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Enhancing Tea Tourism Destination Image through Digital Marketing: The Mediating Role of Visitor Experience in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

The growing importance of experiential tourism has increased the need for effective digital marketing strategies to promote niche tourism destinations. Despite Sri Lanka's global recognition for Ceylon tea, limited empirical evidence exists regarding how digital marketing tools contribute to strengthening tea tourism destination image. Therefore, this study examines the influence of digital marketing tools on tea tourism destination image while investigating the mediating role of visitor experience. A mixed-method research approach was employed by combining quantitative and qualitative techniques. Quantitative data were collected from 382 foreign tea tourists using structured questionnaires, while qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with 12 tea tourism stakeholders. Quantitative data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 4, whereas qualitative data were analyzed using thematic content analysis. The findings reveal that digital marketing tools significantly enhance visitor experience but do not exert a significant direct influence on tea tourism destination image. However, visitor experience significantly mediates the relationship between digital marketing tools and destination image, demonstrating that memorable tourism experiences transform digital promotional efforts into favorable destination perceptions. The qualitative findings further indicate limited adoption of immersive digital technologies, fragmented promotional strategies, and inadequate stakeholder collaboration within Sri Lanka's tea tourism sector. The study extends the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework within the tea tourism context and provides practical recommendations for tourism authorities and industry stakeholders to strengthen digital engagement, improve visitor experiences, and enhance the international competitiveness of Sri Lanka's tea tourism destinations.

Keywords: Destination Image; Digital Marketing Tools; Experiential Tourism; Mediation Analysis; PLS-SEM; Tea Tourism; Visitor Experience.

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Introduction

Tourism continues to be a powerful driver of economic development and cultural integration across the globe, particularly in emerging economies such as Sri Lanka (Jolliffe et al., 2022). One niche sector gaining momentum within this landscape is tea tourism, which blends agro-tourism with heritage and cultural tourism by offering immersive experiences in tea estates and related industries (Kumari et al., 2023; Sandika, 2018). Sri Lanka, internationally acclaimed for its premium "Ceylon Tea," is uniquely positioned to leverage this heritage for tourism promotion (Wickramasinghe, 2023). Destinations like Nuwara Eliya, Kandy, and Ella offer not only breathtaking landscapes and colonial charm but also historic tea estates, museums, and trails that form the backbone of the country's tea tourism offerings (Fernando et al., 2017; Jolliffe & Aslam, 2009). Globally, countries such as India, China, and Japan have successfully developed tea tourism into a robust tourism sub-sector that contributes to local economies and cultural preservation (Gupta et al., 2022).

Despite its rich potential, Sri Lanka's tea tourism industry remains underutilized in terms of digital visibility and strategic promotion (Gayathri et al., 2023). While the global tourism sector is increasingly harnessing digital marketing tools, such as social media, virtual reality (VR), influencer campaigns, and search engine optimization (SEO), to enhance destination image and visitor engagement, Sri Lanka's tea tourism destinations have not effectively embraced these trends (Sarachchandra et al., 2020). This lack of innovation has impeded the country's ability to compete in an international tourism marketplace that is increasingly influenced by online presence and digital narratives (Kumari et al., 2023).

Although Sri Lanka possesses internationally recognized tea resources and unique tea tourism attractions, the adoption of digital marketing tools for promoting tea tourism remains limited compared with leading tea tourism destinations such as China, India, and Japan (Gayathri et al., 2023; Prasath & Wickramarathne, 2019). Previous studies have primarily examined destination image, digital marketing, or visitor experience separately, while limited empirical evidence exists regarding how visitor experience mediates the relationship between digital marketing tools and tea tourism destination image within the Sri Lankan context (Koththagoda & Thushara, 2016). Furthermore, most previous studies have focused on general tourism destinations rather than niche tea tourism destinations, creating empirical, theoretical, and geographical gaps that justify the present study.

This study aims to examine the influence of digital marketing tools on the destination image of tea tourism destinations in Sri Lanka, while investigating the mediating role of visitor experience. By addressing the identified empirical, theoretical, and geographical gaps, the study seeks to provide new evidence on the application of digital marketing within a niche tourism context and offer insights for strengthening the competitiveness and international visibility of Sri Lanka's tea tourism destinations. Accordingly, the study is guided by the following research objectives: (1) to identify existing digital marketing practices of tea tourism destinations in Sri Lanka; (2) to examine the impact of digital marketing tools on promoting tea tourism destinations in Sri Lanka; and (3) to examine the mediating impact of visitor experience in the relationship between digital marketing tools and the promotion of tea tourism destinations in Sri Lanka. The significance of this study is reflected in its theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, the study extends the application of the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R)

