni *et al.*, 2019). While both forms of tourism involve multi-destination travel, motorbikes offer greater freedom to access remote areas (Ramoa *et al.*, 2021).

Adventure tourism, as defined by the Adventure Travel Trade Association (ATTA), includes at least two of three key elements: physical activity, interaction with the natural environment, and cultural immersion. Motorbike touring, widely marketed as an adventure activity, embodies these elements. Motorcycle brands like Royal Enfield highlight this adventurous spirit in their promotions, as seen with the Himalayan model's ad showcasing snow-covered peaks and Buddhist monks, alongside taglines like "Adventure inside you." Publications such as Brake, Overland, and Adventure Bike Rider, along with authors like Chris Scott, further contribute to the adventure narrative surrounding motorbike tourism. Ramoa *et al.*, (2021) tested Buckley's (2012) adventure tourism motivations on motorbike tourists, affirming that motorbike travel aligns with the adventure tourism domain. Key motivators of contact with nature, excitement, friendships, and overcoming challenges parallel those of traditional adventure tourism. In another study, Scherhag *et al.*, (2022) examined motorbike tourism in the DACH region (Germany, Austria, Switzerland) and concluded that motorbike tourism is a subcategory of adventure tourism, particularly in remote areas. They highlighted 'freedom' as a psychographic characteristic of motorbiking and demonstrated that it meets all three criteria set by ATTA, including cultural immersion through post-tour lifestyle changes among participants.

Ecotourism, as defined by The International Ecotourism Society (2015), is "responsible travel to natural areas that



conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people.” This concept involves responsible travel practices inspired by sustainability. According to the UNWTO, ecotourism encompasses four essential elements: admiration of nature, education and learning, conservation of natural sites, and sustainability, particularly local employment and economic contributions. However, many travelers overlook the sustainability aspect, assuming that merely visiting natural sites and paying for their maintenance qualifies as ecotourism. Ecotourism is also recognized as one of the 34 adventure tourism activities by the ATTA.

Ramoa *et al.*, (2021) examined motorcycle tourism in both eco and adventure tourism contexts. Using the Weavers and Lawton model, they assessed the motivations of motorbike tourists, focusing on interests in nature, local culture, and conservation efforts. Their findings showed that motorbike tourists demonstrate a strong interest in these areas, with nature and local culture being the most frequently mentioned factors. These results led the researchers to conclude that motorcycle tourism fits well within the framework of ecotourism.

Scherhag *et al.*, (2022) were the first to categorize motorbike tourism as a form of Special Interest Tourism (SIT), defining it as “a niche form of tourism where motorbike travel is central. This involves riding through scenic, winding routes with minimal traffic, often on less-known paths. Group travel is typical, as interaction with fellow enthusiasts is a key aspect of the experience.” Special Interest Tourism evolved as a response to mass tourism, focusing on unique experiences driven by individual passions and interests (Agarwal *et al.*, 2018). Motorbike tourism fits this model well, catering to those who derive pleasure from motorcycle riding for leisure. Research into motorbike tourism indicates that the primary motivation for enthusiasts is the enjoyment of riding itself. Weiler and Hall (1992) noted that special interest tourists often build social networks within their niche, a trend evident in motorbike tourism. Sykes (2021) introduced the concept of ‘clanning’ to describe the formation of social groups among individuals with similar interests at events, and ‘neo-tribes’ for first-time connections. While special interest tourism typically centers around specific activities or features of a destination (Weiler & Hall, 1992), Rittichainuwat (2018) suggested that tourists often visit destinations as part of a broader experience. For motorbike tourists, the appeal may extend beyond just the riding experience to include the destination itself. Special Interest Tourism encompasses four types of experiences: rewarding, enriching, adventurous, and educational (Warto *et al.*, 2018). Motorbike tourism, with its blend of adventure and community engagement, aligns well with these categories.

