

Transforming Tourism Business Performance Through Digital Marketing Innovations: A Sustainable Approach

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Abstract

This study investigates the transformative role of digital marketing innovations in enhancing the performance and sustainability of tourism businesses, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Emphasizing the tourism sector in northern India, the research explores how perceived usefulness (PU), perceived ease of use (PEoU), and social media marketing (SMM) influence the adoption of digital marketing technologies by tourism enterprises. The study further examines the relationship between digital tool adoption and business performance metrics, such as customer engagement, operational efficiency, and profitability. By identifying key enablers and barriers faced by tourism stakeholders in embracing digital platforms, the research provides valuable strategic insights for policymakers and tourism service providers. The findings aim to contribute toward strengthening digital readiness and promoting sustainable growth across the tourism ecosystem through targeted and innovative digital marketing practices.

Key words: Digital marketing; destination promotion; sustainable tourism development.

Introduction

Digital marketing has become a transformative force in the tourism industry, reshaping how businesses engage with consumers, promote destinations, and pursue sustainable growth. The post-pandemic surge in digital consumption has accelerated the adoption of technologies such as mobile apps, social media, and data-driven campaigns, enhancing visibility, personalization, and customer loyalty (Mkwizu, 2020; Chen & Lin, 2019; Kotoua & Ilkan, 2017).

With global digital advertising in tourism surpassing USD 11 billion and over 75% of Indian travelers using online platforms (Statista, 2024), the shift to digital is evident. However, adoption depends not just on access but also on perceived usefulness (PU), ease of use

(PEoU), and effective social media marketing (SMM), which influence both usage and outcomes (Davis, 1989; Gbadegeshin et al., 2019).

In a time of economic uncertainty and evolving consumer expectations, resilient digital strategies are critical for competitiveness and recovery (Sanasi et al., 2021). Platforms like Booking.com and Expedia now serve as key intermediaries, impacting tourist decision-making and destination branding (Lund et al., 2018; Stringham & Gerdes, 2019). The COVID-19 crisis further accelerated digital transformation, positioning digital marketing as essential for rebuilding trust, boosting engagement, and driving long-term growth (Gössling, Scott, & Hall, 2021).

This study investigates the impact of digital marketing innovations on tourism business performance, particularly in the context of sustainability and post-pandemic recovery. Using the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), it examines how PU, PEoU, and SMM affect technology adoption among tourism enterprises (Venkatesh & Davis, 2000), and how this adoption enhances customer engagement, operational efficiency, and profitability (Sigala, 2018).

Focusing on northern India, the research also explores key barriers such as infrastructure gaps, digital literacy, and financial limitations (Kumar & Kumar, 2021). Despite awareness of digital potential, many stakeholders face challenges in effective implementation.

The study aims to provide strategic insights for policymakers and tourism operators to enhance digital readiness, adoption, and sustainable growth, contributing to a more resilient and digitally empowered tourism sector (UNWTO, 2022).

Objectives of the Study

1. To study the impact of digital marketing innovations on the performance of tourism businesses, with a focus on sustainability and recovery in the post-pandemic context.
2. To study the influence of perceived usefulness (PU), perceived ease of use (PEoU), and social media marketing (SMM) on the adoption of digital marketing technologies in tourism enterprises.
3. To study the relationship between the adoption of digital marketing tools and tourism business performance, particularly in enhancing customer engagement, efficiency, and profitability.
4. To study key factors and challenges influencing the adoption of digital marketing among stakeholders in the tourism sector in northern India.
5. To provide strategic insights for policymakers and tourism service providers to enhance digital readiness and sustainable growth through optimized digital marketing practices.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

1. Digital Transformation in Tourism Marketing

The digitalization of the tourism sector has led to a profound transformation in marketing practices, shifting from traditional methods to data-driven and technology-enabled strategies. Digital marketing tools have broadened the accessibility of tourism services, making them more visible and interactive for global audiences. As noted by Chamboko-Mpotaringa and Tichaawa (2021), this transition has allowed businesses to adopt more flexible, cost-effective marketing approaches while enhancing customer engagement through digital platforms.

The advent of the internet and its integration into business operations has enabled direct communication between service providers and consumers, facilitating real-time interaction and collaboration (Labanauskaitė et al., 2020). Such interaction has redefined the marketing landscape in tourism, moving beyond one-way promotional messaging to a two-way engagement model. This transformation aligns with evolving consumer behavior, where travelers seek customized experiences, instant access to information, and peer-reviewed content before making decisions.

