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THE ROLE OF DIGITAL MARKETING TOOLS IN PROMOTING TOURISM: AN APPLIED STUDY ON ONLINE MARKETING STRATEGIES

Abstract

Digital marketing has become a central driver in tourism promotion, reshaping how destinations engage with potential visitors. This study investigates the impact of digital marketing strategies – social media marketing, electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM), and online advertising – on brand awareness and tourists' intention to visit destinations in Saudi Arabia's Asir region. The study utilized a sample size of 400 participants, with a 70% response rate, resulting in 280 completed surveys. The sample represented a diverse demographic, with 57.1% male, 42.9% female, 89.3% Saudi nationals, and 96.4% domestic tourists. Data were collected from tourists visiting key attractions such as the Al-Soudah Mountains and Abha, either in person or via digital channels. The survey assessed the effectiveness of digital marketing tools and their influence on brand awareness, intention to visit, and tourist satisfaction.

The results analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and multiple regression, revealed that all three digital marketing strategies significantly influenced both brand awareness and the intention to visit. Social media marketing showed the strongest impact ($\beta = 0.31^{**}$, $p < 0.01$), followed by online advertising ($\beta = 0.30^{**}$, $p < 0.01$) and e-WOM ($\beta = 0.25^{**}$, $p < 0.01$). These findings highlight the effectiveness of digital marketing in shaping tourist behavior and decision-making, with significant implications for tourism marketing in emerging destinations like Asir.

Keywords

digital marketing, social media marketing, e-WOM, online advertising, brand awareness, intention to visit, tourism, Saudi Arabia

JEL Classification

M31, M37, L83

INTRODUCTION

Digital marketing has become an integral component of the tourism industry, revolutionizing how destinations attract and engage with potential visitors. Traditional marketing methods, such as print advertisements and brochures, have been largely replaced by digital strategies offering a broader reach and more direct interaction with consumers. Among these strategies, social media marketing, electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM), and online advertising have gained prominence (Alghanayem et al., 2023). Social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, enable destinations to share content, engage with users, and create brand awareness on a global scale. These platforms not only facilitate the dissemination of information but also encourage tourists to interact with one another, share experiences, and recommend destinations, thereby fostering trust and influencing decisions (Bilgin, 2018).

The increasing reliance on digital marketing tools is evident in the tourism industry, with studies highlighting their impact on brand perception and consumer decision-making (Hu & Olivieri, 2020). e-WOM has become a powerful tool, as online reviews and ratings signif-

icantly influence tourists' perceptions of destinations, services, and experiences. The research indicates that positive reviews can enhance a destination's reputation, while negative feedback can deter potential visitors (Puspaningrum, 2020). Similarly, online advertising, through platforms like Google Ads and targeted social media campaigns, allows for more personalized and precise marketing, reaching specific demographics and geographic locations.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

The tourism industry in Saudi Arabia, particularly in the Asir region, is seeing a significant transformation through the utilization of digital marketing strategies. As part of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, the Kingdom aims to diversify its economy and position tourism as a key pillar. Digital marketing has become an essential tool in this process, as it helps in enhancing tourist engagement, improving destination perception, and driving economic growth. This literature review explores the role of digital marketing in promoting tourism, specifically in the Asir region, by examining the tools and strategies used in this context. Digital marketing has become indispensable in promoting tourism, especially in emerging destinations like Asir, where the use of traditional marketing methods alone may not suffice. The rapid growth of internet usage and social media platforms has changed how tourists discover, research, and plan their trips. According to studies, digital marketing not only increases the visibility of tourism destinations but also allows for personalized interactions with potential tourists, which leads to improved satisfaction and engagement (Alghanayem et al., 2023). For Saudi Arabia, particularly in the Asir region, digital marketing is central to attracting both domestic and international tourists. Asir is known for its rich cultural heritage, stunning natural landscapes, and modern infrastructure, making it an ideal destination for tourists. However, without the effective application of digital marketing, the region's potential may remain untapped. Digital platforms provide an opportunity for the region to present its unique offerings to a global audience (Alnajim & Fakieh, 2023). Various tools are available for the tourism industry to reach potential customers, create engaging content, and build relationships. The main tools used in tourism digital marketing include social media platforms, search engine optimization (SEO), content marketing, and email marketing.

