



Presenting a digital brand model for sustainable urban development (Case study: Ardabil city)¹

Ghasem Zarei^{1*}, Mahta Azizi²

¹. Professor in Business Management, University of Mohaghegh Ardabili, Ardabil, Iran

². Ph.D. Student in Business Mngement, University of Mohaghegh Ardabili , Ardabil, Iran

Received Date: 24 September 2025 **Accepted Date:** 25 December 2025

Abstract

Background and Aim: The objective of the present study is to investigate the intersection of digital marketing and sustainable urban tourism, focusing on Ardabil City as a case study. Digital marketing provides innovative tools for promoting destinations, along with advancing responsible tourism practices. Sustainable urban tourism also seeks to balance economic growth, cultural preservation, and environmental management in urban spaces.

Methods and Material: The research method is inductive and a qualitative approach based on Grounded Theory. The participants in the research process include experts, university professors, and experienced employees in the fields of tourism and marketing. Additionally, a purposive sampling method was used, and to reach theoretical saturation and development, interviews were conducted with 12 people and analyzed using MaxQDA software.

Results and Discussion: Based on the results, the causal conditions (weakness in promoting sustainable tourism attractions, weakness in the digital ecosystem, mismatch of existing marketing methods with modern tourist expectations, and cultural and social challenges); the contextual conditions (geographical and natural features, facilities and infrastructure, and the economic and social structure of the local community); the intervening conditions (political and managerial factors, human resource training and expertise, and technological and infrastructural barriers); the strategies (utilizing digital marketing elements, integrated and interactive platform strategies, and collaboration and synergy strategies); and the outcomes (increased awareness and attraction of responsible tourists, economic and social empowerment of the community, branding of Ardabil City as a sustainable destination, and environmental results) were identified.

Keywords: Digital Marketing, Sustainable Urban Tourism, Ardabil City, Grounded Theory Approach.

¹ This article is extracted from the research project titled “Presenting a digital brand model for sustainable urban development (Case study: Ardabil city)” conducted at the University of Mohaghegh Ardabili, Ardabil, Iran.

* **Corresponding Author Email:** Zarei@uma.ac.ir

Cite this article: Zarei,G. and Azizi,M. (2026). Presenting a digital brand model for sustainable urban development (Case study: Ardabil city). *Journal of Sustainable Urban & Regional Development Studies (JSURDS)*, 7(2), 149-166.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Introduction

Due to its high growth potential, the tourism industry can attract foreign investors, leading to the development of tourism infrastructure and the creation of accommodation and recreational facilities. The tourism industry must adhere to the principles of social responsibility to contribute to the sustainable development of local communities and the preservation of the environment (Global Sustainable Tourism Council, 2022). Digital marketing is a vital tool for promoting sustainable urban tourism. This approach, while enhancing the visibility of tourist destinations and improving visitor experiences, also supports long-term sustainability goals. For example, digital platforms such as social media, search engines, and online advertising have been used in numerous case studies worldwide to promote cultural and ecological attractions. These tools not only attract tourists but also align with sustainability initiatives by fostering community engagement and environmental conservation efforts (Veseli, 2025; Sharafuddin, 2024). Urban tourism focuses on cities as destinations, offering cultural, historical, and recreational experiences. This type of tourism plays a vital role in urban development by driving economic growth and improving infrastructure. Sustainable urban tourism models should prioritize the use of digital tools to promote responsible tourism practices while addressing urban challenges. This approach creates a balance between tourism growth and urban sustainability.

Methodology

The present study is classified as applied research. Given the nature of the topic, this research was conducted using qualitative methods and a grounded theory approach. The necessary data and information were collected using two methods: desk research and field research. The desk research method was used to complete and strengthen the theoretical foundations of the research and to access documentary data for the document analysis phase, while the field research method was used to gather the necessary information and observations. Since the research topic requires a field investigation and the presence of the researcher among the study population, interviews and observation were used for data collection. Instead of testing hypotheses, grounded theory takes a step toward producing and constructing a theory derived from the social context, exploring and extracting from the subjects' perspectives. The goal of using grounded theory is to have a theory that has a deep link to our data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Participants in the research process included experts, university professors, and experienced employees in the fields of marketing and tourism.

Results and Findings

Based on the research findings, a total of 196 open codes, 17 axial codes, and finally, 42 selective codes were extracted from the interviews. Based on the results, the following components were identified: causal conditions (weakness in promoting sustainable tourism attractions, weakness in the digital ecosystem, mismatch between existing marketing methods and modern tourist expectations, and cultural and social challenges); contextual conditions (geographical and natural features, facilities and infrastructure, and the economic and social structure of the local community); intervening conditions (political and managerial factors, human resource training and expertise, and technological and infrastructural barriers); strategies (utilizing digital marketing elements, integrated and interactive platform strategies, and collaboration and synergy strategies); and consequences (increased awareness and attraction of responsible tourists, economic and social empowerment of the community, branding of Ardabil City as a sustainable destination, and environmental outcomes).