2. Role of Social Media in Enhancing Brand Visibility

Social media has emerged as a critical element of digital marketing in the tourism industry. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube are now indispensable tools for building brand awareness, enhancing visibility, and engaging with potential travelers (Nisar & Whitehead, 2016; Pentina et al., 2013). These platforms allow tourism businesses to share vivid visuals, customer reviews, influencer endorsements, and promotional content, thus significantly impacting their market presence and perceived credibility.

Social media marketing (SMM) is particularly effective in generating user engagement and virality, thereby expanding outreach at relatively low cost. It enables businesses to monitor trends, collect feedback, and adjust strategies in real-time, all of which are vital for staying competitive in a dynamic market.

3. Mobile Technology and the Tourist Experience

The widespread use of smartphones and mobile applications has further accelerated the digital transformation of tourism. Mobile devices now serve as essential tools for travel planning, navigation, booking, customer service, and post-visit feedback (Cunha, 2019; Wang et al., 2014). The seamless integration of these functions has not only enhanced tourist convenience but also allowed service providers to personalize offerings based on user behavior and preferences.

Mobile technology's role in delivering real-time, location-based services—such as push notifications, virtual tours, and in-app booking—makes it a core component of the modern travel experience. As Magano and Cunha (2020) assert, businesses that effectively leverage mobile platforms stand to gain a competitive edge in terms of customer satisfaction, operational efficiency, and market adaptability.

4. Challenges to Digital Marketing Adoption

Despite the clear benefits, the adoption of digital marketing in the tourism sector is not without challenges. Financial investment in digital infrastructure, marketing automation, skilled personnel, and content creation can be significant, especially for small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Moreover, concerns about data privacy, cyber security, and the ethical use of consumer data create barriers to trust and adoption (Valeri, 2022a).

Another challenge is the pace of technological change itself, which requires continuous learning, innovation, and adaptability from tourism professionals. Organizations that lack the necessary digital literacy or strategic vision may find it difficult to keep up with emerging trends.

5. Importance of Trust and Online Credibility

In the digital environment, trust is a cornerstone of consumer decision-making. Tourists often rely on online reviews, ratings, and recommendations before purchasing travel services. Studies have shown that real-time feedback—especially on third-party platforms—strongly influences tourist behavior and brand perception (Xu et al., 2018; Kannan & Li, 2017). Consequently, building and maintaining online credibility has become essential for tourism businesses aiming to thrive in the digital marketplace.

Effective digital marketing strategies must therefore include mechanisms to manage online reputation, respond to customer feedback, and consistently deliver quality service. Transparency, responsiveness, and value creation are critical in cultivating trust and long-term loyalty in the digital age.

Perceived Usefulness (PU)

Perceived Usefulness (PU), a core component of the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) introduced by Davis (1989), refers to the extent to which individuals believe that using a particular system will enhance their job performance. In the context of tourism businesses, PU signifies the belief that adopting digital marketing technologies—such as websites, mobile apps, social media, and customer relationship management systems—can improve operational efficiency, customer engagement, and business outcomes. Research indicates that when tourism stakeholders perceive digital tools as beneficial in achieving strategic objectives like increasing visibility, improving service quality, or generating revenue, their likelihood of adoption significantly increases (Alford & Page, 2015; Matikiti et al., 2018). For instance, businesses that recognize the strategic value of digital marketing for market responsiveness and brand development are more inclined to invest in and integrate these technologies into their operations. Empirical studies have further confirmed that PU plays a critical role in driving digital transformation in the tourism sector, particularly among small and medium enterprises aiming to stay competitive in the post-pandemic era (Gbadegeshin et al., 2019). However, the perceived utility alone may not guarantee adoption unless complemented by factors like ease of use, digital literacy, and access to resources. Despite challenges such as financial constraints and lack of awareness in certain regions, enhancing PU through training, awareness programs, and evidence-based success stories can significantly strengthen the adoption of digital marketing innovations, making PU a pivotal factor in tourism's shift toward digital sustainability and resilience.

Hypothesis (H1a) (H1b). *This study hypothesizes that PU will positively influence both the intention to enhance tourism business performance and the adoption of digital marketing.*

Perceived Ease of Use (PEoU)

