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Article

Improving Digital Marketing Strategies in the Tourism Services Market: A Customer-Journey Framework and Evidence from Uzbekistan

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Abstract: Tourism demand is recovering strongly, while the search, booking and sharing behaviour of travellers has moved largely online. Destinations and tourism firms therefore compete for attention in digital channels, yet many strategies remain collections of separate tools rather than managed customer-journey systems. This article develops a five-stage digital marketing framework (inspiration, planning, booking, experience, sharing) with a foundation layer of data governance and a feedback loop of measurement, and applies it to Uzbekistan. The study is a conceptual synthesis of 15 scholarly sources combined with a descriptive analysis of published secondary statistics from UN Tourism, DataReportal and the National Statistics Committee of Uzbekistan (as reported by the national press). The data show that global international arrivals reached about 1.52 billion in 2025 (+4%), that Uzbekistan reported a preliminary 11.7 million foreign visitors (+46.8%), that roughly 82% of these came from five neighbouring countries (author's calculation from rounded figures), and that internet penetration in Uzbekistan (89.0%) exceeds the world average (73.2%) while social-media user identities are lower (37.9% versus 68.7%). The article derives five propositions on source-market diversification, channel mix, journey-based measurement, review management and privacy-compliant data use, and an 18-month implementation roadmap. The propositions are not empirically tested; the article proposes a measurement design for testing them.

Keywords: digital marketing; tourism services; customer journey; destination marketing; online reviews; social media; Uzbekistan

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1. Introduction

International tourism has returned to its growth path. UN Tourism estimates that international tourist arrivals reached about 1.52 billion in 2025, roughly 60 million more than in 2024 and 4% higher in annual terms [1]. At the same time, the infrastructure through which travellers discover and evaluate destinations has become digital: DataReportal reported 6.04 billion internet users (73.2% of the world population) and 5.66 billion social-media user identities at the start of October 2025 [2]. For tourism firms and destination management organisations (DMOs), the central marketing question is therefore no longer whether to be present online but how to design, coordinate and measure a digital presence that influences the traveller at every stage of a trip.

Uzbekistan is a relevant case. The National Statistics Committee's preliminary count, as reported by the national press, put foreign visits for tourism purposes at 11.7 million in

2025, 3.7 million (46.8%) above the previous year [3]. DataReportal's country profile shows 33.1 million internet users, equal to 89.0% of the population, in late 2025 [4]. A fast-growing market with a highly connected population creates opportunities, but also risks: growth that depends on a narrow set of source markets, and digital activity that is not linked to measurable outcomes.

Research on tourism information technology has long argued that the Internet reshaped distribution and marketing [5], that social media have become a major part of what travellers find when they search [6], and that online search is an iterative, multi-source process [7]. Less attention has been given to how these findings can be translated into an integrated, measurable strategy for emerging destinations. This article addresses the following research questions. RQ1: which strategic elements does the scholarly literature identify as most relevant for digital marketing in the tourism services market? RQ2: what do published statistics reveal about the demand and digital-access context in which Uzbekistan's tourism marketing operates? RQ3: how can these elements be organised into a framework that supports improved strategies and testable propositions?

Information technology and online search in tourism

Buhalis and Law reviewed two decades of research on information technology and tourism and showed how the Internet changed distribution, the role of intermediaries and the relationship between suppliers and consumers [5]. Pan and Fesenmaier examined online vacation planning and described a process in which travellers use search engines as a gateway and move iteratively between several kinds of sources [7]. Xiang and Gretzel found that social media make up a substantial part of search-engine results for travel-related queries, so that search visibility and social content cannot be managed separately [6]. Law, Buhalis and Cobanoglu later synthesised research on information and communication technologies in hospitality and tourism and highlighted the growing roles of social media and mobile technologies [8].