According to the UNWTO, Mountain Tourism refers to “tourism activities conducted within a defined geographical area such as hills or mountains, characterized by distinctive features related to landscape, topography, climate, biodiversity (including flora and fauna), and local communities. It includes a wide range of outdoor leisure and sports activities.” Mountains and rural areas offer tourists cooler temperatures, clean air, rich biodiversity, and cultural experiences, but they also face sustainability challenges as highlighted in the FAO and UNWTO report “Mountain Tourism—Towards a More Sustainable Path” (2021).

Weddel (2014) investigated the preferences of recreational motorbikers touring the Blue Ridge Parkway, a protected scenic region, and found that mountain scenery and challenging roads were significant motivators for choosing mountainous routes. Similarly, Cater (2012) observed that recreational motorbikers prefer peripheral locations with mountainous and scenic roads, noting an increase in visitors to the scenic mountain region of Ceredigion. If the enjoyment of motorbiking is closely tied to specific landscapes, topographic features, or unique biodiversity, particularly in mountainous areas, then motorbike tourism aligns well with the mountain tourism sector. Previous research supports the notion that motorbikers are drawn to mountainous scenery and challenging roads.

Motorcyclists often face negative portrayals in the media. However, academic literature reveals a more nuanced picture of riders. Research indicates similarities in the demographic profiles, travel characteristics, income and spending patterns, and information sources of motorcycle tourists (Cater, 2017; Kruger *et al.*, 2015; Sykes & Kelly, 2016; Weddell, 2014; Cappelloni *et al.*, 2019; Frash *et al.*, 2019; Park, 2016). These studies describe motorcyclists as predominantly male, older, and affluent individuals who travel in groups, sharing information and spending money in rural areas on food, fuel, accommodation, and other necessities. This group plays a crucial role in supporting local economies at their destinations. Kruger & Venter (2020) identified four lifestyle categories among motorcyclists: socializers (enjoying social interactions), outdoor enthusiasts (engaging in activities like bird watching), event-goers (attending various events), and sports fans (participating in or watching sports). Cater (2017) also outlined four types of motorbike tourists recognized by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board: independent travelers, clubs organizing tours and rallies, specialist motorcycle tour operators, and attendees of biking events. This classification reflects the varying roles of individuals and organizations in arranging motorcycle tours. Similar categories are present in India, including specialized tour operators, regional or brand-specific motorcycle clubs, independently organized events, and solo or small group travelers. The spending behavior of motorbike tourists at events has been extensively studied by Kruger *et al.*, (2015) and Park (2016). These events are important for both tourism and the local economy, as reported by Berić *et al.*, (2012) and Kruger *et al.*, (2015).

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

This exploratory study first explored the literature review to establish what form of tourism motorcycle tourism fits into. To further uncover the nature of motorcycle tourism in trans Himalayan context a quantitative study is conducted based on a structure’s questionnaire.

3.2. Sample Selection

Spiti is one of the popular destinations in trans Himalayas for motorcycle enthusiasts. The route to the destination is through Kinnaur, Shimla, and Kullu districts. A time and place sampling technique is used in which the potential places and time where and when the respondents will be available is selected to collect



data. The tourist attractions are covered in day time and hotels early in morning or late in night. Additionally, a large sample size of 400 is chosen to ensure variability. It is ensured that only one participant from the entire group is included in the study.

3.3. Ethical Considerations

The purpose of the study is clearly disclosed to the respondents while collecting data. The data is not manipulated or handled unethically during the entire process of research.