theory within the context of tea tourism by conceptualizing digital marketing tools as the Stimulus, visitor experience as the Organism, and destination image as the Response, thereby providing new empirical evidence on the applicability of the S-O-R framework in a niche tourism setting within a developing-country context. Practically, the findings offer valuable guidance for tourism planners, destination marketers, policymakers, and tea tourism operators in designing effective digital marketing strategies that enhance visitor experiences and strengthen the international competitiveness and visibility of Sri Lanka's tea tourism destinations. By identifying both the strengths and gaps in current promotional practices, the study not only highlights potential opportunities for improving digital marketing practices but also provides a strategic pathway for repositioning Sri Lanka's tea tourism destinations in the global market through the effective utilization of innovative digital tools and the enhancement of visitor experiences.

Literature Review

Tea Tourism

Tea tourism has been increasingly recognized as an effective approach for promoting rural development, cultural preservation, and destination competitiveness. Previous studies highlight that authentic tea landscapes, heritage resources, and traditional practices are key attractions influencing tourists' interest in tea-related experiences (Jolliffe & Aslam, 2009; Su et al., 2019). However, the success of tea tourism is not solely determined by the availability of natural and cultural resources. Some researchers argue that without effective destination management, branding, and promotional strategies, valuable tea resources may fail to achieve wider market recognition (Koththagoda & Dissanayake, 2017; Kumari et al., 2023). Furthermore, an emerging debate exists regarding whether traditional heritage-based experiences alone are sufficient to attract contemporary tourists or whether digital engagement has become an essential component of competitive tea tourism development. While earlier studies emphasize the importance of authenticity, cultural immersion, and physical interactions in creating tourism value (Jolliffe et al., 2022), recent research highlights that digital technologies, online storytelling, and interactive platforms increasingly influence tourists' expectations and destination perceptions before actual visits (Armutcu et al., 2023; Rai et al., 2022). This reflects a transition from a resource-oriented approach, which focuses on the intrinsic value of tea landscapes and heritage, toward an experience-oriented approach where digital engagement and visitor experiences play a central role in shaping destination competitiveness. However, limited empirical attention has been given to understanding how digital marketing tools contribute to visitor experiences and destination image formation within tea tourism contexts.

Tea Tourism in Sri Lanka

Building upon the global development of tea tourism, Sri Lanka represents a unique case due to its historical tea heritage, internationally recognized Ceylon Tea identity, and diverse plantation landscapes. The development of Sri Lankan tea tourism can be traced back to the colonial tea industry established in the 1870s, where plantations, factories, and estate bungalows have gradually transformed into tourism attractions (Datta, 2018; Jolliffe & Aslam, 2009). Major tea-growing regions, including Nuwara Eliya, Kandy, Uva, Dimbula, Uda Pussellawa, Ratnapura, and Galle, provide visitors with experiences such as factory visits, tea tasting, tea plucking,

heritage accommodation, and plantation walks (Ranasinghe & Jolliffe, 2017; Tea Exporters Association, 2021). According to the Tea Exporters Association (2021), the country has seven important tourist sites, including Dimbula, Galle, Kandy, Nuwara Eliya, Uda Pussellawa, Ratnapura, and Uva, which have long been known for their "Black Tea" offerings and the figure 1 shows the tea production regions in Sri Lanka (Tea Exporters Association, 2021).

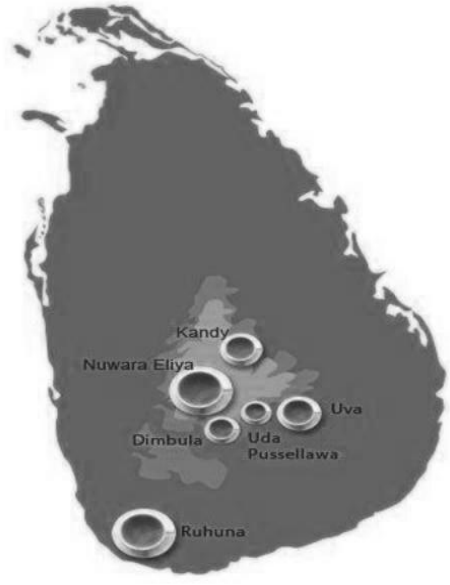


Figure 01: Tea Production Regions in Sri Lanka
Source: (Tea Exporters Association, 2021)

The geographical distribution of tea tourism resources across Sri Lanka demonstrates the diversity of plantation-based experiences; however, the concentration of these attractions does not necessarily translate into strong destination positioning, highlighting the importance of effective promotional mechanisms. Table 1 emphasizes the major tea tourism destinations and activities in Sri Lanka.