Smart tourism, experience and the customer journey

Gretzel, Sigala, Xiang and Koo conceptualised smart tourism as the use of connectivity, data and information technology to support personalised, data-driven tourism services and value co-creation [9]. Neuhofer, Buhalis and Ladkin proposed a typology of technology-enhanced tourism experiences and argued that technology enables co-creation during the trip, not only before it [10]. In the wider marketing literature, Kannan and Li define digital marketing as an adaptive, technology-enabled process through which firms collaborate with customers and partners to create, communicate, deliver and sustain value, and stress the role of data and interactivity [11]. Lemon and Verhoef model customer experience as an evolving journey across pre-purchase, purchase and post-purchase stages with multiple touchpoints [12]. These two contributions provide the structural logic of the framework developed below.

Reviews, user-generated content and destination social media

Ye, Law, Gu and Chen showed that traveller-generated online reviews are related to differences in online hotel bookings, which makes review profiles a commercial rather than purely reputational variable [13]. Filieri, Alguezaui and McLeay found that the perceived quality of information and of the platform shape trust in consumer-generated media, which in turn influences recommendation adoption and word of mouth [14]. Mariani, Di Felice and Mura examined the Facebook pages of Italian regional DMOs and found considerable differences in the engagement they generate, indicating that content and management practice matter more than mere presence [15].

Research on Uzbekistan

Jumanazarov, Kamilov and Kiatkawsin surveyed 222 international tourists in Samarkand and found that destination attributes influence satisfaction, revisit intention and word-of-mouth intention [16]. Word of mouth is a social-media-relevant outcome, so

the study supports treating the "sharing" stage as part of marketing and not as an afterthought. Local scholarship has begun to address digital marketing for sustainable tourism development [17], and a small survey of 44 respondents compared digital and traditional promotion of Silk Road tourism [18]; the small sample limits what can be generalised from the latter. The literature on Uzbekistan thus remains thin and mostly perception-based, which is why this article relies on a framework plus statistics instead of claiming causal findings.

Table 1. Synthesis of the reviewed literature and implications for strategy

Theme (source)	Main insight	Implication for strategy
Online search [5–7]	Search is iterative and multi-source; social content appears in search results	Manage search visibility and content together
Smart tourism and experience [9, 10]	Data and technology support personalisation and in-trip co-creation	Extend marketing into the trip itself
Digital marketing and journey [11, 12]	Value is created with customers across stages and touchpoints	Organise tools by journey stage; measure by stage
Reviews and UGC [13–15]	Reviews relate to bookings; trust depends on quality; DMO engagement varies	Treat reviews as managed assets; manage content quality
Uzbekistan studies [16–18]	Attributes drive satisfaction and WOM; local evidence is small-scale	Build own measurement; avoid over-generalising

Source: compiled by the author from the cited works.

2. Materials and Methods

The study has a conceptual-synthesis design with a descriptive empirical component. First, 15 scholarly sources (12 international and 3 authored or co-authored by Uzbekistan-based scholars) were selected purposively for relevance to online information search, digital marketing, customer experience, reviews and social media in tourism, with attention to bibliographic completeness and verifiable digital object identifiers. The selection is not a systematic review; it follows the logic of evidence-informed synthesis described by Tranfield, Denyer and Smart [19] in a deliberately lighter form, and its coverage is therefore illustrative, not exhaustive.

Second, three types of secondary statistics were used: (a) global and regional arrivals from UN Tourism [1]; (b) global and national digital-access indicators from DataReportal, which compiles data from Kepios, GSMA Intelligence and other providers [2, 4]; and (c) the preliminary number and origin structure of foreign visitors to Uzbekistan reported by the national press on the basis of the National Statistics Committee [3]. No figure was estimated or imputed. Derived values (implied 2024 base, shares of origin groups) are labelled as the author's calculations from the published numbers, which are partly rounded.