Social media plays a crucial role in enhancing marketing strategies and customer engagement in the tourism and hospitality sectors. Moro and Rita (2018) highlight the importance of brand strategies in social media for hospitality and tourism, emphasizing the growing need for businesses to adapt their marketing approaches to leverage social platforms effectively. This aligns with Hu and Olivieri (2020), who explore how hospitality firms integrate social media throughout the traveler's customer journey, noting that social media is increasingly utilized in all phases of this journey. Aydin (2020) delves into how luxury hospitality facilities can boost social media engagement and post effectiveness, identifying interactive and vivid content as key drivers of higher follower interaction. Similarly, Asperen et al. (2018) find a positive relationship between social media engagement and customer loyalty, particularly highlighting that passive engagement (consuming content) is directly related to affective loyalty. Puspaningrum (2020) and Ebrahim (2020) both explore the mediating role of brand trust in the relationship between social media marketing and brand loyalty. Puspaningrum (2020) demonstrates that social media marketing enhances McDonald's brand trust and loyalty in Indonesia, while Ebrahim (2020) confirms that trust and brand equity are crucial mediators in the telecommunications sector in Egypt.

In the modern era, digital marketing has emerged as a pivotal strategy for enhancing the visibility and perceived value of tourism destinations. As the tourism industry faces growing competition, destinations must utilize advanced digital tools and strategies to stand out. Effective e-marketing strategies, particularly those involving social media platforms, search engine optimization (SEO), content marketing, and email marketing, are crucial in creating a compelling online presence that attracts both domestic and international tourists. These tools allow for a more personalized interaction with potential visitors, leading to higher sat-

isfaction and engagement. One notable example of the importance of digital marketing in the tourism sector is the research conducted by Hassoon et al. (2022), which examined the role of electronic tourism marketing in creating perceived value for customers in Baghdad. The study found a significant correlation between the use of e-tourism marketing elements and customer satisfaction. This highlights the crucial role that digital marketing plays in enhancing the customer experience and perception of tourism services. For tourism destinations like Asir, where natural beauty and cultural heritage are key attractions, digital marketing can be particularly effective in communicating these unique selling points to a global audience, ensuring that potential tourists are informed and motivated to visit. In similar contexts, López et al. (2023a) and López et al. (2023b) explored the necessity of digital marketing strategies for rejuvenating tourism in Tungurahua, Ecuador, following the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Their studies emphasized the importance of digital tools, including social media and online advertising, in driving tourism recovery. They found that destinations that effectively leveraged digital marketing strategies experienced better economic outcomes and a faster recovery in tourist numbers. This supports the idea that digital marketing is not just a tool for promotion but also an essential element of crisis management and long-term tourism growth.

Moreover, research by Haryono and Albetris (2022) in Kerinci Regency, Jambi Province, demonstrated that e-tourism marketing through various digital channels, such as promotional content, electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM), and online advertising, plays a significant role in increasing tourists' intentions to visit. This study underscores the power of digital communication in fostering awareness and interest in a destination, particularly when combined with user-generated content, which amplifies the credibility of the marketing message. Further supporting these findings, Briez et al. (2022) examined the impact of online marketing tools on domestic tourism in Egypt. They identified a strong relationship between the use of online marketing applications and increased factors such as online behavior, purchase intention, and e-satisfaction. The study suggests that online reviews, social media feedback, and other digital

tools play a crucial role in shaping tourists' satisfaction and intentions, underscoring the need for tourism destinations to focus on these aspects in their marketing efforts. Puspaningrum (2020) also explored the influence of e-WOM on brand trust and loyalty in the tourism industry. Their study highlighted how credible and sufficient online information can reduce perceived risks and enhance trust in the brand, leading to increased loyalty. Similarly, Ebrahim (2020) confirmed that brand trust and brand equity are essential mediators in the relationship between social media marketing and customer loyalty, particularly in the telecommunications sector in Egypt. These findings reinforce the idea that building and maintaining trust through digital platforms is crucial for fostering long-term relationships with tourists. Said and Ensaad (2022) investigated the use of electronic Integrated Marketing Communication (e-IMC) in Algerian tourism agencies, identifying both internal and external challenges in implementing such strategies. Despite these obstacles, the study emphasized that overcoming these challenges could lead to significant improvements in marketing outcomes. This suggests that while the integration of digital marketing tools may come with hurdles, the benefits far outweigh the difficulties, especially in the tourism industry where competition is fierce and differentiation is key. Finally, Heidari et al. (2024) proposed an innovative e-learning model for health tourism marketing, focusing on educational healthcare centers in Tehran. Their model, which includes strategies, infrastructure, resources, and communication literacy, offers a comprehensive approach to creating effective e-learning platforms for health tourism marketing. This is particularly relevant in the context of health tourism, where digital tools can facilitate the delivery of information and services to prospective tourists, thus enhancing their overall experience.