Table 01: Major Tea Tourism Destinations and Activities

Destination	Activities
Nuwara Eliya	Tea estate tours (e.g., Pedro tea estate, Damro Labookellie), tea tasting, high tea experiences, hiking trails, and tours for tea museums
Kandy	Visits to tea museums like Hanthana tea museum, tours for tea, tea processing demonstrations, and historical tours
Uva	Tea plantation visits, factory tours, tea and wellness retreats, scenic train journeys through tea landscapes, community-based tea experiences, and learning sustainable tea farming practices
Galle	Boutique tea experiences, small-scale organic tea estate visits, and exploring colonial bungalows

Dimbula	Guided tea estate tours, tea tasting sessions, and historical bungalow visits
Uda Pussellawa	Tea factory visits, tea plucking experiences, scenic trails

Source: Compiled by the researcher based on the Literature, 2025

However, although Sri Lanka possesses strong cultural and environmental resources for tea tourism development, previous studies highlight a gap between potential and market performance. Unlike countries such as China, Japan, and India, which have successfully integrated digital technologies and experiential marketing into tea tourism promotion, Sri Lanka's tea tourism remains comparatively underdeveloped due to limited destination branding, inadequate digital visibility, and fragmented promotional strategies (Koththagoda & Thushara, 2016; Kumari et al., 2023). Furthermore, while colonial heritage enhances authenticity and visitor attraction, scholars argue that excessive dependence on colonial narratives may overlook local communities, contemporary tea culture, and sustainable livelihood perspectives (Aslam & Jolliffe, 2015; Su et al., 2019).

Recent initiatives such as the Pekoe Trail demonstrate a shift in Sri Lanka toward sustainable, experience-based tea tourism by combining nature, community engagement, and cultural interpretation (Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority [SLTDA], 2024). Nevertheless, the existing literature provides limited empirical evidence on how digital marketing tools influence the image of Sri Lankan tea tourism destinations and how visitor experiences contribute to this relationship. Therefore, this study addresses this gap by examining the role of digital marketing tools and visitor experience in enhancing tea tourism destination image in Sri Lanka.

Digital Marketing Tools in Tea Tourism

Digital marketing tools have transformed tea tourism promotion from traditional information-based communication into interactive and experience-oriented destination marketing (Kannan & Li, 2017; Magano & Cunha, 2020). Platforms such as websites, social media, email marketing, virtual reality (VR), and online advertising enable tea tourism destinations to communicate cultural heritage, plantation landscapes, and unique visitor experiences to global audiences (Cranmer et al., 2020; Sarachchandra et al., 2020). Social media platforms, particularly Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube, allow destinations to create emotional connections through visual storytelling and pre-visit engagement, influencing tourists' perceptions and destination expectations (Armutcu et al., 2023; Li et al., 2021). However, existing literature highlights that digital marketing effectiveness depends not only on online visibility but also on the authenticity, credibility, and alignment between digital representations and actual visitor experiences (Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019; Jiménez-Barreto et al., 2020). Therefore, a theoretical debate exists between technology-driven destination promotion and experience-based tourism development, as attractive digital content without meaningful on-site experiences may create unrealistic expectations among tourists (Hwang & Seo, 2016).

Tea tourism destinations in China, Japan, and India have effectively integrated digital technologies through virtual tours, online tea experiences, and interactive storytelling to enhance destination engagement (Gupta et al., 2022; Rai et al., 2022). In contrast, although Sri Lanka has strong global recognition through Ceylon Tea, digital promotion of tea tourism experiences remains limited, reducing its competitiveness in attracting digitally connected travellers (Daily

News, 2020; Wickramasinghe, 2023). Hence, this gap highlights the need to examine the influence of digital marketing tools on tea tourism destination image and visitor experience in the Sri Lankan context.

Destination Image

Destination image represents tourists overall perceptions, beliefs, and emotional evaluations regarding a particular destination and plays a significant role in influencing destination competitiveness and tourist decision-making (Chen & Tsai, 2007). Previous studies identify destination image as a multidimensional construct consisting of cognitive components related to knowledge and beliefs, affective components associated with emotions and feelings, and an overall evaluation formed through these perceptions (Jiang & Shi, 2023). In tourism contexts, digital platforms increasingly influence destination image formation by providing visual information, online reviews, and storytelling that shape tourists' expectations before visitation (Almeida-Santana & Moreno-Gil, 2017; Armutcu et al., 2023).