Third, the framework was built by mapping the constructs identified in the literature onto the journey stages of Lemon and Verhoef [12], adding a foundation layer (segmentation, data governance) and a feedback loop (measurement) following the data-and-interactivity emphasis of Kannan and Li [11]. The propositions were derived by comparing the framework with the statistical context. Three limitations should be stated. The statistics describe aggregate demand and access, not the effectiveness of any marketing activity. Cross-source comparisons are made only between figures dated to the same period (late 2025). Finally, the framework and propositions have not been tested with firm-level or traveller-level data.

3. Results

3.1. Global demand context

According to UN Tourism, about 1.52 billion international arrivals were recorded in 2025, with Europe receiving 793 million (+4%), Asia and the Pacific 331 million (+6%), the Americas 218 million (+1%), Africa 81 million (+8%) and the Middle East nearly 100 million (+3%) [1]. The same release reports that Europe was 6% above its 2019 level, Asia and the Pacific still 9% below it and the Middle East 39% above it [1]. Table 2 and Figure 1 summarise these data. Growth is geographically uneven, so competition for travellers from the fastest-growing regions will intensify online as well as on the ground.

Table 2. International tourist arrivals by region, 2025

Region	Arrivals, million	Growth vs 2024	Position vs 2019
Europe	793	+4%	+6%
Asia and the Pacific	331	+6%	−9%
Americas	218	+1%	n/a in source
Africa	81	+8%	n/a in source
Middle East	≈100 (“nearly 100”)	+3%	+39%
World	≈1,520	+4%	n/a in source
Region	**Arrivals, million**	**Growth vs 2024**	**Position vs 2019**

Source: UN Tourism [1]. “n/a in source” means the figure was not reported in the release consulted; no value was imputed.

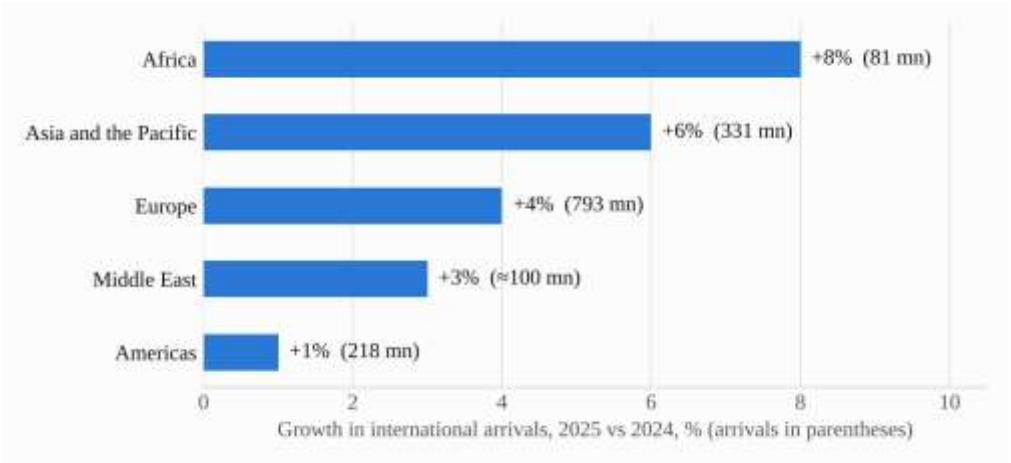


Figure 1. Growth of international arrivals by region, 2025 vs 2024

Source: drawn by the author from UN Tourism data [1].

3.2. Uzbekistan: demand growth and market concentration

The preliminary 2025 figure of 11.7 million foreign visitors is 3.7 million (46.8%) higher than in 2024 [3]. The difference implies a 2024 base of about 8.0 million (author’s calculation); this base should be treated with caution because published 2024 totals in other releases may differ owing to revisions. Figure 2 shows the ten largest origin countries reported: Kyrgyzstan (3.3 million), Tajikistan (2.7 million), Kazakhstan (2.7 million), Russia (984.4 thousand), Afghanistan (476.7 thousand), Turkmenistan (370 thousand), China (278.9 thousand), Türkiye (174.9 thousand), India (80.8 thousand) and the Republic of Korea (46.3 thousand) [3].

