DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT THROUGH INSTAGRAM – ENHANCING AZERBAIJAN'S TOURISM APPEAL

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ABSTRACT

Azerbaijan's tourism industry, rich with cultural heritage and breathtaking landscapes, is increasingly leveraging digital platforms to attract a global audience. Instagram, with its visually driven interface, has emerged as a powerful tool for destination branding and engaging potential travelers. This study investigates the role of Instagram as a pivotal digital marketing tool in promoting Azerbaijan's tourism industry. Drawing from a survey with tourists visiting the country, the research explores how Instagram's visual storytelling and influencer partnerships shape travel decisions and perceptions of Azerbaijan as a destination. Findings reveal that while the platform effectively highlights the country's cultural heritage and natural beauty, gaps remain in leveraging user-generated content and targeting diverse demographics. By addressing these challenges, Azerbaijan can enhance its digital marketing strategies to attract and engage a broader global audience. This paper contributes to the understanding of social media's impact on tourism and offers actionable insights for destination marketers.

Keywords: tourism, marketing, digital engagement, social media in tourism, destination branding, tourism strategies.

Introduction

Tourism plays a significant role in economic development, and as countries increasingly rely on digital tools to enhance their appeal, understanding how social media impacts tourism sector has become crucial. According to Kaplan and Haenlein, social media is a collection of internet-based apps that enable the creation and exchange of user-generated content. Karatsoli and Nathanail noted that the platform is crucial for information exchange, opinion expression, social network facilitation, decision-making influence, and business promotion. According to Xiang and Gretzel, in the tourism industry, social media influences tourism mainly in how travellers obtain and use tourist information. Zhang and his colleagues mentioned that modern travellers review other travellers' comments on travel forums, travel blogs, or social media platforms, and consider these peer-to-peer reviews to be more reliable than marketing material on the organizations' website or associated sources.

Among various digital marketing tools, Instagram has emerged as an important platform for destination promotion, leveraging visual storytelling to influence traveler perceptions. Through high-quality imagery, user-generated content, and influencer collaborations, destinations can enhance their brand visibility and appeal to a global audience. Yet, optimizing Instagram's potential requires a strategic approach that considers engagement metrics, content effectiveness, and audience segmentation.

Azerbaijan, with its rich history, cultural heritage, and growing tourism infrastructure, stands at the crossroads of East and West, making it an ideal case study for examining how digital platforms can influence tourism development in the country. However, despite ongoing efforts, the effectiveness of Instagram-based tourism marketing in Azerbaijan remains an area requiring further examination.

This research investigates Instagram's role as a digital marketing tool for Azerbaijan's tourism industry. By analyzing survey data taken from tourists visiting Baku, the capital city, the study examines the platform's effectiveness in shaping tourist behavior and decision-making. The study begins with the relevance of the problem and examples from related studies, providing an overview of the research problem and the impact of Instagram on travel behavior. Methods section describes the survey that has been conducted to gather primary data. Later, the findings are presented which contribute to the broader discourse on digital engagement in tourism, offering insights into how Azerbaijan can refine its Instagram strategies to enhance its global tourism appeal.

Objective

In the age of digital connectivity, social media platforms have transformed the way people search for, share, and engage with travel information. As social media becomes increasingly embedded in travel behavior, Instagram stands out due to its visual nature, interactive features, and widespread popularity among travelers. According to Zhang and his colleagues, with over one billion active users globally, Instagram plays a central role in influencing tourist behavior through visually immersive content and peer-to-peer communication. Meanwhile, Karatsoli and Nathanail noted that its ability to create engaging narratives through photos, stories, reels, and influencer collaborations allows destinations to foster emotional connections with potential tourists.

Tešin and her colleagues stated that Instagram posts about a specific place inspire tourists to visit that place, and social media plays a significant role when they choose a travel destination. It has also been noted that Instagram's influence on travel decision is more when it comes to women. Being one of the main inspiration sources when choosing a travel destination, Instagram also helps to create brand image for destinations.

In their study, Mele, Kerkhof, and Cantoni examined how cultural values are represented in Instagram posts with the examples from Chile, Portugal, the USA, and the Netherlands. They emphasized Instagram's potential in cultural tourism promotion, noting how cross-cultural imagery shared on the platform shapes traveler perceptions and preferences. Their study underscoring that visually appealing and culturally significant posts lead to stronger tourist engagement and destination recall, highlighted the importance of tailoring online content to address culturally diverse audiences.

However, leveraging Instagram's potential requires a clear understanding of content strategies, audience engagement metrics, and evolving trends in digital behavior, wrote Kaplan and Haenlein.

