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Article

Priority Management Decisions for Digitalising Tourism Destinations: Regional Connectivity Evidence and a Site-Level Decision Framework for Uzbekistan

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Abstract: Digital tourism services are often planned from regional connectivity statistics that say little about conditions where visitors buy tickets or enter a site. This study examines what official regional indicators can tell destination managers and proposes a procedure for selecting, piloting and scaling digital tourism services. Official data on total and individual internet subscriptions per 100 residents for Uzbekistan's 14 first-level regions in 2023–2025 were analysed descriptively, the annual change was decomposed into individual and non-individual components, and Samarkand Region was examined in detail. Between 2024 and 2025, total subscriptions per 100 residents rose from 84.7 to 93.6 nationally, while individual subscriptions were almost unchanged (77.1 to 77.0); the entire national increase therefore came from non-individual subscriptions. Total subscriptions rose in 13 regions, whereas individual subscriptions fell in seven. Samarkand Region gained 10.5 and 2.8 units, respectively, and moved from 11th to 9th place on total and to 7th place on individual subscriptions. Because the indicators diverge and neither measures on-site connectivity or use, regional statistics should only indicate where site audits are needed. A decision tree and pilot metrics, drawn from the smart destination literature, link a site audit of connectivity and data ownership to a staff-assisted or online pilot and to explicit criteria for wider rollout.

Keywords: Smart tourism destination; digitalisation; internet subscriptions; destination management; interoperability; service pilot; Uzbekistan.

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1. Introduction

A decision to digitalise a tourism service in a region starts with two questions: which service the visitor is using, and at which stage of the visit the difficulty arises. Finding information, buying a ticket, finding the way and using the service may all occur in one trip. If opening hours differ between channels, someone must first be made responsible for updating them; if the connection drops at the ticket gate, a procedure for recording a confirmed booking on the spot matters most. The purpose of the service, the owner of its data and the technical conditions at the site must therefore be considered together.

Uzbekistan has made digital transformation a national priority through the "Digital Uzbekistan – 2030" strategy [1], and tourism authorities are expected to launch online information, booking and ticketing services. The data most readily available to them are regional statistics on internet subscriptions published by the national statistics agency [2], [3]. Such administrative indicators, however, count subscriptions rather than users and may include inactive or duplicate accounts [4]. They say nothing about the connection a

visitor experiences at a particular museum, mausoleum or ticket office. Used uncritically, they can lead to online services being launched where they cannot work.

This study therefore asks two questions. Which conditions of a digitalisation project can regional differences in internet subscription density help to check in advance? And on what evidence should a decision to scale up a digital service rest? The aim is to link open data on connectivity with a pre-project audit, a management decision and a service pilot. The empirical analysis covers all 14 first-level regions of Uzbekistan, and the practical interpretation is developed for Samarkand Region and its tourist sites.

The paper makes three contributions. First, it shows that two closely related official indicators, total and individual subscriptions per 100 residents, moved in different directions in 2024–2025, so that the choice of indicator changes the conclusion. Second, it decomposes the regional changes into individual and non-individual components and identifies the statistical artefacts a manager must know about before using the data. Third, it proposes a decision tree and a set of pilot metrics that translate the smart destination literature into a procedure that a regional coordinator and a site operator can apply.

Gretzel et al. define smart tourism as tourism supported by integrated efforts at a destination to collect and aggregate data from physical infrastructure, social connections, government and organisational sources and people themselves, and to turn these data into on-site experiences and business value [5]. In a companion paper, the smart tourism ecosystem is described as a tourism system that uses smart technology to create and deliver services and is characterised by intensive information sharing and value co-creation [6]. Boes, Buhalis and Inversini show, through case studies of established smart cities, that information and communication technology (ICT) is a critical enabler of smart destinations but is insufficient on its own: leadership, human capital, innovation and social capital are equally necessary [7]. Ivars-Baidal et al. reach a similar conclusion for destination management, arguing that the efficiency of the smart destination approach will depend not only on technology but also on governance that integrates its different levels [8].

These conclusions place destination management organisations (DMOs) at the centre of digitalisation. Gretzel proposes six functions of a "smart DMO", namely mobilising, match-making, managing, sensing, shapeshifting and stewardship, and notes that DMOs often lack the capacities and competencies needed to govern smart destinations [9]. For a regional tourism administration, a digital service is therefore as much an organisational arrangement as a piece of software.