However, literature presents a debate regarding whether destination image is primarily created through promotional activities or through actual visitor experiences. While digital marketing can enhance awareness and create attractive destination perceptions, researchers argue that unrealistic online representations may negatively affect destination evaluation when actual experiences fail to meet expectations (Jiménez-Barreto et al., 2020). Therefore, destination image should be considered as a dynamic process influenced by both pre-visit digital interactions and post-visit experiences. Although destination image has been widely examined in general tourism studies, limited research has explored how digital marketing tools and visitor experiences cooperatively influence tea tourism destination image, particularly within the Sri Lankan context.

Visitor Experience

Visitor experience has become a central concept in contemporary tourism research as tourists increasingly seek meaningful, memorable, and authentic interactions rather than simply consuming tourism products (Hosany & Witham, 2010). In tea tourism, experiences are created through activities such as tea tasting, plantation visits, cultural interactions, learning about production processes, and engagement with local communities, which contribute to emotional connections and destination attachment (Fu et al., 2023). According to experience-based tourism perspectives, the value of a destination is determined not only by physical resources but also by how visitors interpret and emotionally respond to those resources.

Nevertheless, previous studies reveal different perspectives regarding experience formation. Some researchers emphasize that authentic on-site interactions are the primary drivers of memorable tourism experiences, while others highlight that digital platforms increasingly influence experiences by shaping expectations before arrival and enabling continuous engagement after visits (Armutcu et al., 2023; Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019). This indicates that visitor experience is no longer limited to physical encounters but includes digital interactions throughout the tourist journey. Although international tea destinations have adopted digital storytelling and interactive technologies to enhance visitor engagement, empirical evidence regarding the role of visitor experience in shaping tea tourism destination image remains limited.

Therefore, this study considers visitor experience as a key mechanism linking digital marketing activities with destination image development.

Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) Theory

The Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) theory, introduced by Mehrabian and Russell (1974), explains how external environmental stimuli influence individuals' internal psychological processes and subsequently generate behavioral or cognitive responses. Unlike traditional stimulus-response models, S-O-R theory emphasizes that individuals do not directly react to external factors; instead, they interpret and evaluate stimuli through internal emotional and cognitive mechanisms before forming responses (Eroglu et al., 2001; Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). The model consists of three components: stimulus, organism, and response.

In tourism contexts, digital marketing tools represent the stimulus by providing information, visual content, online reviews, and interactive experiences that influence tourists' expectations and perceptions (Armutcu et al., 2023; Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2015). The organism represents tourists' internal evaluations, including emotions, engagement, satisfaction, and visitor experiences developed through interactions with destination information and actual tourism activities (Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019; Hwang & Seo, 2016). The response reflects the resulting outcomes, such as destination image, behavioural intentions, and destination loyalty (Chen & Tsai, 2007; Hosany & Witham, 2010).

This theory is highly relevant to tea tourism because tourists often form initial expectations through digital representations before experiencing tea landscapes, cultural heritage, and plantation activities. Therefore, this study applies S-O-R theory by positioning digital marketing tools as the stimulus, visitor experience as the organism, and tea tourism destination image as the response, addressing the limited empirical understanding of this relationship in the Sri Lankan tea tourism context.

Impacts of Digital Marketing Tools on Tea Tourism Destination Image

Digital marketing tools have become important mechanisms for developing tea tourism destination images by communicating cultural heritage, natural landscapes, and unique tourism experiences to potential visitors (Gupta et al., 2022; Rai et al., 2022). Social media platforms, websites, and virtual content enable tea destinations to construct attractive visual narratives that influence tourists' cognitive and emotional perceptions before actual visitation (Armutcu et al., 2023; Li et al., 2021). For example, tea destinations in Darjeeling and Assam have effectively used digital storytelling, online campaigns, and virtual engagement to strengthen destination recognition and attract experience-oriented travellers (Rai et al., 2022).

However, previous studies present a contrasting view that digital exposure alone does not guarantee a favorable destination image. Although online platforms enhance destination awareness, the credibility of digital content and its consistency with actual visitor experiences determine whether positive perceptions are developed (Angeloni & Rossi, 2020; Jiménez-Barreto et al., 2020). This indicates a theoretical debate between technology-driven image formation and experience-based destination evaluation.

In Sri Lanka, despite the international reputation of Ceylon Tea, tea tourism remains comparatively underrepresented in digital platforms, limiting its visibility among global travellers (Kumari et al., 2023; Wickramasinghe, 2023). Therefore, this study examines how digital marketing tools contribute to tea tourism destination image development in Sri Lanka.

