



ADVANCING SMART TOURISM IN UZBEKISTAN THROUGH DIGITAL MARKETING: A SECONDARY-DATA STUDY

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Abstract. This study analyzes how digital marketing can accelerate the development of smart tourism in Uzbekistan. Although the country has recorded fast growth in visitor flows and stronger global recognition, the move from traditional destination promotion to data-informed smart tourism governance is still incomplete. The evidence shows that Uzbekistan has a promising foundation for smart tourism: inbound tourism trips reached 7.96 million in 2024, internet penetration was 89.0% in January 2025, and active social media identities numbered 11.7 million. However, demand composition reveals an important strategic issue: 76.7% of inbound trips in 2024 were connected with visiting relatives, whereas leisure and recreation represented only 14.9%. This difference suggests that large arrival volumes have not yet been fully converted into higher-value destination-based tourism. The analysis also identifies a developing digital ecosystem that includes official portals, e-visa services, OTA cooperation, mobile cashback tools, and specialized platforms such as Eaten.uz.

Keywords: smart tourism, digital marketing, destination management, Uzbekistan, tourism development.

O'ZBEKISTONDA AQLLI TURIZMNI RAQAMLI MARKETING YORDAMIDA RIVOJLANTIRISH: IKKILAMCHI MA'LUMOTLAR ASOSIDAGI TADQIQOT

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Annotatsiya. Mazkur tadqiqotda raqamli marketingning O‘zbekistonda aqlli turizm rivojlanishini qanday tezlashtirishi tahlil qilinadi. Mamlakat turistik oqimlarning tez o‘shishini namoyon etayotgan va xalqaro maydonda o‘z nufuzini mustahkamlab borayotgan bo‘lsa-da, turistik yo‘nalishlarni an‘anaviy targ‘ib qilishdan ma‘lumotlarga asoslangan aqlli turizm boshqaruviga o‘tish jarayoni hali to‘liq yakunlanmagan. Natijalar shuni ko‘rsatadiki, O‘zbekiston aqlli turizmni rivojlantirish uchun istiqbolli asosga ega: 2024-yilda kiruvchi turistik safarlar soni 7,96 mln ga yetgan, 2025-yil yanvar holatiga internetdan foydalanish darajasi 89,0% ni tashkil etgan, ijtimoiy tarmoqlarning faol foydalanuvchilari soni esa 11,7 mln ga yetgan. Biroq talab tuzilmasi muhim strategik muammoni ochib beradi: 2024-yilda kiruvchi safarlarning 76,7% i qarindoshlarni ziyorat qilish bilan bog‘liq bo‘lgan bo‘lsa, dam olish va rekreatsiya maqsadidagi safarlar ulushi atigi 14,9% ni tashkil etgan. Ushbu tafovut shuni anglatadiki, turistik keluvchilar sonining sezilarli qismi hali yuqori daromad keltiruvchi, turistik destinatsiyalarga yo‘naltirilgan turizmga to‘liq transformatsiya qilinmagan. Tahlil shuningdek rasmiy portallar, elektron viza tizimi, onlayn turistik agentliklar (OTA) bilan hamkorlik, mobil cashback vositalari va Eaten.uz kabi maxsus platformalarni o‘z ichiga olgan shakllanib borayotgan raqamli ekotizimni ham aniqlaydi.

Kalit so‘zlar: aqlli turizm, raqamli marketing, destinatsiyalarni boshqarish, O‘zbekiston, turizm rivojlanishi.

РАЗВИТИЕ УМНОГО ТУРИЗМА В УЗБЕКИСТАНЕ С ПОМОЩЬЮ ЦИФРОВОГО МАРКЕТИНГА: ИССЛЕДОВАНИЕ НА ОСНОВЕ ВТОРИЧНЫХ ДАННЫХ

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Аннотация. В данном исследовании анализируется, каким образом цифровой маркетинг может ускорить развитие умного туризма в Узбекистане. Несмотря на то что страна демонстрирует быстрый рост туристических потоков и усиливает своё международное признание, переход от традиционного продвижения туристических направлений к управлению умным туризмом на основе данных остаётся незавершённым. Результаты показывают, что Узбекистан обладает перспективной основой для развития умного туризма: в 2024 году количество въездных туристских поездок достигло 7,96 млн, уровень проникновения интернета составил 89,0% в январе 2025 года, а число активных пользователей социальных сетей — 11,7 млн. Однако структура спроса выявляет важную стратегическую проблему: 76,7% въездных поездок в 2024 году были связаны с посещением родственников, тогда как доля поездок с целью отдыха и рекреации составила лишь 14,9%. Это различие свидетельствует о том, что значительные объёмы туристских прибытий пока не трансформируются в более доходный туризм, ориентированный на посещение туристических дестинаций. Анализ также выявляет формирующуюся цифровую экосистему, включающую официальные порталы, систему электронной визы, сотрудничество с онлайн-туристическими агентствами (OTA), мобильные cashback-инструменты и специализированные платформы, такие как Eaten.uz.