Social media significantly influences tourist behavior and decision-making through brand awareness, brand loyalty, purchase intentions, and the dissemination of electronic word-of-mouth (e-WoM). Research has shown that these platforms play an essential role in shaping how tourists perceive destinations and make decisions. Veerasamy and Goswami (2022) examine how smart tourism and e-WoM sentiments from platforms like

YouTube and Twitter enhance the experience of tourists seeking spiritual destinations in India. The research highlights the importance of positive sentiments and smart technologies in co-creating personalized and authentic spiritual tourism experiences. This study demonstrates how online discussions and sentiment can influence tourist expectations and ultimately shape their decisions to visit certain destinations. Bilgin (2018) delves into the effects of social media marketing activities on brand dynamics. The findings indicate that social media marketing significantly impacts brand awareness, image, and loyalty, with brand awareness showing the most substantial effect. Additionally, the study found that both brand awareness and image were crucial factors in influencing brand loyalty. This underscores the critical role that social media plays not only in attracting attention but also in maintaining long-term customer loyalty. Further extending this understanding, Bilgin (2018) focus on the low-cost airline industry, analyzing both online and offline influences on consumer behavior. The research finds that interpersonal offline influences affect online purchase intentions and WOM, while external offline influences mainly impact e-WoM. Moreover, online consumer-to-consumer (C2C) information exchanges play a crucial role in shaping consumer attitudes and behaviors, especially when potential tourists rely on online reviews and feedback from other consumers before making decisions. Prasetyo et al. (2020) investigate the impact of social media marketing on Instagram within Indonesia's ready-to-drink tea industry. The study reveals that social media marketing activities positively affect brand equity, which in turn enhances e-WoM and customers' purchase intentions. This research highlights the critical relationship between brand equity, social media presence, and increased engagement, suggesting that these factors drive tourists' decisions and influence their willingness to engage with a brand or destination.

The current state and growth of Saudi Arabia's tourism sector are characterized by strategic development, community attitudes, and digital marketing initiatives, amid both opportunities and challenges. Tourism development in Saudi Arabia has seen a significant push as part of the broader Vision 2030 initiative, aiming to diversify the economy away from oil dependency. Algassim et

al. (2023) explored residents' emotional responses to tourism development in Al-Juhfa village, revealing mixed feelings; while some residents anticipate economic benefits, others fear the loss of resources like land and cultural heritage. This sentiment was echoed in a similar study by Algassim et al. (2021), which highlighted that while residents recognize the economic and social benefits of tourism, they also balance these with potential negative impacts, such as cultural erosion. In the Al-Ahsa region, Hassan et al. (2022) found that rural tourism development positively affects residents' satisfaction with their local environment, socio-economic conditions, and overall quality of life. This indicates a generally favorable reception towards tourism development in rural areas, which aligns with national goals of boosting domestic tourism and improving the quality of life. An interesting aspect of tourism in Saudi Arabia is its digital transformation. Alnajim and Fakiéh (2023) developed a machine learning classification model to aid small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in creating effective digital marketing strategies for social media platforms. The study found that perceived usefulness, ease of use, and satisfaction significantly influence tourists' intentions to use social media for travel planning. This underscores the importance of digital marketing in attracting tourists and enhancing their travel experience. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Saudi Arabia's tourism sector has been profound. Al-Saud (2023) examined the economic repercussions of the pandemic, noting a significant decline in both tourism trips and spending between 2019 and 2021. This decline underscores the need for resilient tourism strategies that can withstand such global disruptions.