Buhalis and Leung show that standardised web-based applications simplify data interchange and allow the internal systems of an enterprise and those of its partners to become interconnected and interoperable [10]. Their argument applies directly to destinations, where the same opening hours, prices and site identifiers appear on an official website, in booking platforms, on maps and at the ticket office. Interoperability requires an agreed owner for each record and agreed rules for publishing and correcting it. Without them, a new platform reproduces existing inconsistencies faster.

Femenia-Serra, Neuhofer and Ivars-Baidal describe the "smart tourist" as a central but neglected element of the smart destination and stress that tourists' engagement with digital services depends on their attitudes and behaviour [11]. A survey of tech-savvy Spanish millennials found that their actual use of smart destination technologies did not fully match the expectations of institutions and the media [12]. Tanti and Buhalis identify four factors that help or prevent travellers from staying connected: hardware and software; needs and contexts; openness to usage; and the supply and provision of connectivity [13].

Research on the digital divide warns against equating connection rates with access. Minghetti and Buhalis propose a framework in which technical, social and motivational factors jointly determine how far tourism markets and destinations can interact digitally [14]. Van Deursen and van Dijk show that the first-level digital divide persists even where connection rates approach saturation, because access to devices and the ongoing costs of

hardware, software and subscriptions remain unequal [15]. A regional subscription rate is therefore, at best, an indicator of physical access, not of the capacity of residents or visitors to use a particular service.

Evidence that smart destination projects deliver results is limited. Femenia-Serra and Ivars-Baidal examined whether the smart destination strategy of Benidorm, Spain, actually transformed destination management and tourists' experiences [16]. Ivars-Baidal et al. developed a system of indicators for measuring the progress of smart destinations as a management tool [17]. Stankov and Gretzel argue from a human-centred design perspective that the use of tourism technology can limit as well as enhance the tourist experience, and that systems must therefore be designed and tested around users' needs [18]. Outside tourism, controlled experiments are regarded as the best design for establishing whether a change to a digital service alters user behaviour, provided that sample size and statistical power are planned [19].

Research gap

The literature agrees that technology alone does not make a destination smart, that data ownership and interoperability are preconditions, that access is unevenly distributed, and that initiatives should be judged by their effects. It rarely offers a procedure linking the regional statistics available to managers with decisions at the level of a single site. Most of the cases reviewed come from Western Europe; evidence from Central Asian destinations, where regional statistics are often the only systematic data available, remains scarce. This study addresses that gap for Uzbekistan.

2. Materials and Methods

The quantitative analysis uses two series from SIAT, the open statistical database of the National Statistics Committee of Uzbekistan: series 1.06.02.0031, internet subscriptions per 100 residents (total), and series 1.06.02.0032, internet subscriptions of individuals per 100 residents [2], [3]. The analysis covers the Republic of Karakalpakstan, the 12 regions (*viloyat*) and Tashkent city for 2023–2025. The values correspond to the versions of the series updated on 12 November 2026 (total) and 13 November 2026 (individuals). The absolute number of individual subscriptions in 2023–2025, in thousands, was taken from a separate SIAT series [20].

In the SIAT methodology, the indicator per 100 residents is obtained by dividing the number of subscriptions on 1 January of the year following the reporting year by the average annual permanent population [2], [3]. The indicator can exceed 100 because one person may hold several connections and because subscriptions of organisations are included in the total. The SIAT metadata also note that figures for Tashkent city include the subscriptions of two operators, UNITEL and RUBICON WIRELESS COMMUNICATION, that relate to Tashkent Region [2]. More generally, administrative subscription counts may include inactive or duplicate accounts, whereas actual use is measured by household surveys [4]. The regional indicator therefore does not measure connection speed at a site or the share of unique persons using a service.

For each region r, the 2024 value was subtracted from the 2025 value, and the change was expressed in subscriptions per 100 residents. The direction of change (increase, decrease or no change) was compared between the two series. The non-individual component was defined as the difference between the two series, $N_r = T_r - I_r$, where T is total and I individual subscriptions per 100 residents, so that the annual change decomposes exactly as $\Delta T_r = \Delta I_r + \Delta N_r$. Regional medians were computed over the 14 regions, with the national value kept separate. Samarkand's rank was computed as one plus the number of regions with a higher value. Regional dispersion was measured by the range, with and without Tashkent city, and by the coefficient of variation excluding Tashkent city.