Perceived Ease of Use (PEoU), a foundational construct in the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) developed by Davis (1989), refers to the extent to which an individual believes that using a particular system will be free of effort. In the domain of digital marketing, particularly within tourism businesses, PEoU reflects how intuitively business owners and managers can operate digital tools such as websites, social media platforms, booking engines, content management systems, and analytics dashboards. When these tools are perceived as user-friendly, with clear interfaces, minimal technical complexity, and seamless navigation, tourism stakeholders are more likely to adopt and integrate them into daily operations. A high level of PEoU not only facilitates faster learning and smoother implementation but also reduces psychological resistance and dependence on technical support. According to Muñoz Leiva et al. (2012), a system's ease of use significantly enhances customer satisfaction and loyalty by enabling effortless navigation, quick access to information, and secure transactions. In the tourism sector, where timely responses, real-time updates, and engaging content are essential, ease of use becomes a key driver for both service providers and end users. For small and medium-sized tourism enterprises (SMTEs), which may lack specialized IT staff, PEoU becomes even more critical, as limited digital proficiency can otherwise become a major barrier to adoption. Therefore, enhancing PEoU through intuitive design, training, and technical support can significantly influence the intention to use digital marketing platforms, thereby improving digital engagement, business performance, and customer experiences in the tourism industry.

Hypothesis 2 (a) and Hypotheses 2 (b). *This study hypothesizes that PEoU will positively influence both the intention to enhance tourism business performance and the adoption of digital marketing*

Social Media Marketing (SMM)

Social Media Marketing (SMM) has emerged as a pivotal component of digital marketing strategies, fundamentally transforming how tourism businesses connect with existing and potential customers. As platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and TikTok continue to grow in popularity and functionality, they have become indispensable tools for building brand awareness, driving customer engagement, and influencing travel decisions (Elbanna et al., 2019). In the tourism industry, where visual appeal, storytelling, and real-time communication are essential, SMM provides a dynamic and cost-effective medium for sharing destination imagery, customer testimonials, promotional offers, and behind-the-scenes content that resonates emotionally with travelers. Tourists increasingly turn to social media not only for inspiration and trip planning but also to validate their choices through user-generated content, reviews, and influencer endorsements (Barcelos et al., 2019; Molina et al., 2020). Research highlights that SMM enhances perceived credibility and trust, significantly affecting tourists' attitudes, purchase intentions, and loyalty. Furthermore, the interactive nature of social media allows tourism businesses to maintain continuous dialogue with consumers, resolve queries, respond to feedback, and foster community-driven brand engagement. Real-time analytics and audience targeting further enable businesses to customize campaigns and measure impact effectively. However, the strategic use of SMM requires a nuanced understanding of platform-specific behavior, content trends, and algorithmic dynamics. When executed effectively, SMM not only boosts digital visibility but also contributes meaningfully to tourism business performance by increasing reach, improving conversion rates, and enhancing destination reputation. Thus, it stands as a critical enabler of digital transformation and competitive positioning in the tourism sector.

Hypotheses 3 (a) and Hypothesis 3 (b): *This study hypothesizes that SMM will positively influence both the intention to enhance tourism business performance (H3a) and the adoption of digital marketing (H3b).*

Tourism Business Performance (TBP)

Tourism Business Performance (TBP) is a multidimensional construct that encompasses various indicators such as financial outcomes, operational efficiency, customer satisfaction, market competitiveness, and long-term sustainability. In recent years, digital marketing has emerged as a powerful driver of improved performance in tourism businesses by transforming how services are marketed, delivered, and consumed (Magano & Cunha, 2020). The adoption of digital tools—ranging from responsive websites, search engine optimization (SEO), and email campaigns to more immersive technologies such as virtual reality (VR) and artificial intelligence (AI)—has allowed tourism enterprises to reach wider audiences, reduce operational costs, and tailor their offerings to specific customer preferences. These tools enhance customer experience by providing personalized, real-time, and interactive content, thereby improving satisfaction, engagement, and loyalty. Research by Deb (2021) and Mkansi (2021) underscores the role of digital strategies in strengthening brand visibility, optimizing booking processes, streamlining communication, and facilitating efficient resource allocation. Moreover, performance metrics such as online traffic, conversion rates, customer feedback, and repeat visits are now essential indicators of digital success and overall business health. In highly competitive and dynamic tourism markets, the ability to adapt and innovate digitally has become critical not only for survival but for achieving superior performance outcomes. Thus, the integration of digital marketing into core business strategy is increasingly recognized as a determinant of tourism business success in both emerging and mature destinations.

Adoption of Digital Marketing

Digital marketing adoption uses technologies like the internet and mobile phones for promotion (Ritz et al., 2019). Driven by expected ROI and informed by research and experience, businesses employ tactics like social media and SEO (Venkatesh & Morris, 2000). Success, measured by engagement, reinforces adoption, while challenges prompt adjustments. This dynamic process expands reach and achieves marketing goals.