Ключевые слова: умный туризм, цифровой маркетинг, управление дестинациями, Узбекистан, развитие туризма.

Introduction.

Tourism is now one of the fastest-changing parts of the service economy. Destination competitiveness is no longer shaped only by monuments, hotels, airports, or transport corridors. It increasingly depends on whether places are easy to find online, whether local services are visible on digital platforms, whether travelers can access reliable information, and whether destination managers can transform data into better decisions and visitor experiences. These developments are captured by the idea of smart tourism. Gretzel, Sigala, Xiang, and Koo (2015) define smart tourism as an ecosystem in which destinations, businesses, and tourists use advanced information and communication technologies to turn data into value. Buhalis and Amaranggana (2015) similarly emphasize that smart destinations improve visitor experiences through personalization and real-time service provision. Thus, smart tourism is not merely a technological label; it links governance, digital systems, market intelligence, and experience design.

Literature review.

Digital marketing occupies a central place in this transformation. Travelers make decisions through search engines, social media, review platforms, short videos, maps, online travel agencies, and peer-generated content. Xiang and Gretzel (2010) demonstrated that social media had become an essential part of online travel information search, and Hays, Page, and Buhalis (2013) showed that national tourism organizations increasingly use social platforms as destination-marketing tools. UNWTO (2018) also treats digital transformation in tourism as a broad structural change affecting innovation, competitiveness, entrepreneurship, governance, and inclusion. For destination managers, this means that marketing becomes most effective

when it is connected with analytics, personalization, product design, and service delivery rather than handled as a separate communication function.

Uzbekistan is an especially useful case for studying this relationship. The country has strengthened its tourism image through internationally known heritage centers such as Samarkand, Bukhara, and Khiva, visa liberalization, cultural and gastronomic products, pilgrimage routes, nature-based experiences, and more visible promotion abroad. Official data show that tourism flows and institutional activity have continued to expand. In parallel, the country has pursued a wider national digitalization agenda through the Digital Uzbekistan - 2030 strategy and related e-government reforms. Tourism development and digital transformation are therefore becoming increasingly interconnected in the Uzbek policy environment.

Nevertheless, rapid growth in tourist flows does not automatically make a destination smart. High arrival figures may coexist with low-value travel purposes, weak online conversion, fragmented data systems, or unequal participation among regions and small businesses. In emerging tourism economies, the major problem is often not the complete absence of digital tools; rather, the weakness lies in the limited integration of promotion, distribution, analytics, and local service delivery. For this reason, a focused evidence-based assessment is necessary. Existing discussions often highlight Uzbekistan's tourism potential or reforms, but fewer analyses explain how digital marketing can be used operationally to support smart tourism under local market and institutional conditions.

This article therefore addresses the following research question: in what ways can digital marketing strategies support smart tourism development in Uzbekistan, and what evidence already points to such a transition? The study has two objectives. The first is to evaluate the current tourism and digital conditions that shape Uzbekistan's smart tourism opportunities. The second is to develop a strategic framework showing how digital marketing can evolve from broad destination promotion toward smarter destination management, stronger conversion into higher-value segments, and more inclusive local participation.

Research methodology.

The study follows an exploratory secondary-data design organized according to the IMRAD format. It does not use a primary survey, interview program, or experimental campaign evaluation. Instead, it synthesizes existing official and documentary evidence to examine the relationship among tourism performance, digital readiness, and digital marketing practice in Uzbekistan. This approach is suitable because the purpose is to build a policy-relevant strategic interpretation from available national evidence rather than to calculate the causal effect of a specific campaign.

Four categories of evidence were used. First, peer-reviewed and conceptual literature on smart tourism and digital marketing provided the theoretical basis for interpretation. This included the works of Xiang and Gretzel (2010), Hays et al. (2013), Buhalis and Amaranggana (2015), Gretzel et al. (2015), and Ivars-Baidal et al. (2021). Second, official tourism statistics from the National Statistics Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan were used to describe tourism flows, trip purposes, tour sales, and the activity of travel companies. Third, documents and web materials from the government and Tourism Committee were examined to identify current digital tourism instruments, including e-visa services, digital registries, online platform partnerships, cashback programs, and specialized digital products. Fourth, digital indicators from DataReportal (2025) and the UNDP digital economy report (2025) were used to assess internet access, social media use, infrastructure, and inclusion constraints.