3.4. Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics and Frequency distribution is used for analysis utilizing Microsoft Excel.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The demographic data reveal a male-dominated population. Although pillion riders are also included in the definition of motorcycle tourists, there is a clear gender disparity, with 95.75% of the sample being male. The reasons for this disparity are unknown; however, potential factors could include personal disinterest, cultural influences, societal norms, or perceived risks. The motorcycle tourism market in this region is predominantly domestic, with only two percent of tourists being foreign (Spanish and Israeli). This may reflect a rise in domestic tourism in India, as statistics indicate a similar trend. Foreign tourist arrivals in the region have drastically decreased, while domestic tourism has increased over the past decade. A majority of 69.5% of tourists are unmarried, possibly due to fewer family responsibilities, fewer people involved in decision-making, greater freedom of choice, more risk-taking behavior among singles, and a preference for solo tours. Family tourism may be more common among married individuals, though a notable 30.5% of participants are married and still choose to engage in this form of tourism.

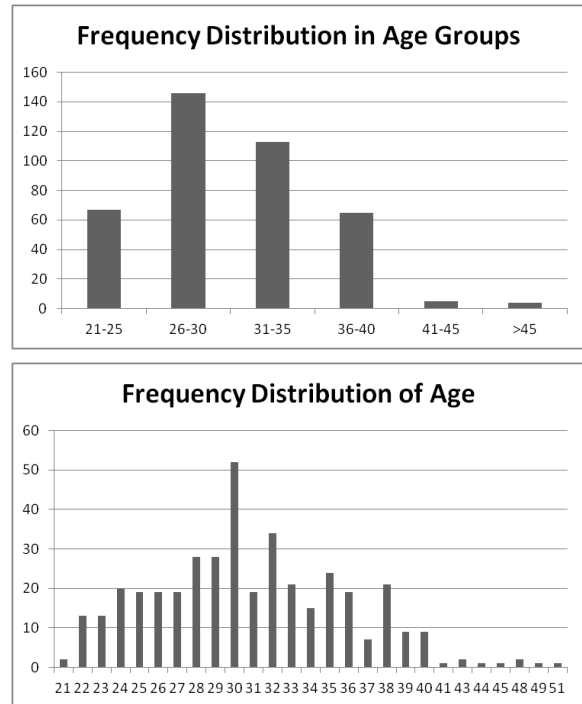


Figure 2. Frequency Distribution of Age and Age Group

The analysis of annual income data shows that the largest segment of tourists, 37%, falls within the middle-income range of ₹5-10 lakh. This is followed by 32% who belong to the lower middle-income bracket (₹2-5 lakh), and 15% who are in the higher middle-income category (₹10-20 lakh). A smaller share, 10%, are from high-income households earning more than ₹20 lakh, while 6% are in the low-income group, earning ₹2 lakh or less. The average income of ₹1,032,555 and a median of ₹700,000 indicate that most tourists are positioned within the lower middle to higher middle-income levels. Additionally, the mode of ₹1,000,000, representing the most common income, reinforces this concentration in the middle-income brackets. The 95% confidence interval, which ranges from ₹927,013 to ₹1,138,097, suggests that the true mean annual income likely falls within this span. The income data also highlight significant diversity, with incomes ranging from ₹0 (typically students or homemakers) to ₹7,000,000. The standard deviation of ₹1,073,714 underscores the variation in financial backgrounds among tourists. The income distribution is skewed to the right, with a skewness of 2.42, showing that a higher number of tourists are from lower-income groups, while the presence of wealthier individuals is less common. The kurtosis of 6.57 points to a distribution with heavier tails and outliers, indicating that some tourists report significantly higher incomes than the rest of the sample. The appeal to the middle-income group hints at the affordability factor, the young population who prioritize participation over luxury, though the presence of higher income suggests the scope of premium products as well. The majority of the tourists surveyed work in the private sector, making up 61.25% of the respondents, highlighting a significant representation from this field. Business owners and the self-employed form 16.5% of the group, with government employees following at 14.75%. A smaller portion, 5.5%, are engaged in temporary projects or freelance work, reflecting a



Figure 1. Gender, Nationality, and Marital Status of Motorcycle Tourists

The tourists are generally young, with a median and mode age of 30 years. The mean age is 30.82, and the distribution is slightly skewed to the right, with a positive skewness value of 0.53, indicating a larger proportion of younger participants. However, the age range from 21 to 51 suggests that motorcycle tourism appeals to both younger and older individuals. The standard deviation of 5.17 indicates a moderate spread. When age is grouped into 5-year intervals, the majority falls within the 26-30 range, followed by the 31-35 range, with those above 45 being the least frequent.