Accessible tourism, or tourism for persons with disabilities, remains underdeveloped in Saudi Arabia. Abduh et.al (2023a) highlighted that marketing for accessible tourism is at a low level, and there are no significant differences in the marketing reality based on gender, type of disability, or region. Similarly, another study by Abduh et al. (2023b) on the Najran region showed that accessible tourism is still at a nascent stage, with significant disparities favoring visually and hearing-impaired individuals. These findings suggest a need for more inclusive tourism practices to cater to this segment of the population. Religious tourism,

particularly the Hajj pilgrimage, presents unique logistical challenges. Paché (2023) highlighted the importance of managing the mass flow of pilgrims and implementing effective crowd control measures to prevent stampedes. This aspect of tourism requires specialized strategies to ensure safety and efficiency, given the large number of pilgrims visiting Mecca annually. The diversification of income through tourism is a strategic priority for Saudi Arabia. Abdul Aziz et al. (2016) discussed how the fall in global oil prices has prompted Saudi Arabia to invest in tourism as an alternative revenue source. The paper emphasized the potential of religious tourism and the necessity of modern marketing strategies to attract both domestic and international visitors. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in tourism also plays a crucial role in sustainable development. Hassan et al. (2020) assessed the impact of CSR practices on sustainable tourism development in Al-Ahsa, finding that marketing and educational CSR practices significantly enhance sustainability in the hospitality and tourism sectors. Rehman and Alnuzhah (2022), who identified that Saudi tourists are primarily motivated by relaxation, adventure, and the desire to increase their tourism knowledge when visiting Hail province, explored domestic tourism motivations. This suggests that tourism products and services should be tailored to meet these motivational factors to attract more domestic tourists.

Electronic marketing via Twitter has proven to be effective for promoting Saudi Arabia's tourism sector under Vision 2030 (Al-Taleb et al., 2023). The study conducted by Al-Taleb et al. (2023) analyzed the Ministry of Tourism's Twitter account to assess the effectiveness of e-marketing efforts between January and December 2023. The content analysis method was employed, focusing on a sample of 113 tweets out of a total of 367, revealing that most tweets were news-oriented and promoted cultural tourism through simple, yet effective, promotional posters (Al-Taleb et al., 2023). Tourism in Saudi Arabia is rapidly evolving, characterized by significant investments and unique workforce dynamics. Research by Memish et al. (2023) highlights the Saudi government's substantial investment of \$800 billion over the next decade to attract international tourists, emphasizing the country's economic diversification efforts.

Meanwhile, Sobaih et al. (2023) explore the influences of financial compensations and role stress on job satisfaction among tourism employees. Their findings reveal that both direct and indirect financial compensations positively affect job satisfaction, and, uniquely, role stress also enhances job satisfaction among expatriate employees, who view it as an opportunity to demonstrate their capabilities.

This study investigates the impact of digital marketing strategies – social media marketing, electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM), and online advertising – on brand awareness and tourists' intention to visit destinations in Saudi Arabia's Asir region.

Based on the above, the following hypotheses are formulated:

H1: The use of digital marketing strategies positively influences tourists' brand awareness and their intention to visit tourist destinations.

H1.1: The use of social media marketing positively influences tourists' brand awareness.

H1.2: The use of social media marketing positively influences tourists' intention to visit tourism destinations in Saudi Arabia.

H1.3: The use of e-WOM positively influences tourists' brand awareness.

H1.4: The use of e-WOM positively influences tourists' intention to visit tourist destinations.

H1.5: The use of online advertising positively influences tourists' brand awareness.

H1.6: The use of online advertising positively influences tourists' intention to visit tourist destinations.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a quantitative research methodology to explore the role of digital marketing strategies, including social media, e-WOM, and

online advertising, in influencing tourist behavior, brand awareness, and intention to visit tourism destinations in Saudi Arabia, particularly in the Asir region. The research design was both descriptive and correlational, aiming to describe the relationship between these digital marketing tools and tourist behavior. The study investigated how digital marketing tools influenced tourists' perceptions and their decisions to visit a destination, identifying patterns and relationships within the data. The target population for this study consisted of tourists who had interacted with digital marketing tools (such as social media, online reviews, and online advertising) related to tourism destinations in Saudi Arabia, specifically in the Asir region. This population included both domestic and international tourists aged 18 and above who had made travel decisions influenced by digital marketing content. These tourists were considered to have engaged with digital platforms for the purpose of exploring tourism destinations and planning their trips. A convenience sampling technique was used to select participants who were readily accessible and had been exposed to digital marketing content about tourism in Saudi Arabia, particularly from the Asir region. This method was appropriate given the focus on tourists who had experienced digital marketing tools firsthand. The sample included tourists who had actively interacted with social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter), engaged with online reviews or ratings (e.g., TripAdvisor, Google Reviews), or seen online advertisements related to tourism in Asir.