Conclusion

The conducted research indicates that digital marketing plays a vital and central role in the development of sustainable tourism in Ardabil. The results of the qualitative analysis suggest that current challenges, such as a weakness in promoting sustainable attractions and an inefficient digital ecosystem, can be resolved with targeted digital strategies. These strategies include creating engaging content, using interactive platforms, and strengthening stakeholder collaboration. The implementation of this model can bring about positive consequences, such as attracting responsible tourists, economically empowering the local community, and improving the city's branding. Ultimately, the findings confirm that by leveraging Ardabil's unique potential and aligning actions with sustainability principles, the city can be introduced as a leading model for sustainable urban tourism.

Declarations

Funding

The article is extracted from a research project supported by the Vice President of Research and Technology of University of Mohaghegh Ardabili.

Authors' Contribution

Authors contributed equally to the conceptualization and writing of the article. All of the authors approved the content of the manuscript and agreed on all aspects of the work declaration of competing interest none.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to all the scientific consultants of this paper.

References

- Abedini, Mousa & Emamian, Fatemeh. (2024). Investigation and Analysis of Geotourism Potentials of Biledaraq Tourist Village, Ardabil City, Using the Pereira Model. *Urban and Regional Sustainable Development Studies Journal*, 5(4), 232-244. https://www.srds.ir/article_214442.html?lang=en(in Persian)
- Arastoo, Y, Vakil, H S (2016). Measurement And Evaluation Of The Rural Sustainable Tourism Of Life Cycle, (Case Study: Comparative Survey Of Village Located In Tourism Pivots Of Tehran And Alborz Province) *Journal of Research and Rural Planning*, 4, 41-56. <https://doi.org/10.22067/JRRP.V4I4.40484>
- Balatska, N et al. (2022). Digital Technologies And Digital Marketing: New Opportunities For Tourism And Hospitality Business. <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/08ee472fdca900a3017fcd93078815972b7a987f>
- Chamboko-Mpotaringa, M, Tichaawa, T (2023). Sustainability of digital marketing strategies for driving consumer behaviour in the domestic tourism industry. *Studia Periegetica*. <https://doi.org/10.58683/sp.570>
- Chamboko-Mpotaringa, M, Tichaawa, T (2025). Tourist-Centric Framework to Align Digital Marketing Strategies in Tourism. *Tourism*. <https://doi.org/10.37741/t.73.3.3>
- Damiasih, D (2025). Innovative Marketing Strategies for Sustainable Tourism Development: A Literature Review. *Golden Ratio of Marketing and Applied Psychology of Business*. <https://doi.org/10.52970/grmapb.v5i1.875>