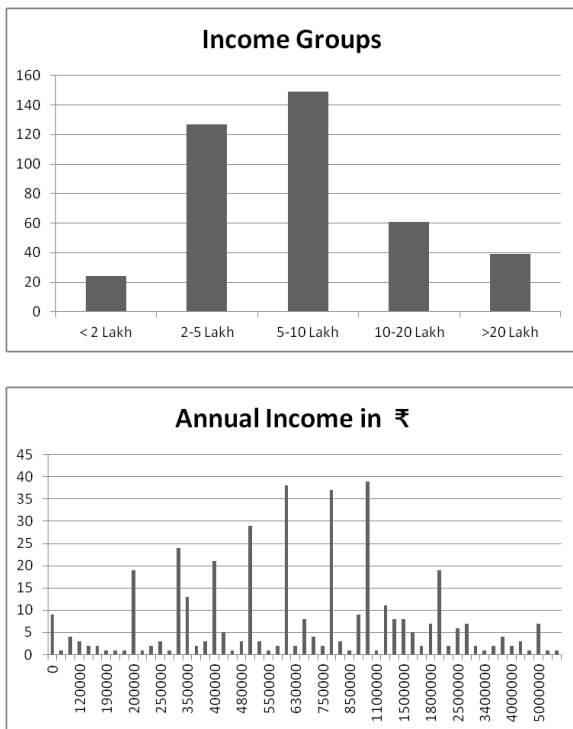


Figure 3. Frequency Distribution of Annual Income

minority involved in more flexible career paths. Lastly, students and homemakers make up 2% of the respondents, representing the smallest segment in the survey. A word cloud provides further insight into the professional roles of motorcycle tourists, with engineers, particularly software engineers, as well as those in the service sector and banking, being the most prominent. These careers and particularly private sector jobs might lead individuals to seek adventure-based activities like motorcycle tourism as a form of escape and stress relief. This aligns with the idea that those in demanding careers are drawn to the freedom and thrill of motorcycle travel as a break from their routine work environments. With a high percentage of participants in structured roles such as those in engineering and banking, there may be opportunities for organized group tours, possibly targeting corporate employees or teams seeking bonding or retreat experiences through adventure tourism. The educational background of most motorcycle tourists reveals that 59% have completed undergraduate degrees. Around 31.75% have pursued postgraduate education, 5.25% hold intermediate or diploma qualifications, and the smallest group, 4%, have obtained doctoral degrees. In terms of fields of study, the majority are educated in engineering, particularly in software and civil engineering. Management and pharmaceutical studies are also common disciplines represented in the data. The educational and professional backgrounds suggest that motorcycle tourism in this context attracts a knowledgeable and skilled demographic, providing opportunities to develop specialized services and experiences that cater to their preferences for structured, meaningful, and intellectually stimulating travel experiences. Motorcycle tours in Spiti typically last about 8.94 days, with a slight margin of error of 0.12 days. At a 95% confidence level, the average duration ranges from roughly 8.69 to 9.19 days.