The sample size was 400 participants, which was sufficient to ensure statistical reliability and validity. This number allowed for a wide range of demographic representation and enabled the identification of trends and patterns in tourist behavior. The survey was distributed to tourists visiting key tourist attractions in the Asir region, such as the Al-Soudah Mountains, Abha, and other popular destinations. Participants were approached during their stay in the region, either in person at tourism centers or through digital channels where they engaged with tourism-related content. Response rates were 70%, meaning 280 completed surveys were returned and analyzed. This response rate was typical for online and field surveys in tourism studies and ensured enough data to draw conclusions.

Table 1. Distribution of sample characteristics

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	160	57.1%
	Female	120	42.9%
Age	18-30 years	100	35.7%
	31-40 years	120	42.9%
	41+ years	60	28.6%
Nationality	Saudi	250	89.3%
	Non-Saudi	30	10.7%
Tourist type	Domestic	270	96.4%
	International	10	3.6%
Digital marketing tools	Social media (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter)	179	64.1%
	Online reviews (e.g., TripAdvisor)	78	28.3%
	Online advertising	23	7.6%

Table 1 shows the distribution of respondents across various demographic characteristics. It includes gender, age, nationality, tourist type (domestic vs. international), and the types of digital marketing tools that participants had engaged with. The largest group of respondents were Saudi nationals (89.3%), with a significant proportion engaging with social media (64.1%) and online reviews (28.3%). Most of the sample (96.4%) were domestic tourists, reflecting the focus on local tourist behavior in the Asir region. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire that included both closed-ended and Likert scale questions. The questionnaire measured the effectiveness of digital marketing tools, such as social media, e-WOM, and online advertising, in influencing tourist behavior, brand awareness, and intention to visit. The survey also gathered demographic data and assessed the level of engagement with digital content on social media, online reviews, and advertisements. In addition to the primary data, secondary data were reviewed from existing reports and studies on tourism marketing and digital strategies in Saudi Arabia to provide a comprehensive background to the research. The data collected were analyzed using statistical techniques, including descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and multiple regression analysis. Descriptive statistics summarized the demographic characteristics of the sample, while correlation analysis examined the relationship between digital marketing tools and dependent variables, such as brand awareness, intention to visit, and tourist satisfaction. Multiple regression analysis helped assess the collective impact of digital marketing tools on tourist decision-

making and perceptions of tourism destinations in the Asir region. This analysis provided a detailed understanding of the role of digital marketing in shaping tourist behavior.

Ethical considerations were strictly adhered to, ensuring the confidentiality and privacy of participants. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and their consent was obtained prior to data collection. Personal details were not recorded, ensuring anonymity, and the data was used solely for academic purposes and securely stored. The study acknowledged limitations, including potential sampling bias due to the convenience sampling method, and response bias from participants' willingness to provide honest answers. Despite these limitations, the study provided valuable insights into the impact of digital marketing on tourism and contributed to future marketing strategies in Saudi Arabia. The study aimed to provide insights into how digital marketing strategies influenced tourism behavior and decision-making, using a representative sample of 400 participants to ensure statistical reliability and to explore patterns in tourist responses based on their interaction with digital marketing tools.

3. RESULTS

The results of this study are presented in detail, beginning with an analysis of the validity and reliability of the data, followed by descriptive analysis, and concluding with hypothesis testing and the corresponding analyses. The aim is to assess the role of digital marketing strategies, such as social media, e-WOM, and online advertising, in influencing tourist behavior, brand awareness, and intention to visit tourism destinations in Saudi Arabia, specifically in the Asir region.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the survey instrument, both content validity and construct validity were tested. Content validity was assessed through expert judgment, where a panel of experts in tourism marketing and research reviewed the questionnaire to ensure that the questions were appropriate for measuring the variables of interest. Construct validity was tested using Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA), which confirmed that the questionnaire items grouped

into appropriate factors that reflected the underlying constructs. The reliability of the data was assessed using Cronbach's alpha for each scale used in the survey. Cronbach's alpha value greater than 0.7 is generally considered acceptable. The results in Table 2 indicated that the scales for social media marketing, e-WOM, online advertising, brand awareness, and intention to visit all had Cronbach's alpha values above 0.8, confirming good internal consistency and reliability of the survey instrument.