The absolute number of individual subscriptions was used to check whether a fall in the ratio reflected fewer subscriptions or faster population growth. Because the series depend on the denominator, reporting and rounding, levels and changes were read together. The analysis is descriptive: annual regional aggregates cannot identify the causes of change at individual sites.

The decision framework was derived from the literature reviewed in Section 2 [7], [8], [10], [11], [13]. It rests on three diagnostic questions. Is connectivity at the point of service sufficient in practice? Who confirms and updates information on opening hours, prices and bookings? Can people use the planned service online or with the help of staff? The first question is answered by on-site observation during operating hours, the second by an audit of data and responsibilities, and the third by a small pilot with different types of users.

Figure 1 turns these questions into a management decision tree. The regional coordinator organises the site audit. Once data and connectivity have been assessed, the operator selects the service variant to pilot, and the operator's instructions set out staff-assisted service and the actions to take when the connection fails. Extension to other sites is considered only if the measured outcome has improved and the conditions of use have been met.

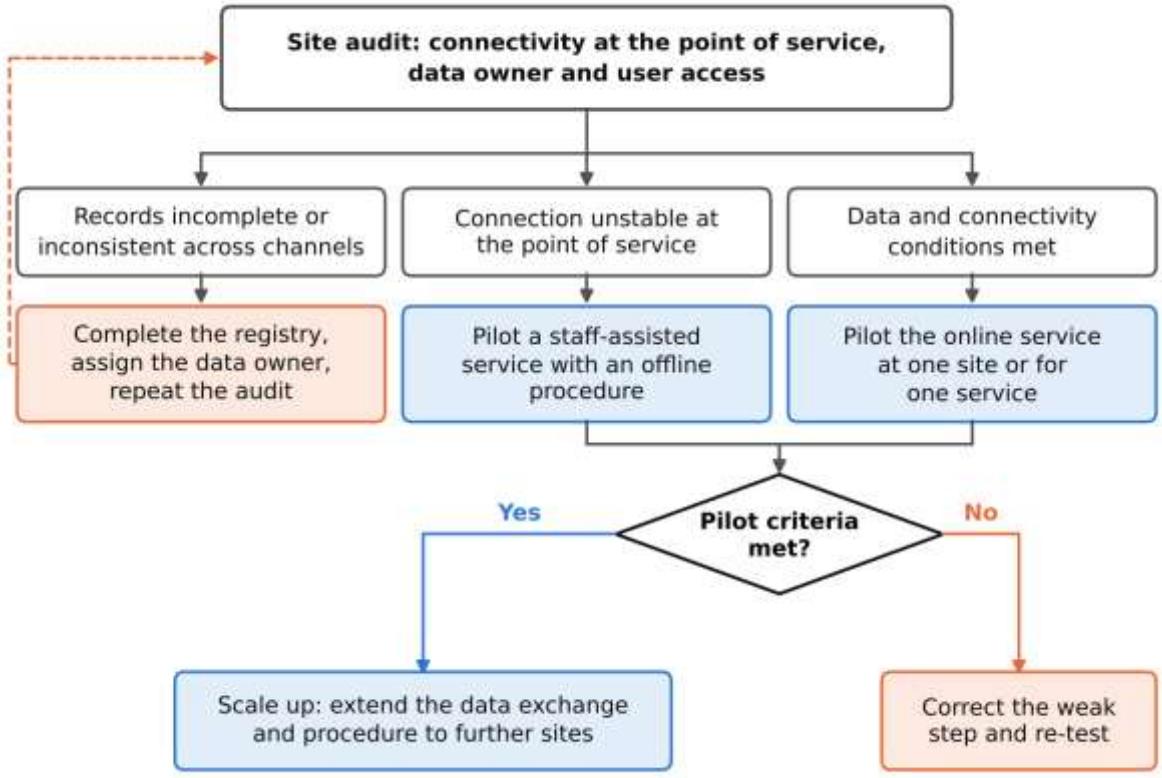


Figure 1. Decision tree for digitalising a tourism service

Source: compiled by the author(s) from the literature on smart destinations, interoperability and user experience [5], [7], [8], [10], [11]. The dashed arrow indicates a repeated audit.

3. Results

Table 1 shows total and individual internet subscriptions per 100 residents by region in 2023–2025. In 2025 the national values were 93.6 and 77.0, respectively. Compared with 2024, the total ratio rose by 8.9 units, whereas the individual ratio fell by 0.1. Over the same period the absolute number of individual subscriptions increased from 29,257.6 thousand to 29,791.9 thousand, or by 1.8% [20]. The slight fall in the individual ratio therefore reflects

population growth outpacing the growth of individual subscriptions, not a fall in subscriptions.