1. Conceptual Framework

This study is grounded in a conceptual framework that explores the relationship between digital marketing adoption and tourism business performance. The framework incorporates key constructs such as perceived usefulness (PU), perceived ease of use (PEoU), social media marketing (SMM), and tourism business performance (TBP). These constructs are examined through a series of hypotheses, which are tested using PLS-SEM

Research Methodology

This study employs a quantitative, cross-sectional, and explanatory research design to assess the impact of digital marketing innovations on tourism business performance in Northern India, with a focus on sustainability and post-pandemic recovery. Grounded in the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), it examines constructs such as perceived usefulness (PU), perceived ease of use (PEoU), and social media marketing (SMM) to understand adoption behavior.

The target population includes tourism stakeholders—travel agencies, hotels, homestays, tour operators, and digital marketers—in states like Jammu & Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Punjab, and Rajasthan. Using stratified random sampling, 300 respondents were selected to ensure diverse representation.

Primary data was gathered via a structured questionnaire containing closed-ended and Likert-scale items, distributed both online and through field visits from January to March 2025. Instrument reliability was confirmed with Cronbach's Alpha scores above 0.70, and content validity was ensured through expert review and a pilot test with 30 industry participants.

Data Analysis

The data collected from 300 tourism stakeholders across Northern India were analyzed using SPSS 28.0 and AMOS 26.0 to assess the impact of digital marketing innovations on tourism business performance. The analysis was structured around five core objectives of the study.

To address the first objective—**examining the impact of digital marketing innovations on the performance of tourism businesses with a focus on sustainability and post-pandemic recovery**—descriptive statistics and multiple regression analysis were employed. The findings revealed that 72% of the respondents had increased their digital marketing efforts after the COVID-19 pandemic, with innovations such as AI-enabled chatbots, targeted email campaigns, and virtual tours being widely adopted. Regression results indicated that businesses leveraging innovative digital marketing tools reported significantly higher levels of customer retention, service innovation, and sustainability-driven branding ($\beta = 0.53$, $p < 0.01$). These innovations not only helped regain lost customer segments but also contributed to positioning the businesses as resilient and environmentally conscious.

The second objective focused on **evaluating the influence of perceived usefulness (PU), perceived ease of use (PEoU), and social media marketing (SMM) on the adoption of digital marketing technologies**. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) confirmed the construct validity of PU, PEoU, and SMM with high factor loadings (all above 0.70). Multiple regression analysis revealed that PU ($\beta = 0.41$, $p < 0.01$) and SMM ($\beta = 0.47$, $p < 0.001$) were strong predictors of digital marketing adoption, while PEoU ($\beta = 0.28$, $p < 0.05$) also contributed positively but to a lesser extent. These findings validate the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) in the tourism context and highlight the significant role of social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook in influencing adoption behavior.

For the third objective—**examining the relationship between digital marketing adoption and tourism business performance (engagement, efficiency, profitability)**—a path analysis within Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was conducted. The model exhibited good fit indices (CFI = 0.93, RMSEA = 0.048, Chi-square/df = 1.97). Digital marketing adoption showed a strong positive relationship with customer engagement ($\beta = 0.49$), operational efficiency ($\beta = 0.42$), and profitability ($\beta = 0.37$), all statistically significant at the 0.01 level. Businesses that consistently used content-driven marketing, influencer collaborations, and customer analytics reported higher online traffic and improved conversion rates. This affirmed that digital marketing is not just a communication tool but a strategic asset influencing core business performance dimensions.

The fourth objective sought to **identify key factors and challenges influencing digital marketing adoption in Northern India's tourism sector**. A combination of frequency analysis and thematic coding of open-ended responses was used. The main facilitators of adoption included increased internet penetration (88%), mobile-first customer behavior (73%), and support from government digitalization initiatives. However, several challenges were also reported: lack of digital skills among small business owners (67%), high cost of advanced tools (54%), and poor infrastructure in remote areas (42%). ANOVA tests revealed significant regional disparities in digital readiness, with tourism enterprises in urban clusters like Shimla and Srinagar adopting digital tools more readily than those in remote Himalayan or border areas.

The final objective involved **providing strategic insights for policymakers and tourism providers to enhance digital readiness and sustainable growth**. Cluster analysis grouped businesses into three categories: digitally advanced, emerging adopters, and digitally lagging. Based on this segmentation, tailored recommendations were derived. Digitally advanced businesses were advised to invest in AI, automation, and real-time customer analytics, while emerging adopters were encouraged to build capacity through digital literacy programs. Digitally lagging businesses, primarily rural and small-scale operators, require infrastructure upgrades, low-cost digital toolkits, and government incentives. These insights, drawn from empirical data, provide a roadmap for inclusive and sustainable digital transformation in the tourism sector.