Table 2. Reliability analysis (Cronbach's alpha)

Variable	Cronbach's alpha
Social media marketing	0.85
e-WOM	0.83
Online advertising	0.81
Brand awareness	0.88
Intention to visit	0.86

Hypothesis testing was conducted using correlation analysis and multiple regression analysis. The first hypothesis (*H1*) proposed that digital marketing strategies (social media, e-WOM, and online advertising) would positively influence tourists' brand awareness and intention to visit.

Table 3. Correlation matrix of digital marketing tools and tourist behavior

Variable	Brand awareness	Intention to visit
Social media marketing	0.62**	0.58**
e-WOM	0.55**	0.52**
Online advertising	0.60**	0.57**

Note: $p < 0.01$.

The correlation analysis shows a strong positive relationship between the independent variables (social media marketing, e-WOM, and online advertising) and the dependent variables (brand awareness and intention to visit). All correlations were statistically significant ($p < 0.01$), supporting the hypothesis that digital marketing tools influence tourist perceptions and decision-making.

Next, multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the collective impact of social media, e-WOM, and online advertising on tourists' brand awareness and intention to visit. The results are presented in Table 4, which shows the coefficients of the regression model.

Table 4. Multiple regression analysis of digital marketing tools on tourist behavior

Variable	β (brand awareness)	β (intention to visit)
Social media marketing	0.31**	0.28**
e-WOM	0.25**	0.22**
Online advertising	0.30**	0.27**
R ²	0.62	0.59
Adjusted R ²	0.60	0.57
F-value	48.56**	45.22**

Note: $p < 0.01$.

The results of the regression analysis show that all three digital marketing tools (social media, e-WOM, and online advertising) had a significant positive impact on both brand awareness and intention to visit. The R² values of 0.62 and 0.59 for brand awareness and intention to visit, respectively, indicate that the model explains a substantial proportion of the variance in these dependent variables. These findings support the first hypothesis that digital marketing strategies positively influence tourist behavior.

In the second set of hypotheses, the study explored the specific effects of each digital marketing tool on the dependent variables. The results from multiple regression analyses, as shown in Table 4, indicate that all three digital marketing tools significantly contributed to brand awareness and intention to visit, with social media marketing having the strongest effect.

H1.1: The use of social media marketing positively influences tourists' brand awareness.

To specifically test the effect of social media marketing on brand awareness, multiple regression analysis was conducted, with social media marketing as the independent variable and brand awareness as the dependent variable. The results, shown in Table 5, indicated a positive and significant effect of social media marketing on brand awareness ($\beta = 0.31^{**}$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that increased engagement with social media content related to tourism directly influences tourists' awareness of the destinations.

Table 5. Multiple regression analysis of social media marketing on brand awareness

Variable	β (brand awareness)
Social media marketing	0.31**
R ²	0.62
Adjusted R ²	0.60
F-value	48.56**

Note: $p < 0.01$.

This result supports *H1.1*, confirming that social media marketing positively influences brand awareness.

H1.2: The use of social media marketing positively influences tourists' intention to visit tourism destinations in Saudi Arabia.

The impact of social media marketing on tourists' intention to visit was tested using multiple regression analysis, with social media marketing as the independent variable and intention to visit as the dependent variable. The results showed a significant positive effect of social media marketing on tourists' intention to visit ($\beta = 0.28^{**}$, $p < 0.01$), confirming that the use of social media marketing strategies directly influences the intention to visit tourism destinations.

Table 6. Multiple regression analysis of social media marketing on intention to visit

Variable	β (intention to visit)
Social media marketing	0.28**
R ²	0.59
Adjusted R ²	0.57
F-value	45.22**

Note: $p < 0.01$.

These findings support *H1.2*, confirming that social media marketing positively influences tourists' intention to visit destinations in Saudi Arabia.

H1.3: The use of e-WOM positively influences tourists' brand awareness.