Table 1. Internet subscriptions per 100 residents by region, 2023–2025

Region	Total 2023	Total 2024	Total 2025	Indiv. 2023	Indiv. 2024	Indiv. 2025
Karakalpakstan	72.3	77.7	83.9	69.1	72.9	71.8
Andijan	68.2	71.3	78.9	66.3	69.5	69.5
Bukhara	75.3	81.6	86.5	71.8	77.1	75.2
Jizzakh	69.6	76.4	82.4	66.0	72.0	70.5
Kashkadarya	61.1	66.6	68.9	59.3	64.2	64.8
Navoi	83.2	90.5	101.5	78.5	83.7	82.9
Namangan	68.2	74.5	83.0	65.7	71.7	70.5
Samarkand	**64.7**	**71.5**	**82.0**	**62.8**	**68.4**	**71.2**
Surkhandarya	60.6	65.0	69.3	58.5	62.4	63.1
Syrdarya	82.1	85.4	96.9	77.8	79.7	78.9
Tashkent Region	54.7	58.1	62.6	53.3	55.6	57.1
Fergana	93.1	88.3	76.9	72.5	73.5	71.0
Khorezm	72.5	78.2	87.3	69.7	74.1	74.3
Tashkent city	203.2	204.5	261.1	168.2	164.5	164.6
Uzbekistan	**80.9**	**84.7**	**93.6**	**73.8**	**77.1**	**77.0**

Source: SIAT series 1.06.02.0031 and 1.06.02.0032 [2], [3]. "Indiv." denotes subscriptions of individuals. Tashkent city includes subscriptions of two operators that relate to Tashkent Region.

Between 2024 and 2025 the total ratio rose in 13 regions and fell only in Fergana. The individual ratio rose in six regions, fell in seven and was unchanged, after rounding, in Andijan. The median regional changes were +6.9 and −0.4 units, respectively. Figure 2 decomposes the change in each region. Nationally, the non-individual component rose from 7.6 to 16.6 subscriptions per 100 residents (+9.0), so that the whole national increase in the total ratio came from non-individual subscriptions. In Tashkent city, 56.5 of the 56.6-unit increase was non-individual. Excluding Tashkent city, the non-individual component rose in 12 of the 13 remaining regions.