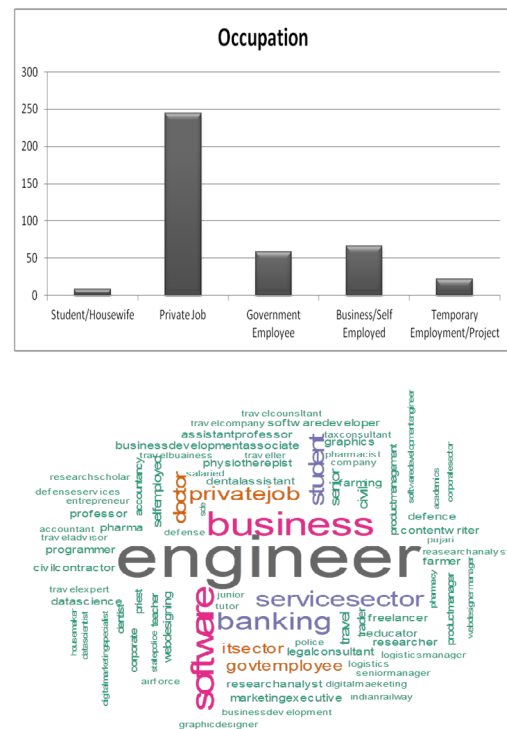


Figure 4. Occupation Details

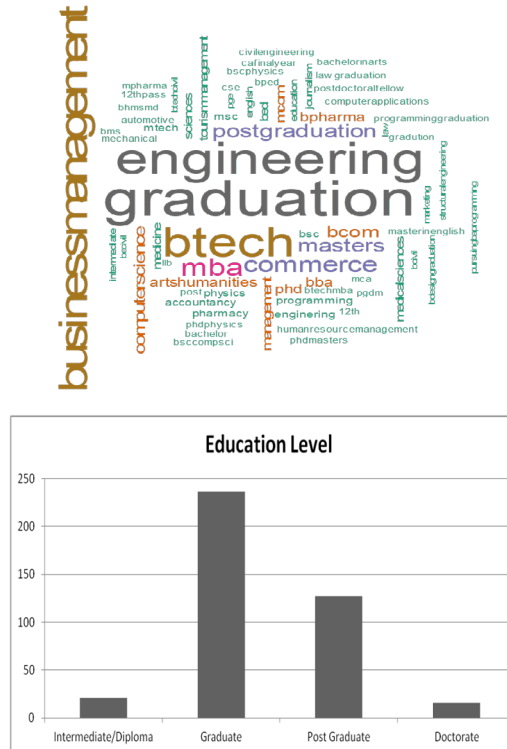


Figure 5. Education Details

Both the median and the most common tour length (mode) is 9 days, indicating consistency around this duration. However, tour lengths can vary widely, with the shortest being 4 days and the longest stretching to 16 days, giving a range of 12 days. The shorter duration is possible for those using motorcycles for day trips or sightseeing at a destination. However, the majority of motorcycle tourists in Spiti are dedicated enthusiasts who

use their motorcycles for extended periods. The average deviation from the mean is 2.45 days, and a skewness of 0.76 indicates a moderate rightward skew. This means that while most tours cluster around 9 days, some extend slightly longer. So, motorcycle tourists choose this mobility option for entire circuit or right from the origin.

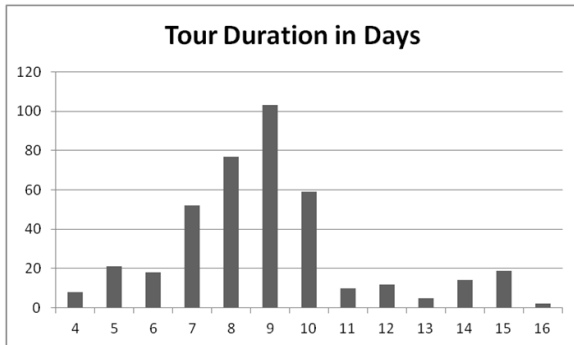


Figure 6. Motorcycle Tours' Duration

The motorbike tourist market in Spiti is diverse, with 60 individuals traveling alone, 102 touring with a companion, and 119 each in smaller groups of fewer than 12 and larger groups of more than 12 members. This variety illustrates the broad appeal of Spiti as a destination for all types of travelers, including solo adventurers. Occasionally, solo travelers join group tours without prior acquaintance with other participants, often choosing from available seats in group packages advertised for specific dates. Additionally, some group tours consist of affinity groups, such as people from the same locality or workplace. Among the duos, the specifics of whether they ride the same bike or different ones are not recorded.