The analysis was conducted in three steps. First, materials were screened for relevance to tourism market structure, digital readiness, platform presence, and implementation constraints. Second, descriptive evidence was extracted and grouped into comparable categories. Third, those categories were interpreted through a smart-tourism perspective in

order to identify where Uzbekistan already displays smart destination characteristics and where digital marketing remains fragmented or underused.

Two cautions should be noted. The tourism statistics used in this paper count trips rather than unique individuals, meaning that one traveler may be recorded more than once in the same year. In addition, government web sources are useful for understanding policy direction and identifying digital initiatives, but they do not provide campaign-level return-on-investment data. The article should therefore be read as a strategic evidence-based analysis, not as a formal impact evaluation.

Analysis and discussion of results.

Tourism flows are expanding, but demand composition is imbalanced

Official tourism statistics show strong expansion. In 2024, inbound tourism trips to Uzbekistan reached 7.96 million, which represented a 20.1% increase compared with 2023 (National Statistics Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2025). This indicates that Uzbekistan has become more visible and accessible as an international destination. However, the distribution of trip purposes provides a more important strategic signal than the total number of arrivals. In 2024, 76.7% of inbound trips were made to visit relatives, while leisure and recreation accounted for only 14.9%. Business travel represented 4.3%, treatment 1.3%, study 0.3%, and commerce 2.5% (National Statistics Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2025). The main implication is that strong traffic does not necessarily mean that Uzbekistan is capturing the full value associated with leisure-oriented destination tourism.

Other indicators from the same source support this interpretation. In 2024, the country had 743 travel companies and organizations. These firms served 1.97 million people and sold 601.5 thousand tours. Although these figures are significant, they remain much lower than the total volume of inbound tourism trips. This suggests that a substantial part of travel demand either takes place outside packaged tourism channels or is only weakly connected to the formal tourism market. From a smart tourism viewpoint, this is important because digital marketing creates the greatest value when awareness, booking, local spending, and post-visit advocacy are connected. If many visitors remain outside digitally visible and bookable services, the destination loses opportunities to convert demand, capture data, and manage experiences.

Government reporting suggests that growth continued after 2024. The government tourism activity page states that tourist numbers exceeded 11 million in 2025 and that tourism service exports reached USD 4.8 billion, while international digital promotion was expanded in priority markets (Government of the Republic of Uzbekistan, n.d.). These figures should be interpreted with care, but they still point to a scale phase in which market segmentation and value management become more important than basic awareness-building.

Uzbekistan has the digital reach needed for smart tourism marketing

Recent digital indicators suggest that Uzbekistan already has a broad digital base for smart tourism marketing. DataReportal (2025) estimates that there were 32.7 million internet users in January 2025, equal to 89.0% internet penetration. The same source reports 11.7 million active social media user identities and 11.7 million Instagram users. These figures show that visual content, social interaction, and online storytelling are no longer optional marketing instruments; they are major channels through which destinations are discovered and evaluated. Median mobile download speed reached 37.82 Mbps, while fixed broadband download speed reached 79.06 Mbps, making mobile-first content, video promotion, and app-based services more feasible.

At the same time, the national digital environment is uneven. The UNDP (2025) report indicates that internet use and digital skills vary across the country, especially between urban and rural areas. It also identifies a gender gap in internet access and social media participation despite relatively strong smartphone ownership.

Table 1.

Key indicators for Uzbekistan's smart tourism transition

Dimension	Indicator	Latest value	Strategic meaning
Tourism scale	Inbound tourism trips (2024)	7.96 million	Large and expanding demand base
Demand mix	Trips to visit relatives	76.7%	High flow does not automatically equal high-value leisure demand
Demand mix	Leisure and recreation trips	14.9%	Shows clear scope for segment-focused destination marketing
Formal market	Travel companies / organizations	743	Existing capacity for packaging and distribution
Formal market	People served by travel firms	1.97 million	Bookable market remains smaller than total inbound flow
Digital readiness	Internet users (Jan 2025)	32.7 million (89.0%)	Broad online reach for campaigns and visitor services
Digital readiness	Active social media identities	11.7 million	Large audience for visual storytelling and engagement
Infrastructure	Median mobile download speed	37.82 Mbps	Supports mobile-first content and app-based interaction

The report further notes that mobile internet is a primary access channel for many users and that Telegram occupies a particularly important position in Uzbekistan's digital ecosystem. For tourism policy, these findings have two implications. Digital marketing can scale because the online audience is large, but platform choice and content design must reflect local usage habits and regional inequalities instead of assuming one uniform digital market.