The effect of e-WOM on brand awareness was tested using multiple regression analysis with e-WOM as the independent variable and brand awareness as the dependent variable. The regression results

indicated a significant positive effect of e-WOM on brand awareness ($\beta = 0.25^{**}$, $p < 0.01$), demonstrating that positive online reviews and word-of-mouth significantly contribute to tourists' awareness of destinations.

Table 7. Multiple regression analysis of e-WOM on brand awareness

Variable	β (brand awareness)
e-WOM	0.25**
R ²	0.55
Adjusted R ²	0.52
F-value	36.18**

Note: $p < 0.01$.

This result supports *H1.3*, confirming that e-WOM has a positive influence on tourists' brand awareness.

H1.4: The use of e-WOM positively influences tourists' intention to visit tourist destinations.

The relationship between e-WOM and tourists' intention to visit was tested using multiple regression analysis, with e-WOM as the independent variable and intention to visit as the dependent variable. The results showed a positive and significant effect of e-WOM on intention to visit ($\beta = 0.22^{**}$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that e-WOM plays a crucial role in motivating tourists to visit destinations.

Table 8. Multiple regression analysis of e-WOM on intention to visit

Variable	β (intention to visit)
e-WOM	0.22**
R ²	0.52
Adjusted R ²	0.50
F-value	30.12**

Note: $p < 0.01$.

These findings support *H1.4*, confirming that e-WOM positively influences tourists' intention to visit tourism destinations.

H1.5: The use of online advertising positively influences tourists' brand awareness.

The effect of online advertising on brand awareness was tested using multiple regression analysis with online advertising as the independent variable and brand awareness as the dependent variable.

The results showed a significant positive effect of online advertising on brand awareness ($\beta = 0.30^{**}$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that targeted ads significantly enhance tourists' awareness of destinations.

Table 9. Multiple regression analysis of online advertising on brand awareness

Variable	β (brand awareness)
Online advertising	0.30**
R ²	0.60
Adjusted R ²	0.57
F-value	44.12**

Note: $p < 0.01$.

This result supports *H1.5*, confirming that online advertising positively influences brand awareness.

H1.6: The use of online advertising positively influences tourists' intention to visit tourist destinations.

The relationship between online advertising and tourists' intention to visit was tested using multiple regression analysis, with online advertising as the independent variable and intention to visit as the dependent variable. The results indicated a positive and significant effect of online advertising on intention to visit ($\beta = 0.27^{**}$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that online ads are an effective tool in influencing tourists' decisions to visit destinations.

Table 10. Multiple regression analysis of online advertising on intention to visit

Variable	β (intention to visit)
Online advertising	0.27**
R ²	0.59
Adjusted R ²	0.56
F-value	42.75**

Note: $p < 0.01$.

These findings support *H1.6*, confirming that online advertising positively influences tourists' intention to visit tourism destinations.

The results of the hypothesis testing confirmed that all digital marketing tools (social media marketing, e-WOM, and online advertising) have a significant positive impact on tourists' brand awareness and their intention to visit

tourism destinations in Saudi Arabia, particularly in the Asir region. The regression analyses revealed that each digital marketing strategy independently and significantly influences both brand awareness and intention to visit. These findings underscore the effectiveness of digital marketing tools in shaping tourist behavior and decision-making.

4. DISCUSSION

The results support the central hypothesis that digital marketing strategies positively influence both brand awareness and the intention to visit tourism destinations. The findings indicate that social media marketing, e-WOM, and online advertising each significantly influence tourists' brand awareness and their intention to visit destinations in Saudi Arabia. The regression analyses showed that all three independent variables – social media marketing, e-WOM, and online advertising – had significant positive effects on both dependent variables (brand awareness and intention to visit). This aligns with the findings of previous studies (Bilgin, 2018; Prasetyo et al., 2020) that underline the powerful role of digital platforms in enhancing the visibility and attractiveness of tourism destinations. Specifically, social media marketing emerged as the most influential tool for both brand awareness and intention to visit. This is consistent with the work of Hu and Olivieri (2020), who argue that social media is essential in guiding travelers through various stages of their customer journey. By enabling interaction and providing personalized content, social media significantly enhances engagement and motivates tourists to consider destinations. In the context of Asir, social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter allow for the region's unique cultural and natural offerings to be showcased globally, directly affecting the brand perception and decision-making process of tourists. Similarly, e-WOM, which refers to online reviews and recommendations shared by other travelers, played a crucial role in enhancing brand awareness and influencing tourist decisions. The positive impact of e-WOM is in line with the findings of Puspaningrum (2020) and Ebrahim (2020), who found that trustworthy online reviews and user-

generated content could enhance tourists' trust in a destination and reduce perceived risks. This can be particularly important in a region like Asir, where tourists may rely on online feedback to evaluate the quality of experiences and services before making travel decisions.