H1: There is a significant impact of digital marketing tools on the tea tourism destination image in Sri Lanka

Impacts of Digital Marketing Tools on Visitor Experience

Digital marketing tools increasingly influence visitor experience by shaping tourists' expectations, destination knowledge, and pre-travel engagement. Online reviews, social media content, websites, and interactive technologies provide tourists with accessible information that supports travel decisions and enhances anticipation before visiting a destination (Armutcu et al., 2023; Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2015). In tea tourism, digital platforms can introduce plantation landscapes, tea production processes, cultural practices, and authentic experiences, allowing visitors to develop emotional connections with destinations before physical interaction (Fu et al., 2023; Rai et al., 2022).

Nevertheless, existing literature highlights that digital marketing may produce mixed outcomes when online representations differ from actual experiences. While attractive digital content can increase visitor interest, unrealistic expectations may reduce satisfaction if destinations fail to deliver the promised experience (Hwang & Seo, 2016). Therefore, scholars argue that digital marketing should not be considered only as a promotional mechanism but also as a tool for experience co-creation between destinations and visitors (Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019).

Although international tea destinations have adopted virtual tours, interactive content, and digital engagement strategies, limited empirical research has examined how digital marketing influences visitor experiences within Sri Lankan tea tourism contexts (Kaldeen, 2020). Hence, this study investigates the relationship between digital marketing tools and visitor experience in Sri Lankan tea tourism destinations.

H2: There is a significant impact of digital marketing tools on visitor experience in tea tourism destinations

Impacts of Visitor Experience on Tea Tourism Destination Image

Visitor experience is recognized as a fundamental factor influencing destination image because tourists evaluate destinations based on their emotional, cognitive, and sensory interactions during travel (Chen & Tsai, 2007; Hosany & Witham, 2010). Positive experiences related to authenticity, service quality, cultural engagement, and memorable activities can strengthen tourists' perceptions of a destination and encourage positive word-of-mouth communication (Buonincontri et al., 2017). In tea tourism, experiences such as tea tasting, plantation visits, interaction with local communities, and learning about production processes contribute to creating distinctive destination meanings (Fu et al., 2023).

However, previous research indicates that destination image is not shaped solely by positive experiences. Some scholars argue that tourists' existing perceptions, online information, and destination branding activities also influence image formation before and after visitation (Almeida-Santana & Moreno-Gil, 2017). Therefore, destination image development represents a continuous process where pre-visit expectations and actual experiences interact.

In tea tourism destinations such as China, Japan, and India, memorable visitor experiences have contributed to strengthening destination identity and competitiveness (Rai et al., 2022). However, limited studies have explored this relationship in Sri Lanka, despite its rich tea heritage and growing potential for experience-based tourism (Wickramasinghe, 2023). Therefore, this study examines the influence of visitor experience on tea tourism destination image in Sri Lanka.

H3: There is a significant impact of visitor experience on the tea tourism destination image in Sri Lanka

Mediating Effect of Visitor Experience on Digital Marketing Tools and Tea Tourism Destination Image

The relationship between digital marketing tools and tea tourism destination image can be better understood through the mediating role of visitor experience. According to the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) theory, digital marketing tools act as external stimuli that influence tourists' perceptions, visitor experience represents the internal cognitive and emotional process, and destination image represents the resulting response (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). Digital content, online storytelling, virtual experiences, and electronic word-of-mouth can create initial expectations and emotional connections with tea destinations (Angeloni & Rossi, 2020; Fu et al., 2023).

However, previous studies indicate that digital marketing alone may not ensure a positive destination image unless online representations are supported by authentic and memorable on-site experiences. When actual experiences align with digital expectations, visitors are more likely to develop favorable destination perceptions and promote the destination through positive recommendations (Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019). Although this relationship has been examined in general tourism contexts, limited research has investigated the mediating role of visitor experience within tea tourism, particularly in Sri Lanka. Therefore, this study positions visitor experience as an important mechanism linking digital marketing tools with tea tourism destination image.

H4: Visitor experience mediates the relationship between digital marketing tools and the tea tourism destination image in Sri Lanka.

Conceptual Framework & Hypothesis

Figure 2 illustrates the proposed conceptual framework developed based on the Stimulus-Organism-Response theory. Digital marketing tools act as the stimulus influencing visitor experience, which represents the organism, while destination image represents the response. The framework proposes that digital marketing tools have both direct and indirect effects on destination image through visitor experience.