- Deb, S K et al. (2022). Promoting tourism business through digital marketing in the new normal era: a sustainable approach. *European Journal of Innovation Management*. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ejim-04-2022-0218>
- Farajzadeh, H, Matzarakis, A (2009). Quantification of climate for tourism in the northwest of Iran. *Meteorological Applications*, 16. <https://doi.org/10.1002/met.155>
- G, S, D, D J P (2025). Harnessing Digital Technologies To Fuel Sustainable Tourism Practices. *International Journal For Multidisciplinary Research*. <https://doi.org/10.36948/ijfmr.2025.v07i04.50703>
- Grah, B et al. (2020). *Managing Sustainable Urban Tourism Development: The Case of Ljubljana*. Sustainability. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12030792>
- Hardiyanto, D et al. (2025). The role of marketing communications in influencing the promotion and visibility of tourist destinations: A systematic literature review. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism and Entrepreneurship*. <https://doi.org/10.35912/joste.v6i2.2266>
- Hosseinzadeh Helia, Pour Ahmad Ahmad, Ferdosi Sajjad, & L. Warren Noushin. (2022). Digital Marketing Strategies for Sustainable Tourism Destination Management (Case Study: Noor Coastal City). *Journal of Dynamic Management and Business Analysis*, 4(1), 146-162. <https://dmbaj.org/index.php/dmba/article/view/179>(in Persian)
- Isavi, Hiro. (2024). Presenting a Digital Marketing Model in the Tourism Industry (Case Study: Tehran City). *Tourism Culture*, 5(17), 40-51. doi: 10.22034/toc.2024.450406.1154(in Persian)
- Javan, K et al. (2023). Enhancing Environmental Sustainability in a Critical Region: Climate Change Impacts on Agriculture and Tourism. *Civil Engineering Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.28991/cej-2023-09-11-01>
- Khiavi, R F (2014). Health Tourism Development Strategies in Ardabil. *international journal of travel medicine and global health*, 2, 65-67. <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/43a156d4c6c01c9997b4134bc38c3e9714b35733>
- Kinasih, L C R, Abdurrahman, M S (2024). Digital Integrated Marketing Communications Strategies in Building Local Cultural Image for Achieving Tourism Sustainability: The Role of Local Community Involvement. *Jurnal Indonesia Sosial Teknologi*. <https://doi.org/10.59141/jist.v5i11.1276>
- Krabokoukis, T (2025). Bridging Neuromarketing and Data Analytics in Tourism: An Adaptive Digital Marketing Framework for Hotels and Destinations. *Tourism and Hospitality*. <https://doi.org/10.3390/tourhosp6010012>
- Kumar, A, Barua, D C S (2024). Leveraging Digital Innovations in Tourism Marketing: A Study of Destination Promotion Strategies. *International Journal of Business and Management Research*. <https://doi.org/10.37391/ijbmr.120102>
- Levitskaya, A, Yanioglo, N (2018). Digital marketing technologies as an effective tool for promotion of tourism in the republic of Moldova. *Marketing and Digital Technologies*. <https://doi.org/10.15276/mdt.2.3.2018.5>
- Liu, Y Y, Macerinskiene, A (2016). Managing The Digital Campaign Process For Sustainable Tourism Destinations. <https://doi.org/10.2495/ST160121>
- Lotfi Ashtiani, Seyyed Mohsen, Andarvaz, Leila & Albunaimi, Ebrahim. (2025). Designing a Digital Marketing Model Based on Grounded Theory in Iran's Medical Tourism Industry. *Tourism and Development*, 14(1), 37-53. doi: 10.22034/jtd.2023.401222.2780(in Persian)
- Makian, S et al. (2023). Key factors of nature-based tourism future development in less-developed nature destinations: Case study: Ardabil province of Iran. *Geographica Pannonica*. <https://doi.org/10.5937/gp27-44751>

- Maulana, M et al. (2025). Integrating Digital Marketing Communication and Community Participation for Sustainable Tourism Development: A Case Study of Sumberbulu Tourism Village, Indonesia. *CHANNEL: Jurnal Komunikasi*. <https://doi.org/10.12928/channel.v13i1.1061>
- Panasiuk, A (2020). Policy of Sustainable Development of Urban Tourism. *Polish Journal of Sport and Tourism*, 27, 33 - 37. <https://doi.org/10.2478/pjst-2020-0012>
- Pellokila, I R et al. (2024). Sustainable Tourism Marketing in the Digital Age. *PUBLIC POLICY (Jurnal Aplikasi Kebijakan Publik & Bisnis)* <https://doi.org/10.51135/publicpolicy.v5.i2.p1124-1135>
- Saura, J R et al. (2020). The Digital Tourism Business. <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-5225-9783-4.CH001>
- Sharafuddin, M et al. (2024). Assessing the Effectiveness of Digital Marketing in Enhancing Tourist Experiences and Satisfaction: A Study of Thailand's Tourism Services. *Administrative Sciences*. <https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci14110273>
- Silva, F P d et al. (2019). Towards Socially Sustainable Tourism In Cities: Local Community Perceptions And Development Guidelines. *Enlightening Tourism: A Pathmaking Journal*, 9, 168-198. <https://doi.org/10.33776/ET.V9I2.3631>
- Song, J, Xu, B (2024). Evaluation model of urban tourism competitiveness in the context of sustainable development. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 12. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2024.1396134>
- Timur, S, Getz, D (2009). Sustainable tourism development: how do destination stakeholders perceive sustainable urban tourism? *Sustainable Development*, 17, 220-232. <https://doi.org/10.1002/SD.384>
- Veseli, A et al. (2025). The Impact of Digital Marketing on Promotion and Sustainable Tourism Development. *Tourism and Hospitality*. <https://doi.org/10.3390/tourhosp6020056>
- Yazdani, Mohammad Hassan & Farzaneh Sadat Zarengi, Zhila. (2025). Evaluating the Effective Components on Urban Landscape Desirability (Case Study: Ardabil City Entrances). *Urban and Regional Sustainable Development Studies Journal*, 6(4), 84-97. https://www.srds.ir/article_218660.html?lang=en(in Persian)
- Zybareva, O et al. (2024). Sustainable Tourism Development: Project Management In A Practical Dimension. *Market Infrastructure*. <https://doi.org/10.32782/infrastructure80-23>