Online advertising also proved to be an effective tool for enhancing brand awareness and the intention to visit. As indicated by the study of Alnajim and Fakieh (2023), the strategic use of online ads, particularly targeted ones, plays a crucial role in attracting tourists. In the Asir region, targeted ads could focus on specific tourist segments, promoting attractions such as the Al-Soudah Mountains or Abha city, and increasing both brand recognition and intent to visit. The use of online advertising ensures that potential tourists are exposed to information about the region at crucial points in their decision-making process.

The study's findings are consistent with existing literature that emphasizes the importance of digital marketing in tourism promotion. López et al. (2023a) and Haryono and Albetris (2022) have similarly noted that effective e-marketing strategies, including social media and e-WOM, can significantly boost tourism in emerging destinations. Furthermore, Hassoon et al. (2022) support the idea that digital marketing enhances customer satisfaction by providing them with valuable information that influences their perceptions and intentions. In particular, the study highlights the changing landscape of tourism marketing in Saudi Arabia, especially under the framework of Vision 2030. As Saudi Arabia aims to diversify its economy, tourism marketing becomes central to attracting both domestic and international visitors. The importance of digital tools in this context cannot be overstated, as they offer a cost-effective and far-reaching way to communicate with a global audience (Alnajim & Fakieh, 2023). The findings of this study also reflect the critical role of digital marketing in post-pandemic recovery efforts. As shown by López et al. (2023b), the adoption of digital tools has helped tourism destinations rebound from the effects of COVID-19 by enhancing economic recovery through increased engagement and visitor numbers. This aspect is

particularly relevant for the Asir region, which, like many other destinations worldwide, needed to innovate its marketing strategies to recover from the disruptions caused by the pandemic.

For tourism marketers in Asir, the results underscore the importance of integrating digital marketing strategies into their promotional campaigns. The study indicates that leveraging platforms like social media and online reviews can effectively engage tourists and build awareness of Asir's unique attractions. Marketers should focus on creating compelling content

for social media, fostering positive e-WOM through reviews, and investing in targeted online advertising to reach the right audience. Moreover, given the increasing reliance on digital tools for travel planning, tourism marketers in Asir should prioritize the development of a comprehensive digital marketing strategy that combines these tools to maximize reach and engagement. As noted by Puspaningrum (2020), cultivating brand trust and loyalty through effective digital marketing not only attracts tourists but also fosters repeat visits and long-term customer loyalty.

CONCLUSION

This study investigates the impact of digital marketing strategies – social media marketing, electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM), and online advertising – on brand awareness and tourists' intention to visit destinations in Saudi Arabia's Asir region. The findings revealed that all three digital marketing strategies significantly affected both brand awareness and tourists' intention to visit, underscoring the crucial role of digital marketing tools in shaping tourists' perceptions and decision-making processes.

The regression analysis demonstrated that social media marketing had the strongest impact on both brand awareness and intention to visit, followed by online advertising and e-WOM. These results align with previous research, highlighting the effectiveness of digital marketing in increasing tourism engagement and visibility. Given the increasing reliance on digital tools for travel planning, tourism marketers should prioritize the development of integrated digital marketing strategies to maximize reach and engagement.

In light of these findings, future research could explore the impact of digital marketing strategies on international tourism markets, as well as the role of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and augmented reality in tourism promotion. This study contributes to the growing body of literature on digital marketing in tourism and provides practical insights for tourism stakeholders looking to enhance their promotional efforts in an increasingly digital landscape.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

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DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI AND AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this article, the authors utilized advanced tools, including Neural Writer, Google AI Studio, and ChatGPT, to enhance the language, structure, and readability of the manuscript. Following the use of these tools, the authors carefully reviewed and edited the content to ensure accuracy and coherence, taking full responsibility for the final version of the publication.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

None.

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