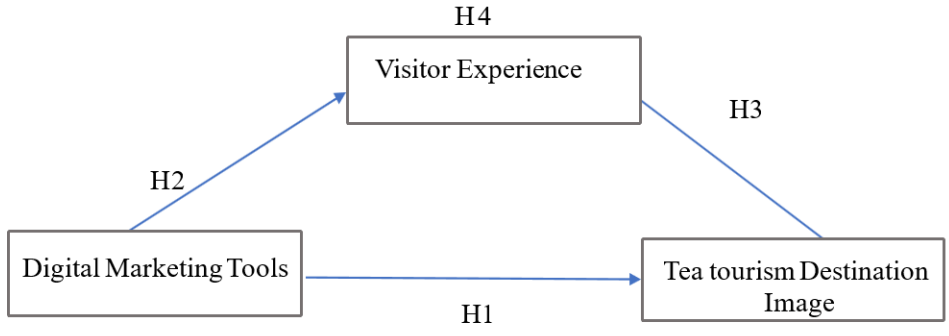


Figure 02: Conceptual Framework

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-method research approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to gain a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between digital marketing tools, visitor experience, and the tea tourism destination image in Sri Lanka. Mixed methods are widely recognized for addressing complex problems by leveraging the strengths of both approaches (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Greene, 2007; Hesse-Biber & Johnson, 2015). Quantitative data were collected through structured questionnaires from foreign tea tourists, allowing for statistical measurement of relationships between variables. Meanwhile, qualitative data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with tea tourism service providers to gain deeper insights. This dual strategy improves both the validity and contextual richness of findings (Plano Clark, 2017; Shannon-Baker, 2016), especially in sectors like tourism where subjective experiences matter.

The study targeted two main population groups: foreign tea tourists and tea tourism service providers. Foreign tea tourists refer to the international tourists visiting Sri Lanka's tea tourism sites (Rai et al., 2022). Tea tourism service providers included tea estate and factory owners, tour operators, and local guides. These groups represent both the demand and supply sides of tea tourism, aligning directly with the research objectives. The selected regions are some of the most renowned for high-quality Ceylon tea and are rich in heritage and eco-tourism value, as Sri Lanka has seven important Tea Tourism sites, namely Dimbula, Galle, Kandy, Nuwara Eliya, Uda Pussellawa, Ratnapura, and Uva. These destinations have long been known for their "Black Tea" offerings (Tiwari et al., 2023).

For this research, the expected sample size was 384 foreign tea tourists, selected from major tea tourism destinations, along with 10–15 tea tourism service providers. The final sample consisted of 382 foreign tea tourists and 12 tea tourism service providers. The respondents were selected using a purposive sampling technique, as the study required participants with direct knowledge and experience of tea tourism activities. Although purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling method that may limit the generalizability of findings, it is considered appropriate for specialized research contexts where the target population is specific and not evenly distributed (Etikan et al., 2016; Palinkas et al., 2015). Therefore, this approach ensured the inclusion of

information-rich respondents who could provide relevant insights into digital marketing practices, visitor experiences, and tea tourism destination image development.

The sampling frame for foreign tea tourists was developed based on tourist visitation patterns and records obtained from tea factories and tourism establishments. The selected destinations included Dambetenne Tea Factory, Heritance Tea Factory Hotel, Mackwoods Labookellie Tea Centre, Blue Field Tea Factory, Zesta Tea Cup, Halpe Tea Factory, Kandy Tea Museum, Handunugoda Tea Factory, and Galle Tea Museum. Similarly, 12 tea tourism service providers representing tea estates, factories, accommodation providers, and tourism-related businesses were selected.

Both primary and secondary data were utilized in this research. Secondary data were gathered from journal articles, institutional reports, and credible online resources to build the conceptual framework and support the background analysis. Primary data collection was conducted through structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The structured questionnaire for foreign tea tourists included multiple-item constructs measured on a five-point Likert scale to evaluate variables such as digital marketing exposure, visitor experience, and destination image. The measurement items used in this study were adapted from previously validated scales in tourism and digital marketing literature and modified according to the tea tourism context of Sri Lanka. Digital marketing tools were measured through indicators related to social media marketing, online information accessibility, website effectiveness, and digital promotional activities based on previous studies (Armutcu et al., 2023; Kannan & Li, 2017). Visitor experience was assessed through dimensions including emotional involvement, authenticity, memorability, and experiential value (Hosany & Witham, 2010; Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Tea tourism destination image was measured using cognitive and affective image components representing tourists' perceptions of destination attractiveness, uniqueness, and overall impression (Echtner & Ritchie, 1993; Jiang & Shi, 2023). The semi-structured interviews with service providers were designed to collect qualitative insights on digital marketing practices, strategic challenges, visitor feedback integration, and promotional gaps.

Data were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative techniques. Quantitative data were analyzed through a structural equation model (PLS), and qualitative data were analyzed through content analysis. Descriptive analysis was used to summarize tourist demographics and general response patterns through tables, bar charts, and graphs. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) using the Partial Least Squares (PLS-SEM) technique was employed to examine the hypothesized relationships among digital marketing tools, visitor experience, and tea tourism destination image. PLS-SEM was selected because it is suitable for exploratory and prediction-oriented studies involving complex models with multiple latent constructs and mediation relationships (Hair et al., 2022). Unlike covariance-based SEM (CB-SEM), which mainly focuses on theory confirmation and model fit evaluation, PLS-SEM emphasizes maximizing explained variance and predicting dependent constructs, making it appropriate for studies examining emerging research contexts such as digital transformation in tea tourism (Henseler et al., 2016).