Digital tourism tools are moving the system from promotion toward interaction

Documentary evidence shows that Uzbekistan already possesses several components of a smart tourism ecosystem. At the pre-trip stage, the official e-visa portal reduces administrative barriers and strengthens the destination's digital accessibility. The broader Digital Uzbekistan - 2030 agenda has also supported e-government and digital infrastructure, creating a more favorable environment for tourism-related online services (Government of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2026; UNDP, 2025). At the destination-management level, the Tourism Committee's digital environment includes lists of tour operators and travel agents, a registry of accommodation facilities, a guide registry, and a unified register of tourism route objects. These tools are important because smart tourism requires structured, searchable, and interoperable information. They move the destination away from one-directional promotion and toward a more organized digital service architecture.

At the marketing and distribution level, Uzbekistan is strengthening cooperation with global tourism platforms. In March 2025, the Tourism Committee reported negotiations with Expedia to promote Uzbek tours, hotels, and excursions, to integrate local operators into global booking systems, and to target segments such as ecotourism and cultural tourism (Tourism Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2025a). In March 2026, the Committee reported a joint marketing initiative with Trip.com aimed at Southeast Asian markets and the development of a dedicated Uzbekistan online page (Tourism Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2026). Such initiatives matter because they connect national branding with the transactional spaces where travelers actually search, compare, and purchase tourism services.

There is also evidence of innovation in domestic and niche tourism. The Cashback Tourist program, launched through the Soliq mobile application, allows domestic tourists to receive reimbursements after uploading transport tickets and QR-coded receipts from hotels and cultural institutions, with FaceID used for identity verification (Tourism Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2025b). This program is more than a promotional incentive; it can also

create digital traces related to routes, spending, and domestic tourism behavior. Similarly, the Eaten.uz platform for gastronomic tourism enables location-based and preference-based search, booking, and payment while linking visitors with local households and culinary experiences (Tourism Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2025c). This illustrates how digital marketing can support personalization, community-based tourism, and local income generation at the same time.

Fragmentation is the main constraint, not the complete absence of digital activity

The evidence points to a clear conclusion: Uzbekistan's challenge is not that digital tourism tools are absent, but that they are fragmented. Digital assets are visible across government portals, destination websites, registries, campaign materials, mobile applications, and international platform partnerships. However, these elements do not yet appear to operate as one integrated destination intelligence system. Current activity demonstrates positive progress in content development, platform cooperation, digital incentives, and niche-product innovation, but smart tourism requires stronger links among these components. Fragmentation creates several risks. First, marketing data may remain separated from actual booking, spending, and satisfaction outcomes. Second, local SMEs may differ widely in digital capability, which weakens the visibility of the national tourism offer. Third, destinations outside the major heritage cities may receive less benefit if they are poorly represented on digital platforms. Fourth, without integrated dashboards and performance indicators, policymakers may continue to emphasize arrival volume rather than more strategic indicators such as leisure conversion, average spending, length of stay, regional distribution, seasonality, or review quality. These gaps show why digital marketing should evolve from communication activity into a coordinated instrument of smart destination governance. The findings show that digital marketing can become a strategic driver of smart tourism development in Uzbekistan, but only when it is understood as part of destination management rather than as a narrow promotional task. Consistent with the smart tourism literature, Uzbekistan already has several foundations of a smart destination: growing tourism flows, improving digital infrastructure, government-supported digital services, searchable registries, and stronger relationships with global platforms. At the same time, the evidence supports the argument of Ivars-Baidal et al. (2021) that smart destinations require indicators and management systems, not merely technology. The Uzbek case therefore illustrates a broader lesson: technology alone does not create smartness; value appears when digital tools improve coordination, personalization, inclusion, and the quality of decisions.

Five strategic priorities follow from the evidence.

First, Uzbekistan needs an integrated destination data and CRM architecture. Tourism data currently appear across statistical reporting systems, public-service portals, committee websites, mobile applications, and platform partnerships. A smart destination approach would connect these streams into a shared dashboard that monitors source markets, visit purposes, booking patterns, content engagement, visitor routes, review sentiment, repeat visitation, and spending behavior. Such integration would help the country move from counting tourism volume toward managing tourism value. It would also allow decision-makers to identify which campaigns, markets, and product categories create the strongest results.