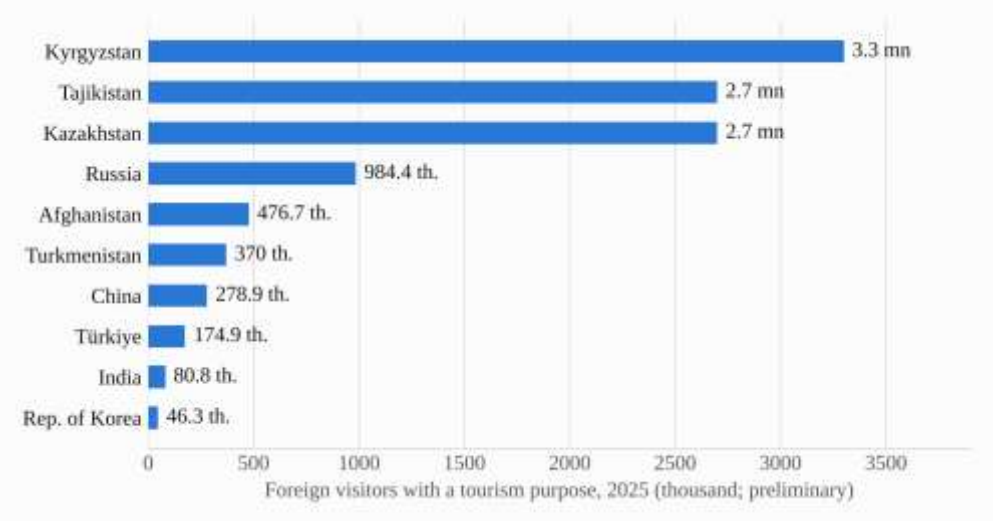


Figure 2. Foreign visitors to Uzbekistan by origin country, 2025 (preliminary)

Source: drawn by the author from data published by Dunyo IA citing the National Statistics Committee [3].

Using the published, partly rounded numbers, the three largest markets (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan) account for about 8.7 million visits, or roughly 74% of the 11.7 million total; the five neighbouring countries in the list (adding Afghanistan and Turkmenistan) account for about 9.5 million, or roughly 82%; and the five more distant markets named in the list (Russia, China, Türkiye, India and the Republic of Korea) account for about 1.6 million, or roughly 13% (Table 3). These shares are calculated by the author. The source does not state trip length, spending or purpose beyond tourism, so the data cannot show how much of this flow is influenced by marketing; it does show, however, that the audience whose behaviour digital marketing could shape most (long-haul, higher-spending-potential travellers) is currently a small share of the count.

Table 3. Structure of foreign visits to Uzbekistan, 2025

Group	Visits, million	Share of 11.7 million
Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan	≈8.7	≈74%
Five neighbouring countries listed*	≈9.5	≈82%
Russia, China, Türkiye, India, Rep. of Korea	≈1.6	≈13%
Other countries (residual of listed ten)	≈0.6	≈5%

* Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan. Calculated from figures in [3]; the "other" row is the residual after the ten listed countries (≈11.1 million) and is affected by rounding.

3.3. Digital access context

DataReportal's Uzbekistan profile reports 33.9 million cellular mobile connections (91.1% of the population), 33.1 million internet users (89.0%) and 14.1 million social-media user identities (37.9%) [4]. The global equivalents are 5.78 billion unique mobile users (70.1%), 6.04 billion internet users (73.2%) and 5.66 billion social-media user identities (68.7%) [2]. Figure 3 compares them. Two cautions apply. Mobile connections (country profile) and unique mobile users (global report) are not identical measures, since one person may hold several connections; and social-media user identities may not correspond to unique individuals [2]. The comparison is therefore indicative. Even so, the pattern is clear: connectivity in Uzbekistan is at least as high as the global average, whereas the measured share of social-media identities is lower.