The structural model was specified as follows:
Visitor Experience = β_1(Digital Marketing Tools) + ε_1
Destination Image = β_2(Digital Marketing Tools) + β_3(Visitor Experience) + ε_2

where β represents the path coefficients estimating the relationships between constructs and ε represents the error term. The measurement model was evaluated through indicator reliability, internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. The structural model assessment included path coefficients, coefficient of determination (R^2), effect size (f^2), predictive relevance (Q^2), and bootstrapping procedures to determine the significance of hypothesized relationships (Hair et al., 2022).

To ensure the reliability of the instrument, a pre-test was conducted using a sample of 15 respondents. Cronbach's Alpha was used to assess the internal consistency of the questionnaire. The results showed strong reliability for the key constructs: digital marketing tools ($\alpha = 0.91$), tea tourism destination image ($\alpha = 0.88$), and visitor experience ($\alpha = 0.90$), confirming the consistency and trustworthiness of the measurement tool.

Data Analysis and Results

Demographics Analysis

Age Group

The age distribution of the sample is skewed toward younger respondents, with a clear concentration in the 26–30 years age group (50.0%). Overall, 79.84% of the participants fall within the 18–35 years range, indicating a predominantly young and economically active population. Respondents aged 36 years and above constitute 19.9% of the sample, ensuring limited but meaningful representation of older age cohorts. This age structure suggests that the empirical findings of the study are largely influenced by younger adults, which should be considered when interpreting behavioral patterns, perceptions, and outcomes derived from the analysis.

Gender Distribution

The gender composition of the sample demonstrates a near-balanced distribution between male and female respondents. Male participants constitute 200 respondents (52.4%), while female participants account for 182 respondents (47.6%). The cumulative percentage reaches 100%, confirming full representation of both gender categories in the dataset. This relatively even gender distribution enhances the robustness of the study by minimizing gender-related sampling bias. In the context of examining the role of digital marketing tools in fostering tea tourism destination image through visitor experience, the balanced representation allows for a more reliable interpretation of perceptions and experiential responses across genders. Consequently, the findings can be considered reflective of both male and female visitor segments engaging with digital promotional strategies in Sri Lanka's tea tourism sector.

Nationality Distribution

The nationality profile of the respondents reflects a diverse international sample, with a stronger representation from European and East Asian markets. German nationals constitute the largest segment with 96 respondents (25.13%), indicating a significant presence of tourists from

Germany in the study. Chinese and Russian respondents each account for 57 participants (14.92%), highlighting the relevance of key long-haul and emerging tourism markets for Sri Lanka's tea tourism sector. Smaller proportions of respondents originate from the United Kingdom and Australia, with 19 respondents each (4.97%), representing traditional but niche source markets within the sample. The 'Other' nationalities category comprises 57 respondents (14.92%), suggesting additional diversity beyond the main identified markets. Overall, the nationality distribution underscores the international orientation of tea tourism in Sri Lanka and provides a relevant context for assessing how digital marketing tools influence destination image and visitor experience across different source markets. The findings, therefore, predominantly reflect perceptions of international tourists rather than regional visitors.

Reliability and Validity Test

Reliability Test

Table 02: Reliability Test Results

Variables	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)
DMT_Q	0.812	0.852
TTDI_Q	0.791	0.792
VE_Q	0.820	0.821

The reliability test conducted through SmartPLS examined Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability (CR) to measure construct internal consistency. As indicated in the above table, the study accepted reliability at 0.7 for its threshold value. The research results demonstrate that the three constructs maintain reliability scores above 0.7 for both measurement models. DMT_Q achieved 0.812 and 0.852, and TTDI_Q reached 0.791 and 0.792 while VE_Q obtained 0.820 and 0.821. The reliability measurement establishes that all elements in the constructs measure their intended variables effectively. The reliability measures from DMT_Q demonstrate the strongest connection among its indicators but TTDI_Q and VE_Q also show reliable results.