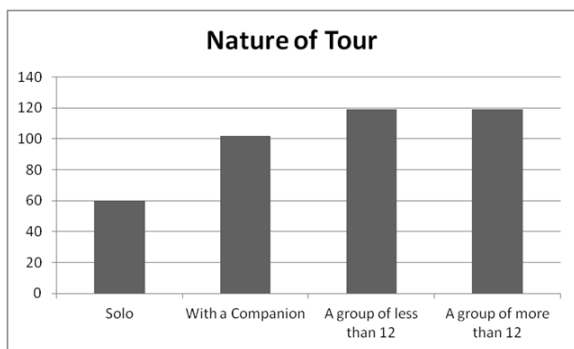


Figure 7. Nature: Group, Solo, or Duo

The organizational preferences shed light on the different styles of motorbike tours. A total of 151 tourists book their trips through travel agencies, operators, or online platforms, while 20 travel with motorbiking clubs or groups. The majority, 229 tourists, prefer to plan their tours independently. The frequency of these tours varies only a small number, 29, go on motorcycle tours very frequently. In contrast, a significant portion, 193, take tours once a year; 79 tours quarterly, and 34 do so every six months. Meanwhile, occasional riders and those on their first or second tour are relatively few, with 41 and 26 respectively.

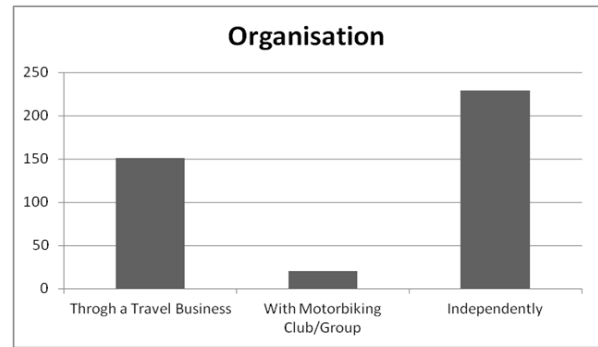


Figure 8. Organised or Independent Tour

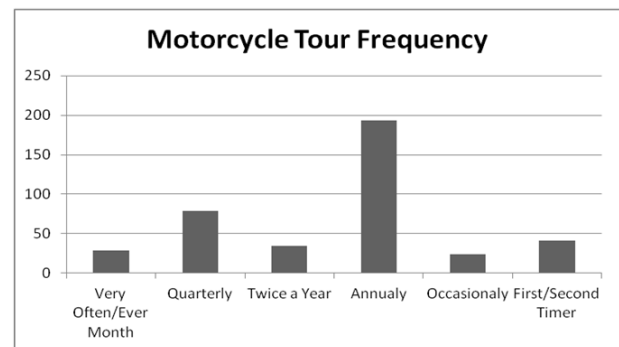
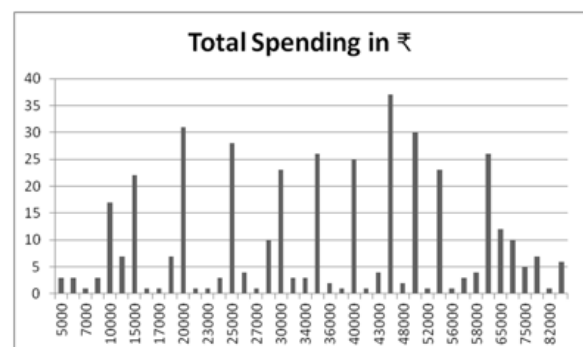


Figure 9. Frequency of Motorcycle Tours

The spending on motorcycle tours ranges from a minimum of ₹5,000 to a maximum of ₹85,000, creating a total range of ₹80,000. The distribution shows a slight rightward skew with a value of 0.33, indicating some higher spending amounts. The median expenditure is ₹36,000, while the most common (mode) spending is ₹45,000. The average spending is ₹38,450, with a standard error of ₹953.52. With a 95% confidence interval of ₹38,450 ± ₹1,874.55, the true average expenditure likely falls within this range. Many tourists are willing to invest in their experience, there is also a significant segment that prefers more economical options. Tour operators should offer flexible pricing and packages to accommodate both high-spending tourists and those with tighter budgets.