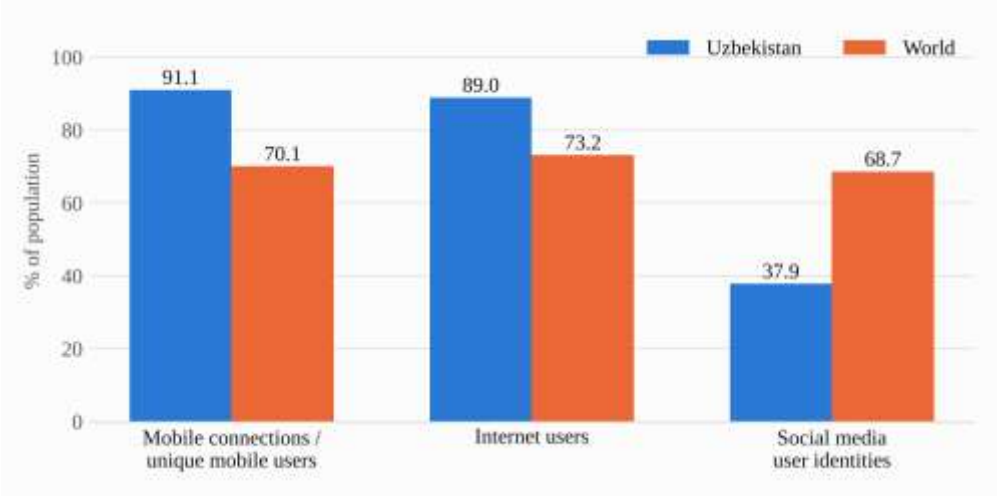


Figure 3. Digital access indicators: Uzbekistan and the world, late 2025

Source: drawn by the author from DataReportal data [2, 4].

Table 4. Digital indicators, Uzbekistan and the world

Group	Visits, million	Share of 11.7 million
Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan	≈8.7	≈74%
Five neighbouring countries listed*	≈9.5	≈82%
Russia, China, Türkiye, India, Rep. of Korea	≈1.6	≈13%
Other countries (residual of listed ten)	≈0.6	≈5%

Source: DataReportal [2, 4]; data as of late 2025 (October 2025 for social-media identities).

3.4. A customer-journey framework for digital tourism marketing

Figure 4 presents the framework developed from the literature. Its logic is that each journey stage has a distinct objective, a distinct set of channels and a distinct set of indicators, while a common foundation and a feedback loop keep the stages consistent. In the inspiration stage the objective is awareness, using social video, creators and content hubs [15]. In planning, search visibility and review profiles dominate [6, 7, 14]. In booking, the user experience of direct and intermediary channels converts interest into transactions [13]. During the experience stage, mobile and local e-services extend marketing into the trip [9, 10]. In the sharing stage, reviews and user-generated content feed the next traveller's inspiration and planning [14, 16].