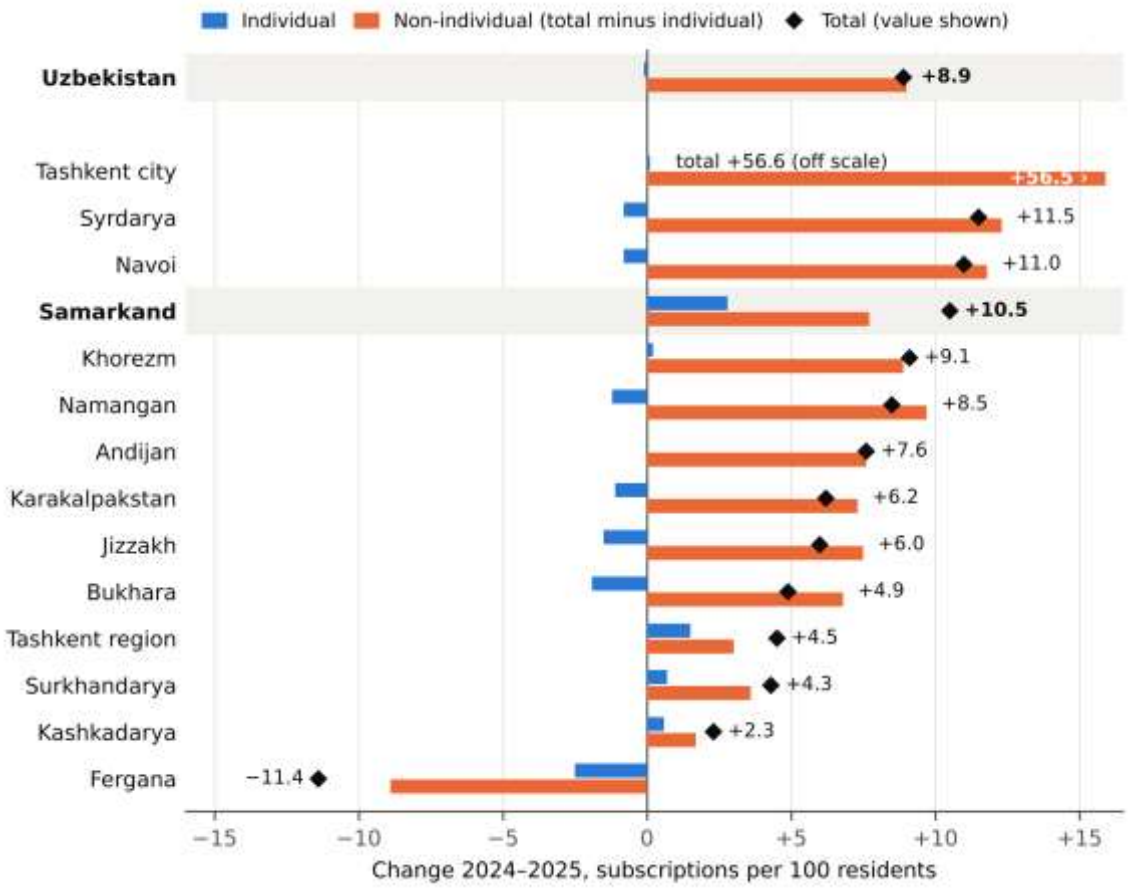


Figure 2. Decomposition of the 2024–2025 change in internet subscriptions per 100 residents

Source: calculated from SIAT series 1.06.02.0031 and 1.06.02.0032 [2], [3]. The non-individual component is the difference between total and individual subscriptions per 100 residents. The non-individual bar for Tashkent city is truncated.

The opposite movements of the two series show that the choice of indicator changes the result. In Bukhara, for example, the total ratio rose by 4.9 units while the individual ratio fell by 1.9. Fergana is the only region where both series fell: the total ratio declined by 11.4 units, of which 8.9 units were non-individual, and the non-individual component fell from 14.8 to 5.9. A change of this size more likely reflects a reclassification of subscriptions than a real loss of connectivity and should be clarified with the statistics agency. Such differences justify checking at the point of service the connection that tourists actually use and the mobile, fixed and staff-assisted variants of a service.

Samarkand Region

In 2025 Samarkand Region had 82.0 total subscriptions per 100 residents, 0.7 units below the median of the 14 regions (82.7). Its individual ratio of 71.2 was 0.1 units above the median of that series (71.1). Between 2023 and 2025 the region moved from 11th to 9th place on the total ratio and from 11th to 7th place on the individual ratio. Its 2025 values were 11.6 and 5.8 units below the national figures. The national value weights regions by population, whereas in the median each region counts once.

Samarkand is one of the few regions where individual subscriptions grew in relative terms in 2024–2025 (+2.8 units, the largest increase in the country). In absolute terms, individual subscriptions in the region rose from 2,921.4 thousand to 3,103.2 thousand, or by 6.2%, against 1.8% nationally [20]. Over 2023–2025 the region's total and individual ratios rose by 17.3 and 8.4 units, against 12.7 and 3.2 nationally. Samarkand is therefore catching up from a below-median starting position.

Regional dispersion

In 2025 the regional range of the total ratio was 198.5 units. Without Tashkent city it fell to 38.9 units, with Navoi the highest of the remaining regions at 101.5 and Tashkent Region the lowest at 62.6. For the individual ratio the range was 107.5 units with Tashkent city and 25.8 without it. Excluding Tashkent city, the coefficient of variation fell between 2023 and 2025 from 0.141 to 0.127 for the total ratio and from 0.106 to 0.090 for the individual ratio, indicating a modest convergence between regions. The very high values of the capital partly reflect the attribution of two operators' subscriptions noted in Section 3.1 [2]. The same attribution may understate Tashkent Region, which has the lowest value in both series. Neither figure should be used as a benchmark without adjustment.

Priority decisions and pilot metrics

Table 2 sets out, for each situation identified by the site audit, the priority action, the responsible function and the metric by which a pilot would be judged. Where visitors cannot obtain reliable information in advance, the first task is to confirm opening hours, address and ticket conditions in a single procedure; where the connection is intermittent, the operator defines an alternative way of admitting visitors. Online booking can be piloted where information is consistent, an operator is responsible and the connection works. The metrics in Table 2 are proposed for future pilots; no pilot results are reported in this study.