Regarding transportation, 196 tourists use their motorbikes, while 203 rent motorbikes. Of those who rent, 163 do so in Himachal Pradesh and 41 rent in Chandigarh or Delhi. Tourists riding their motorbikes are likely traveling from their place of origin, which, if not from a neighboring state, could affect both the duration and cost of their tour.



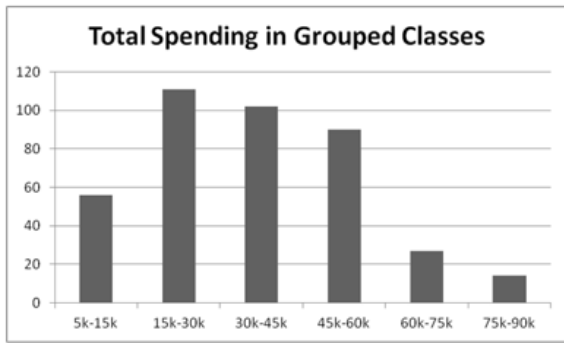


Figure 10. Tourists' Spending

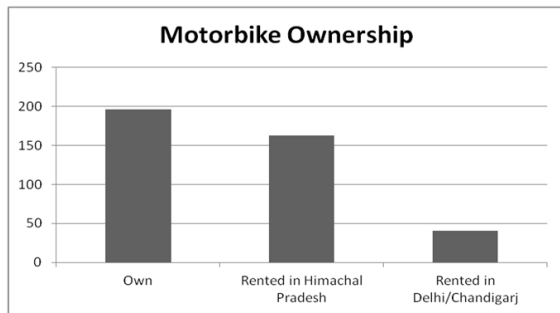


Figure 11. Motorcycle Ownership

A total of 292 tourists opted for hotels, 297 chose homestays, 172 stayed in luxury camps, 47 preferred self-camping, and 36 selected other accommodations like Zostel, hostels, and dormitories. The choice of accommodation varies based on factors such as travel organization, number of tourists, comfort levels, convenience, and cost.

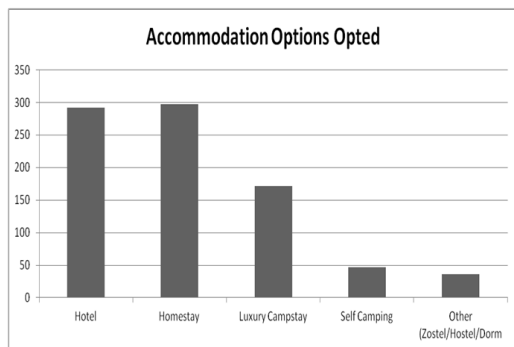


Figure 12. Accommodations Preferred

The most popular combination, selected 93 times, includes Hotel, Homestay, and Campstay. The next most common combination, chosen 80 times, is Hotel and Homestay. Standalone options are also popular, with Hotel selected 44 times and Homestay 53 times. Other frequently chosen combinations include Hotel and Campstay (30 times) and Homestay and Campstay (19 times). A notable combination of Hotel, Homestay, and Self-Camping was chosen 12 times. Combinations with fewer than 10 occurrences include other options. This indicates a broad market segment with different comfort levels, convenience needs, and budget considerations. Tourism operators should cater to this diversity by offering a range of accommodation options and ensuring that facilities align with various traveler expectations. The frequent

combination of Hotel, Homestay, and Campstay suggests that tourists value a mix of comfort, local experiences, and adventure. This indicates that motorcycle tourists often seek a balanced experience that combines traditional lodging with more immersive and adventurous options. Tourism businesses could consider packaging these combinations to enhance the appeal of their offerings.