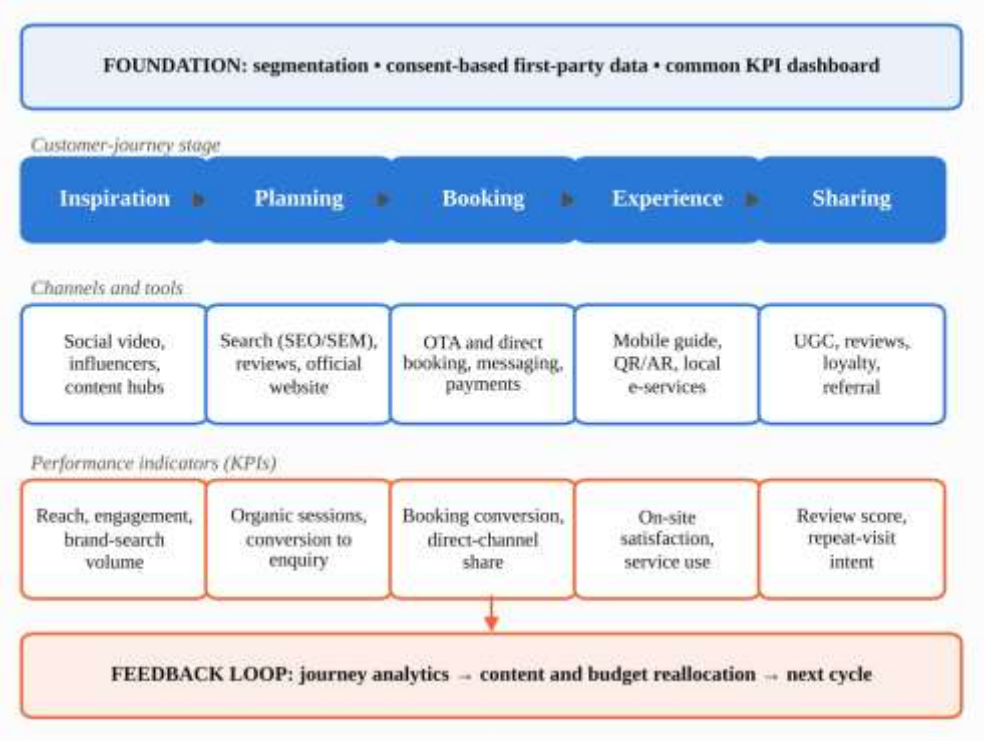


Figure 4. Customer-journey framework for digital tourism marketing

Source: developed by the author on the basis of [6, 7, 9–16].

Table 5 turns the framework into five propositions that connect the statistical context with strategic directions and measurable indicators. They are propositions, not findings: each can be tested, for example by comparing the indicators before and after a change in channel mix.

Table 5. Propositions, instruments and indicators

No.	Proposition (basis)	Main instruments	Indicators
P1	Reduce dependence on neighbouring markets by targeting selected distant markets (Table 3)	Market-specific, multilingual content; search campaigns by origin	Share of visits by origin; cost per enquiry by market
P2	Test the channel mix instead of copying social-first playbooks (Fig. 3)	Controlled channel pilots; search, video, messaging	Cost per engaged user by channel; conversion
P3	Manage by journey stage, not by tool [11, 12]	Common KPI dashboard (Fig. 4)	Stage conversion rates
P4	Treat reviews as managed assets [13, 14]	Response protocol; service recovery; review prompts	Review score; response time; share of answered reviews
P5	Use first-party, consent-based data	Consent management; CRM segments	Opt-in rate; repeat-visit rate

Source: developed by the author.

3.5. Implementation roadmap

Figure 5 sequences the changes in four phases over about 18 months, followed by continuous optimisation. The sequence reflects dependency: audit and segmentation precede content production; measurement must exist before paid scaling; and optimisation closes the loop. The time ranges are planning assumptions of the author for a mid-sized destination or firm, not empirical estimates.