Table 2. Priority decisions, responsible functions and pilot metrics for digitalising a tourism service

Situation at the site	Priority action	Responsible function	Pilot metric
Site records differ between channels	Confirm opening hours, tariff and site identifier	Data owner and regional coordinator	Share of records updated within the agreed deadline
Connection drops at the point of service	Pilot a staff-assisted service with an offline procedure	Site operator and technical contractor	Share of transactions completed successfully during outages
Data and connectivity conditions met	Pilot online booking at one site or for one service	Operator and project manager	Share of sessions completed; waiting time
Pilot criteria met	Extend the data exchange to additional sites	Regional coordinator and operators	Share of sites operating under the same procedure

Source: compiled by the author(s) from the literature on destination management, interoperability and user experience [7]–[11]. The metrics are proposed for future pilots.

4. Discussion

The results show that the headline indicator of internet subscriptions per 100 residents grew strongly in 2024–2025, but that this growth came almost entirely from non-individual subscriptions, which say little about the connection a visitor has at a site. This is consistent with the warning that administrative subscription counts differ from actual use [4] and with the evidence that physical access does not guarantee material access or use [14], [15]. For managers, regional statistics are therefore a screening tool that shows where site audits are most needed but cannot replace them.

Visitors add a further layer: a foreign tourist may use roaming or a foreign operator and may lack local payment methods. Pilots that include such users require evidence beyond the regional subscription ratio [11], [13], which the decision tree in Figure 1 is designed to collect before investment is scaled up.

When information about a tourist site is updated, it must be clear who confirms the primary record, which channel publishes it and how errors are corrected. The site operator is responsible for the record of opening hours and services. The regional coordinator can define site identifiers, field definitions and rules for data exchange, and the technical

contractor keeps a log of outages and corrections. Once these roles are clear, it becomes possible to check how a change made in one service is updated in partner systems [8], [10]. These roles correspond to the managing and stewardship functions of the smart DMO [9].

System costs include data maintenance, connectivity, licences, training and support as well as development. If two projects use the same data registry or other shared infrastructure, these costs should be counted once. In phased funding, the cost per successful transaction should be monitored alongside outages. Where a service collects personal data, the purpose of collection and the storage arrangements must comply with the Law on Personal Data [21].

When several initiatives compete, the responsible body should weigh their interdependence, cost and effect on users. A single authoritative record of opening hours and prices is a prerequisite for several visitor-facing services and belongs in the first phase. If an events calendar is not kept up to date, the procedure for confirming event records should be agreed before mass booking is tested, and the share of duplicate records corrected becomes a data quality criterion of the pilot [17].

Before a pilot starts, the baseline state of the service, the measurement period, the person responsible and the participating sites should be recorded. For an online service, the success rate is measured as the number of completed transactions divided by the number of relevant sessions started. Visitors served at the ticket office or with staff help are recorded separately, network quality is observed at different times of the working day, and system logs are compared with manual counts of outages. A high success rate should be assessed together with queues at other channels, and measurements compared on similar service days.

If only a busy urban site is selected, outages, staffing and demand in rural districts remain unexamined; sites with similar service volumes but different connectivity should therefore be compared, and seasonal or event periods checked separately. User satisfaction and transaction success should not be merged into a single quality score; each should have its own unit and owner [18]. Where the number of transactions allows, a randomised or staggered rollout gives stronger evidence of effect than a simple before-and-after comparison [19]. As the Benidorm case shows, smart destination initiatives should be judged by what they actually change for managers and visitors [16].

The analysis relies on year-end regional indicators; site-level data on coverage, connection stability, service interruptions and visitor satisfaction are not available. The attribution of operator subscriptions between Tashkent city and Tashkent Region, and the large change in Fergana, limit the comparability of some regions. The decision tree has been derived from the literature and has not yet been tested empirically. Future research should run digital service pilots at different types of tourist sites and in different seasons and combine measures of data quality, usability and actual use.

5. Conclusion

Between 2024 and 2025, total internet subscriptions per 100 residents in Uzbekistan rose by 8.9 units, while the ratio for individuals fell by 0.1; the whole increase came from non-individual subscriptions. In Samarkand Region the two ratios rose by 10.5 and 2.8 units, respectively, and the region moved up the regional ranking on both. Because the two official indicators diverge and neither measures connectivity at a tourist site, regional statistics should be used to decide where additional on-site measurement is needed, not to decide where a digital service will work. The proposed decision tree links a site audit to the data owner, the pilot and the service outcome, so that extending a project to other sites depends on measured results. The priority for regional tourism administrations is to establish data ownership and site-level measurement before investing in new platforms.

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