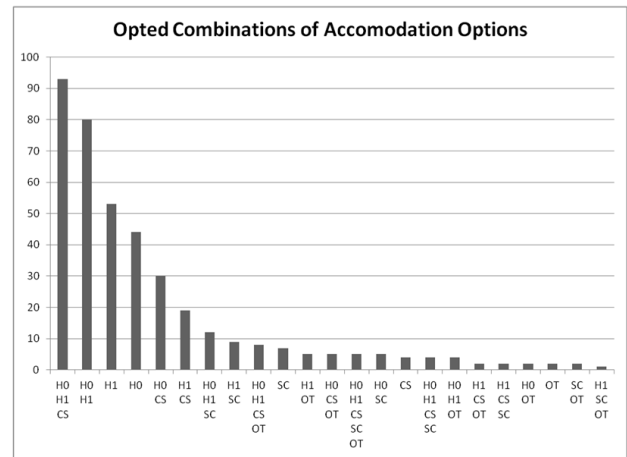


Figure 13. Combination of Accommodation Options Selected

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, motorcycle tourism exhibits a notable gender disparity, predominantly attracting male participants across various global contexts, as documented in studies from Africa Bike Week (Kruger *et al.*, 2014), Montana (Nickerson *et al.*, 2019), North Carolina (Weddel, 2014), and other regions (Park, 2016; Pinch & Reimer, 2012; Frash & Bloese, 2019; Frash *et al.*, 2018; Ramoa *et al.*, 2021; Cater, 2017). However, a distinct pattern emerges in the Indian context, where motorcycle tourists are notably younger compared to their international counterparts. While studies in Germany and Switzerland report average ages of 48.5 and 42-43 respectively (Cater, 2012, 2017; Scherhag *et al.*, 2022), and 80.8% of tourists in Ramoa *et al.*, (2021) are between 30-59 years old, Indian motorcycle tourists predominantly fall within the 21-40 age range, with a mean, median, and mode around 30 years. This younger demographic suggests a unique characteristic of the Indian market, which also leans heavily towards domestic tourism.

Additionally, while many studies have shown that the majority of motorcycle tourists are married (Park, 2016; Frash & Bloese, 2019; Ramoa *et al.*, 2021; Scherhag *et al.*, 2022; Frash *et al.*, 2018), the Indian context reveals a predominance of unmarried tourists. This finding is consistent with Colarič-Jakše & Ambrož's (2015) study in Europe, which also highlighted a higher proportion of unmarried individuals, albeit with a broader age range. Regarding education and employment, Indian motorcycle tourists align closely with international trends, possessing college degrees and holding employment. Affluence is a common thread, with international tourists often categorized as middle-class (Frash & Bloese, 2019) and those in India also predominantly falling within middle-income brackets, earning up to 10 lakh per annum. These insights underscore the distinct demographic and socioeconomic profile of motorcycle tourists

in India, its vibrant and youthful segment setting it apart from global patterns.

Motorcycle tourism in Spiti is characterized by a mix of comfort and adventure, a wide range of accommodation preferences, and diverse spending habits. Understanding these aspects can help tourism operators better cater to the needs of motorcycle tourists, enhance their overall experience, and optimize their offerings to match different preferences and budgets.

Research has certain limitations. The findings are based on a specific sample of tourists in Spiti, the reliance on self-reported data for spending and accommodation choices may introduce biases or inaccuracies. Combining self-reported data with observational or secondary data could enhance the reliability of the findings. This is the basic research, future studies can deepen the understanding of motorcycle tourism and address the complexities revealed by current findings. Future research could also explore impacts, behavior, trends, and other dimensions of tourism.

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