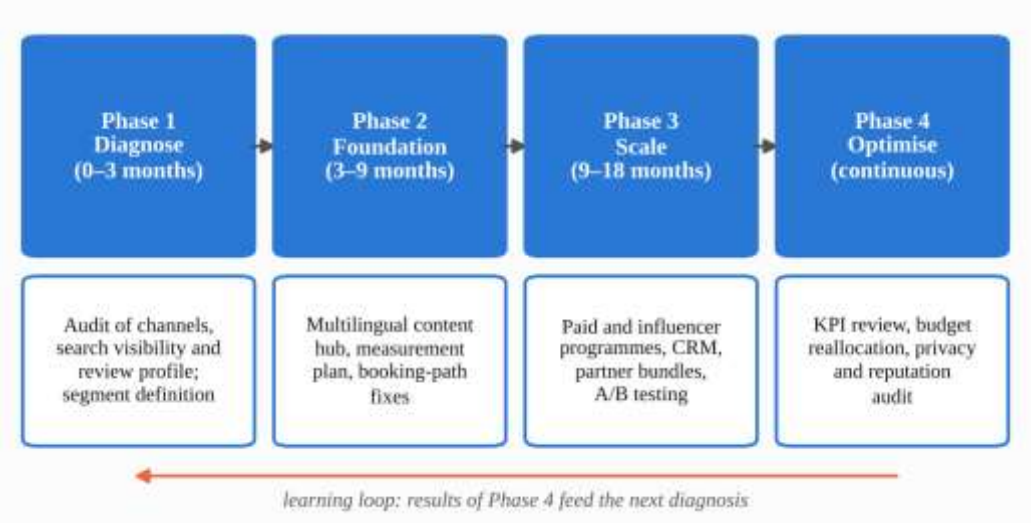


Figure 5. Staged roadmap for improving digital marketing strategy

Source: developed by the author.

4. Discussion

The statistics suggest two structural tensions. First, demand growth in Uzbekistan is large but concentrated: about four-fifths of reported visits come from five neighbouring countries (Table 3). For these travellers, informal networks and short-distance travel may matter more than formal digital campaigns, a hypothesis that the data cannot confirm. For more distant markets, where trip planning is more dependent on online search, reviews and content [6, 7], the digital presence of a destination is more consequential. Hence P1: a strategy that improves digital marketing should be explicit about which source markets it targets and why.

Second, the high level of internet use alongside a lower measured share of social-media identities (Figure 3) implies that a strategy which assumes social-media saturation may misallocate resources. This does not mean that social platforms are unimportant, since a smaller audience can still be strategically valuable, nor that other channels are better. It means that the channel mix should be treated as an empirical question (P2). Studies of DMO social-media pages show large differences in engagement among organisations that are all "present" [15], which supports a performance-oriented rather than a presence-oriented approach.

The framework connects with the literature in three ways. It operationalises the journey logic of Lemon and Verhoef [12] for tourism, where the "experience" stage is unusually long because the product is consumed at the destination [10]. It uses the notion that digital marketing is a data-driven, collaborative value process [11] to justify the foundation layer. It treats review management as a commercial matter, consistent with evidence linking reviews to bookings [13] and with the finding that trust in consumer-generated media depends on information and platform quality [14]. The Samarkand evidence that destination attributes drive satisfaction and word-of-mouth intention [16] suggests that digital marketing cannot compensate for weak on-site experience; it amplifies what travellers say after the trip.

Practical implications are as follows. DMOs should publish a measurement plan before expanding campaigns; tourism firms should align their booking paths and review-response routines with the stage indicators in Table 5; and statistical agencies and associations could improve evaluation by publishing origin-level data on trip length, spending and channels used to plan the trip. The article's limitations are those of its design: purposive literature selection, reliance on preliminary and press-reported national figures, cross-source comparability limits in DataReportal indicators, and the absence of firm-level

data. Future research should test P1–P5 with traveller surveys, web-analytics data and quasi-experimental comparisons of campaigns, and should reconcile the 2024 and 2025 visitor series once final national statistics are released.

5. Conclusion

Digital marketing in the tourism services market is most effective when it is organised as a managed customer-journey system, not as a set of isolated tools. The evidence reviewed shows strong global demand recovery (about 1.52 billion arrivals in 2025), rapid but geographically concentrated growth in Uzbekistan (11.7 million preliminary foreign visits, roughly 82% from five neighbouring countries) and a highly connected population in which social-media identities are less prevalent than internet use. The proposed five-stage framework, five propositions and 18-month roadmap give destinations and firms a structured basis for improving their strategies and a measurement design for testing the claims empirically. The principal next step is empirical validation with firm-level and traveller-level data.

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