Despite Azerbaijan's potential as a prime tourist destination, the country has faced fluctuations in visitor numbers in recent years. Tourism sector is shaped by a combination of global factors – such as the 2014-2015 global oil price crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, international events like the Formula 1 Grand Prix and the COP29 summit – and domestic developments, including the Karabakh conflict. Thus, when comparing the overall trend over the past decade, the figures indicate a variable trajectory rather than steady growth. These statistics raise the question of how

effectively digital marketing tools can influence the situation. For destinations like Azerbaijan, which are working to increase their visibility and competitiveness in the global tourism market, strategic use of platforms like Instagram is essential. This paper investigates the way Instagram content shapes tourist perceptions, destination image, and travel decisions, particularly in the context of Azerbaijan's emerging tourism market. The research aims to analyze the role of Instagram as a digital marketing tool in enhancing Azerbaijan's tourism appeal and to evaluate how the platform influences tourist decision-making and behavior.

Table 1. The number of tourists according to years.

Years	The number of tourists
2017	2 691 998
2018	2 844 877
2019	3 167 904
2020	795 760
2021	790 062
2022	1 602 600
2023	2 086 548
2024	2 600 000

Source: State Migration Service, Arrival Statistics.

Methods
The research involves conducting a survey to collect primary data from tourists in Baku. The structured questionnaire was distributed to 100 tourists during peak travel times. The questionnaire includes a mix of closed-ended, open-ended, and Likert-scale questions aimed at assessing tourists' perceptions of Instagram's role in their travel decision-making. The findings are analyzed to determine usage patterns and travel preferences.
The survey included 3 main sections:
- Demographics: Age, nationality, and travel purpose.
- Instagram usage: Frequency of Instagram use, interaction with Azerbaijan-related content, and influence on travel decisions.
- Tourism perception: Questions measured on a Likert scale (1-5) regarding destination image, satisfaction, and intent to recommend Azerbaijan.

The study employs a mixed-methods approach to explore the influence of Instagram on tourists' preferences regarding travel to Azerbaijan.

**Table 2.** The survey questionnaire

Section 1: Demographics	Section 3: Perceptions of Azerbaijan's digital presence
1. What is your age? 18–25 26–35 36–50	7. How would you rate Azerbaijan's digital marketing efforts on Instagram? Poor Fair

|	
50+ 2. What is your nationality? 3. What is the primary purpose of your visit? Leisure Business Visiting friends/family Other	Good Excellent 8. What type of Instagram content do you find most appealing about Azerbaijan? (select all that apply) Natural landscapes Cultural and historical sites Food and cuisine
Section 2: Instagram usage	Modern architecture Festivals and events

4. How often do you use Instagram?
 Daily
 Weekly
 Occasionally
 Rarely
 5. Have you seen Instagram posts or ads about Azerbaijan before visiting?
 Yes
 No
 6. If yes, how influential were these posts in your decision to visit? (1 = Not influential, 5 = Very influential)
    1   2   3   4   5
	9. After seeing content about Azerbaijan on Instagram, how likely are you to recommend the country as a travel destination? (1 = Not likely, 5 = Very likely)
	    1 2 3 4 5

Source: The table was compiled by the author

According to the results of the survey, 45% of the respondents were aged between 26-35 (majority users of Instagram), and 70% were leisure travelers.

Instagram usage rate among the respondents is relatively high with 75% of them using Instagram daily. Also, 60% of the respondents confirmed that they saw Instagram posts about Azerbaijan before their visit. Chart 2 below illustrates the influence of these posts on travelers.