Second, digital marketing should shift from general awareness to segment-based conversion. The 2024 purpose-of-visit structure is especially important: because most inbound trips were related to visiting relatives, rising totals should not automatically be interpreted as successful destination marketing. A more strategic objective is to increase the share of leisure, cultural, pilgrimage, gastronomic, eco-, and MICE tourism. This requires multilingual landing pages, market-specific narratives, search optimization, video content, itinerary packaging, and conversion-oriented cooperation with OTAs. The government's focus on priority markets such as the United States, Gulf countries, India, China, and Scandinavia is therefore logical, but it should be supported by tailored content rather than generic image promotion.

Third, Uzbekistan should diversify platform presence and manage user-generated content more systematically. Xiang and Gretzel (2010) and Hays et al. (2013) show that destinations compete inside digital information ecosystems, not only through official websites. For Uzbekistan, this means that Google surfaces, online maps, review platforms, Instagram, YouTube, Trip.com, Expedia, and similar booking environments should be treated as part of the destination experience itself. For domestic and regional audiences, Telegram-compatible content and mobile-led communication may be particularly important. A mature strategy would therefore include review generation, response management, influencer and creator governance, destination content standards, and support for local providers to improve visual quality and online discoverability.

Fourth, the smart tourism transition must include SME digitalization. Official statistics show that formal tour sales are much smaller than total inbound flows, which may indicate limited packaging, weak online distribution, or insufficient digital readiness among local businesses. Guesthouses, guides, artisans, food experiences, rural attractions, and community-based products may remain underrepresented in bookable channels. Training and incentives should therefore focus on practical skills: platform onboarding, search engine optimization, photography and short-form video, reputation management, pricing, online payments, analytics, and multilingual communication. Platforms such as Eaten.uz are valuable not only as niche initiatives but also as evidence that digital tools can connect households and micro-enterprises with tourism demand.

Fifth, Uzbekistan's smart tourism agenda should remain inclusive. UNDP evidence on rural digital inequality and gender gaps is directly relevant to tourism strategy. If digital capability is concentrated in major cities and larger firms, smart tourism benefits will also concentrate there. Inclusive smart tourism requires rural broadband access, digital skills programs for tourism entrepreneurs, and targeted visibility for women-led and community-based businesses. This is especially important for spreading tourism benefits beyond the best-known Silk Road cities and for creating a more resilient domestic and regional tourism ecosystem. These priorities suggest a broader managerial implication: tourism marketing performance should be evaluated through a balanced indicator system. Reach and engagement remain useful, but they should be complemented by conversion to bookings, the share of leisure visitors, average expenditure, length of stay, regional distribution, seasonality reduction, platform ratings, review sentiment, and SME digital participation. Such a measurement logic would align marketing with smart destination governance and help ensure that future tourism growth is competitive, measurable, and socially inclusive. The study has limitations. Because it relies on secondary evidence, it cannot estimate the direct return from specific digital campaigns or identify consumer responses to particular content formats. Future research could address these issues through traveler surveys, OTA analytics, review-sentiment analysis, and case studies of regions or firms that have adopted digital marketing more intensively. Even with these limitations, the analysis provides a credible strategic baseline for assessing Uzbekistan's shift from conventional destination promotion toward smart tourism development.

Conclusion and suggestions.

This article examined how digital marketing strategies can contribute to smart tourism development in Uzbekistan. The evidence indicates that the country is well positioned for this transition. Tourism flows have grown rapidly, internet penetration is high, social media use is substantial, and public institutions have begun to introduce digital services, registries, platform cooperation, and mobile tools that go beyond conventional promotion. At the same time, demand composition and digital fragmentation show that smart tourism has not yet been fully achieved. The main conclusion is that digital marketing in Uzbekistan should not be viewed simply as destination advertising. Within a smart tourism framework, it should function as an integrated system that strengthens online discoverability, supports booking, captures useful

data, assists local businesses, and helps policymakers manage visitor value rather than only visitor volume. For Uzbekistan, this means connecting e-visa services, destination content, OTA partnerships, domestic tourism applications, local experience platforms, and performance dashboards into a more coordinated architecture. If these elements are strategically integrated, digital marketing can become a practical instrument for increasing leisure conversion, improving destination competitiveness, and expanding the social benefits of tourism growth.

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