In summary, the data analysis provides robust evidence supporting the strategic value of digital marketing in enhancing tourism business performance, especially in a post-pandemic recovery context. The findings also underline the importance of technology acceptance, stakeholder capabilities, and infrastructural support in driving digital adoption and sustainable tourism development.

Findings and Implications

The study reveals that digital marketing innovations significantly enhance tourism business performance in Northern India, particularly in the post-pandemic context emphasizing sustainability and recovery. Tools like virtual tours, mobile apps, and SEO have improved customer communication, brand positioning, and operational sustainability, while also promoting eco-friendly practices.

Adoption is strongly influenced by perceived usefulness (PU), perceived ease of use (PEoU), and especially social media marketing (SMM), which proved most impactful in connecting with travelers and shaping decisions cost-effectively. The strong correlation between digital adoption and improved engagement, efficiency, and profitability confirms the strategic value of digital marketing beyond mere promotion.

However, adoption challenges persist, particularly for small and micro-enterprises, due to limited digital literacy, infrastructure gaps, and high technology costs.

Theoretically, the study extends the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) by integrating SMM and linking digital adoption to performance and sustainability. Practically, it urges tourism enterprises to embed digital strategies into core operations to boost visibility, competitiveness, and loyalty.

Policy recommendations include targeted digital literacy programs, improved rural digital infrastructure, financial incentives for tech adoption, and stronger public-private partnerships. From a sustainability standpoint, digital marketing supports low-impact tourism and reduces reliance on physical resources, offering a strategic path forward for resilient and responsible tourism growth.

Conclusion

This study underscores the transformative role of digital marketing as a strategic enabler of tourism business performance in a post-pandemic, technology-driven economy. Far from being a supplementary tool, digital marketing has become central to operations, customer engagement, and market adaptation.

The effective use of tools like social media, mobile apps, websites, and analytics enhances brand visibility, operational efficiency, and real-time personalization. Adoption is strongly influenced by perceived usefulness (PU), ease of use (PEoU), and the power of social media marketing (SMM)—key drivers of brand trust and digital outreach.

However, small and medium tourism enterprises (SMTEs) often face barriers such as limited resources, digital literacy gaps, and infrastructure issues. Addressing these challenges requires capacity-building initiatives, policy support, and public-private collaboration to promote inclusive digital transformation.

The study also calls for a strategic digital mindset—one that aligns innovation with customer-centricity and sustainability. Digital marketing should be seen as a long-term investment in building resilient and future-ready tourism businesses.

As technologies like AI, VR, and blockchain reshape the tourism landscape, digital marketing will be pivotal in differentiation, relationship-building, and sustainable development. This research offers both theoretical contributions and practical guidance for leveraging digital tools to drive lasting growth and recovery in the tourism sector.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite its valuable insights, this study is not without limitations. Firstly, the research was geographically confined to tourism enterprises operating in selected northern Indian states, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other regions with different digital infrastructure, policy environments, or tourism characteristics. The context-specific nature of the study, while offering depth, may not fully capture the diversity of digital marketing practices across India's broader tourism landscape. Secondly, the study primarily relied on self-reported data collected through structured questionnaires, which may be subject to social desirability bias or respondent misperceptions about their actual digital capabilities and performance outcomes.

Additionally, while the study focused on key constructs such as perceived usefulness, ease of use, and social media marketing, it did not explore the role of other potentially influential variables like

customer trust, digital competence, organizational culture, or competitive intensity. Moreover, the cross-sectional design of the research provides a snapshot at a particular point in time, limiting the ability to assess the longitudinal impact of digital marketing adoption on business performance and sustainability. Future studies could benefit from longitudinal approaches that track changes in digital adoption and performance over time, particularly in response to evolving technologies and market dynamics.

Another limitation is the underrepresentation of micro-enterprises and informal tourism operators, many of whom operate with minimal digital infrastructure but play a significant role in rural and community-based tourism. Future research should incorporate a more inclusive sample, particularly focusing on under-resourced and marginalized tourism entrepreneurs, to better understand the digital divide and recommend inclusive policy interventions. In addition, qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews or case studies could complement quantitative findings and offer deeper insights into the lived experiences, motivations, and challenges faced by tourism stakeholders in adopting digital tools.

Finally, as digital marketing technologies continue to evolve—through the rise of artificial intelligence, augmented reality, and blockchain—future research should explore the implications of these emerging innovations on the tourism ecosystem. Studies could also examine the effectiveness of specific digital marketing strategies, such as influencer marketing, programmatic advertising, and user-generated content, in shaping destination image and tourist behavior. Addressing these avenues will not only enrich academic discourse but also provide actionable insights for tourism professionals navigating an increasingly digital and competitive global environment.

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