65% rated Azerbaijan's Instagram marketing as "Good", while 70% found content on cultural and historical sites of Azerbaijan most appealing. The tourists' likelihood of recommending Azerbaijan to others pointed a mean score which is 4.2/5, meaning they are very likely to recommend the country as a tourism destination to potential travelers.
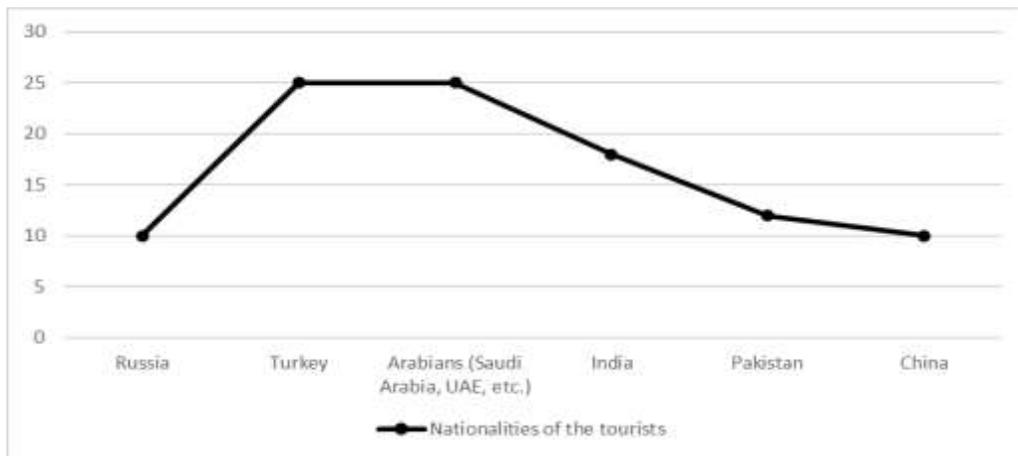
Chart 1. Nationalities of the tourists.
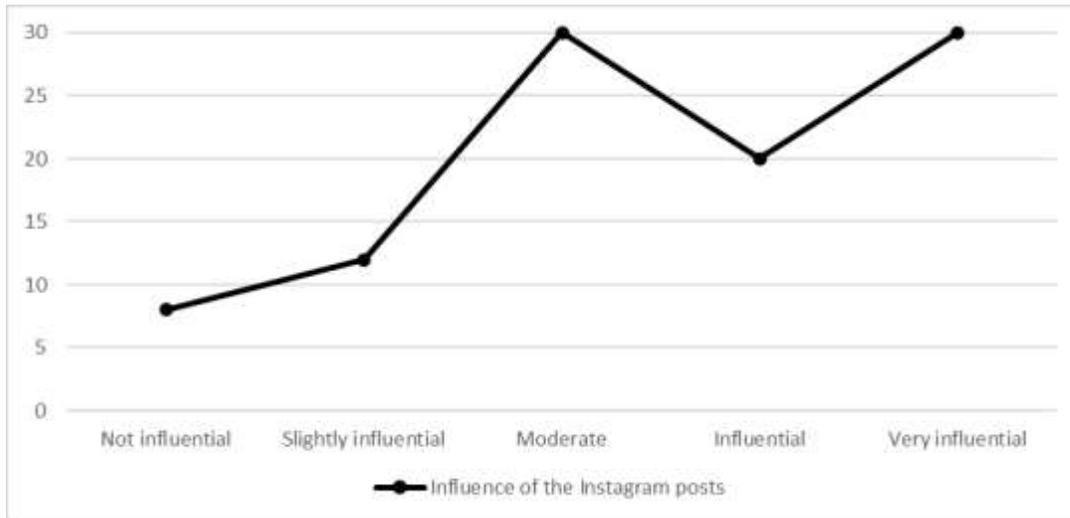
Chart 2. Influence of the Instagram posts

The survey results revealed that 78% of respondents followed travel-related accounts, and 62% discovered Azerbaijan through Instagram posts or ads. Also, 68% rated Azerbaijan's digital presence positively.

Conclusion

The survey revealed that a substantial portion of respondents (45%) belonged to the 26-35 age group, which aligns with Instagram's core user demographic. Approximately 75% of participants reported daily Instagram usage, highlighting the platform's relevance as a marketing tool for reaching potential tourists. Furthermore, 60% of tourists indicated that they had seen Instagram posts or advertisements about Azerbaijan before their visit, with 30% rating these posts as "very influential" in their travel decision.

While Azerbaijan's digital marketing efforts were positively received, with 65% of respondents rating them as "Good," there is room for improvement, as only 25% considered them "Excellent." The most appealing Instagram content identified by tourists included cultural and historical sites (70%), followed by natural landscapes (50%), and food and cuisine (45%). These preferences underscore the importance of showcasing diverse aspects of the country's tourism potential on Instagram.

Respondents displayed a high likelihood of recommending Azerbaijan as a destination, with a mean score of 4.2 out of 5. Tourists also emphasized the role of influencer collaborations in sparking interest, yet many noted a lack of localized, user-generated content that could resonate more personally. These findings revealed a gap in the strategic use of Instagram to engage potential visitors effectively.

For efficiently utilizing Instagram's features to increase digital engagement, we can leverage user-generated content encouraging tourists to share their experiences using hashtags and tagging official tourism accounts, create campaigns that reward or spotlight user-generated content to amplify authentic perspectives and foster engagement; collaborate with influencers to showcase Azerbaijan's unique attractions; use Instagram stories and reels to create short, engaging content highlighting seasonal events or unique travel experiences like hiking in the Caucasus Mountains

or exploring the Caspian coast; tailor content to different demographics by featuring multilingual posts and culturally relevant visuals; use analytics for targeted advertising, to identify audience preferences and run targeted ads that cater to specific travel motivations, such as adventure, cultural exploration, or luxury; stay updated with social media trends and adapt campaigns accordingly, for example, integrating trending music or themes into reels can improve visibility and engagement. These strategies can help increase engagement, thereby contributing to the overall growth of the tourism sector.

This study underscores the necessity to adopt a holistic and strategic approach to digital marketing, leveraging Instagram's capabilities to align with modern traveler expectations. Future efforts should include robust monitoring of campaign performance, deeper collaboration with influencers, and data-driven adjustments to maximize Instagram's impact on tourism growth.

Declarations
The manuscript has not been submitted to any other journal or conference.

Study Limitations
There are no limitations that could affect the results of the study.

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Competing Interests
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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INSTAGRAM VASİTƏSİLƏ RƏQƏMSAL FƏALİYYƏT – AZƏRBAYCANIN TURİZM CƏLBEDİCİLİYİNİN ARTIRILMASI

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XÜLASƏ

Azərbaycanın zəngin mədəni irsi və füsunkar mənzərələri ilə seçilən turizm sektoru qlobal auditoriyanı cəlb etmək üçün rəqəmsal platformalardan getdikcə daha çox istifadə edir. Vizual məzmun əsaslı interfeysi ilə Instagram, brendləşdirmə və potensial səyahətçilərlə əlaqə qurmaq üçün güclü bir alətə çevrilmişdir. Bu tədqiqat Instagram-ın Azərbaycan turizm sektorunun təşviqində əsas rəqəmsal marketinq vasitəsi kimi rolunu araşdırır. Ölkəyə səfər edən turistlər arasında aparılan sorğu əsasında tədqiqat, Instagramın vizual hekayəçiliyi və influencer əməkdaşlıqlarının turistlərin səyahət qərarlarına və Azərbaycanın turizm məkanı kimi qəbuluna necə təsir etdiyini öyrənir. Nəticələr göstərir ki, bu platforma ölkənin mədəni irsini və təbii gözəlliklərini uğurla vurğulasa da, istifadəçi tərəfindən yaradılan məzmundan tam şəkildə faydalanmaq və müxtəlif auditoriyaları hədəfləmək baxımından hələ də boşluqlar mövcuddur. Bu problemləri aradan qaldırmaqla Azərbaycan, qlobal auditoriyanı cəlb etmək və onlarla əlaqəni gücləndirmək üçün rəqəmsal marketinq strategiyalarını təkmilləşdirə bilər. Bu məqalə sosial medianın turizmə təsirinin dərk edilməsinə töhfə verir və marketoloqlar üçün praktik tövsiyələr təqdim edir.
Açar sözlər: turizm, marketinq, rəqəmsal fəaliyyət, turizmdə sosial media, brendləşmə, turizm strategiyaları.

ЦИФРОВОЕ ВЗАИМОДЕЙСТВИЕ ЧЕРЕЗ INSTAGRAM – ПОВЫШЕНИЕ ПРИВЛЕКАТЕЛЬНОСТИ ТУРИЗМА В АЗЕРБАЙДЖАНЕ

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РЕЗЮМЕ

Туристическая индустрия Азербайджана, богатая культурным наследием и захватывающими дух пейзажами, все чаще использует цифровые платформы для привлечения глобальной аудитории. Instagram с его визуально управляемым интерфейсом стал мощным инструментом для брендинга направлений и привлечения потенциальных путешественников. В этом исследовании изучается роль Instagram как основного инструмента цифрового маркетинга в продвижении туристической индустрии Азербайджана. Опираясь на опрос туристов, посещающих страну, исследование изучает, как визуальное повествование и партнерство с влиятельными лицами Instagram формируют решения о путешествиях и восприятие Азербайджана как направления. Результаты показывают, что, хотя платформа эффективно подчеркивает культурное наследие и природную красоту страны, остаются пробелы в использовании пользовательского контента и нацеливании на различные демографические группы. Решая эти проблемы, Азербайджан может улучшить свои стратегии цифрового маркетинга для привлечения и вовлечения более широкой глобальной аудитории. Статья способствует пониманию влияния социальных сетей на туризм и предлагает действенные идеи для маркетологов направлений.
Ключевые слова: туризм, маркетинг, цифровое взаимодействие, социальные сети в туризме, брендинг туристических направлений, туристические стратегии