Convergent Validity

Table 03: Convergent Validity

Variables	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
DMT_Q	0.521
TTDI_Q	0.603
VE_Q	0.567

The assessment of convergent validity focuses on determining the high variance overlap between the indicators that measure a construct. A research measure called Average Variance Extracted (AVE) allows reviewers to check validity by confirming a minimum threshold of 0.5 since this indicates the construct explains 50% or more of indicators. The research established valid approaches through acceptable AVE values above 0.5 for Destination Management Tools (DMT)

together with Tourist Destination Image (TTDI) as well as Visitor Experience (VE). The measurement results showed strong convergent validity with values of 0.521 for DMT and 0.603 for TTDI and 0.567 for VE. The obtained values demonstrate that latent variables properly measure their underlying components which the constructs intend to capture.

The constructs display excellent internal consistency because both Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability (CR) exceed 0.7. All constructs exceed their minimum AVE threshold which confirms statistical validity and appropriateness of the measurement model for further analysis. Research findings based on these constructs achieve valid and meaningful explanations of framework relationships because of this measurement process.

Discriminant Validity

A test of discriminant validity was conducted through the Fornell-Larcker criterion that assessed the square root of AVE values against construct correlations. To confirm discriminant validity a construct needs its AVE square root value to exceed all correlations with others constructs. All constructs achieved proper discriminant validity during analysis thereby confirming their distinct measurements of theoretical concepts with minimal replication.

Table 04: Discriminant Validity Results

Variable	DMT_Q	TTDI_Q	VE_Q
DMT_Q	0.710		
TTDI_Q	0.520	0.735	
VE_Q	0.530	0.615	0.760

A valid discriminant test validates construct separation by comparing the initial value of each AVE construct square root (both in bold diagonals) against the intersection correlations of constructs (off-diagonal values). The study validates discriminant validity through square root of AVE values of 0.710 for DMT_Q and 0.735 for TTDI_Q and 0.760 for VE_Q which surpassed inter-construct correlations. The results demonstrate statistical uniqueness between constructs because their square root AVE values significantly surpass the inter-construct correlations.

The study findings demonstrate clear differences between Destination Management Tools (DMT) and Tourist Destination Image (TTDI) and Visitor Experience (VE). All constructs demonstrate acceptable values for Fornell-Larcker criterion thus maintaining high discriminant validity for meaningful relationship interpretations within the research model.

Descriptive Statistics Analysis

The collected data needed descriptive statistical analysis to present the fundamental traits of respondent perceptions about Digital Marketing Tools (DMT), Tea Tourism Destination Image (TTDI), and Visitor Experience (VE). These analytical results give vital information regarding data distribution alongside central tendency and variability patterns necessary for making quantitative conclusions.

Table 05: Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis	Minimum	Maximum
Digital Marketing Tools (DMT)	3.12	1.05	0.25	1.98	1.00	5.00
Tea Tourism Destination Image (TTDI)	4.10	0.82	-0.30	2.08	2.00	5.00
Visitor Experience (VE)	4.35	0.75	-0.45	2.15	2.00	5.00

The descriptive analysis reveals that while digital marketing tools moderately raise awareness (mean = 3.12), they are not the primary factor influencing travel decisions. Tourists rely more on destination reputation and actual experiences. In contrast, tea tourism destination image received a high average rating (mean = 4.10), indicating a well-established positive perception. Visitor experience scored the highest (mean = 4.35), showing strong satisfaction with immersive activities and service quality. These results suggest that enhancing visitor experience and maintaining a strong destination image are more impactful than relying solely on digital marketing for influencing tourist behavior.

Correlation Analysis

The study employed correlation analysis to determine both the magnitude and orientation of relationships between digital marketing tools and visitor experience and tea tourism destination image. The evaluation used Pearson correlation coefficients as standard measures with values between -1 and 1.

Table 06: Correlations

Variable	DMT_Q	TTDI_Q	VE_Q
DMT_Q	1.000	0.289	0.312
TTDI_Q	0.289	1.000	0.712
VE_Q	0.312	0.712	1.000

The correlation analysis shows that digital marketing tools have only a weak relationship with both tea tourism destination image (r = 0.289) and visitor experience (r = 0.312), indicating limited influence on tourist perceptions. In contrast, visitor experience has a strong positive correlation with destination image (r = 0.712), confirming that firsthand experiences significantly shape how tourists view tea tourism sites. These findings support Hypothesis 3 (H3) and suggest that enhancing service quality, cultural authenticity, and on-site experiences is more impactful than relying solely on digital marketing strategies.

Regression Analysis

The regression model reveals that digital marketing tools influence both visitor experience and tea tourism destination image, with visitor experience acting as a mediating factor. The model

shows that while digital tools contribute directly, their stronger impact is indirect, through enhancing visitor experiences, which in turn shape positive destination perceptions. This framework highlights that visitor satisfaction is central to building a strong destination image, emphasizing the importance of combining effective marketing with high-quality, immersive experiences.

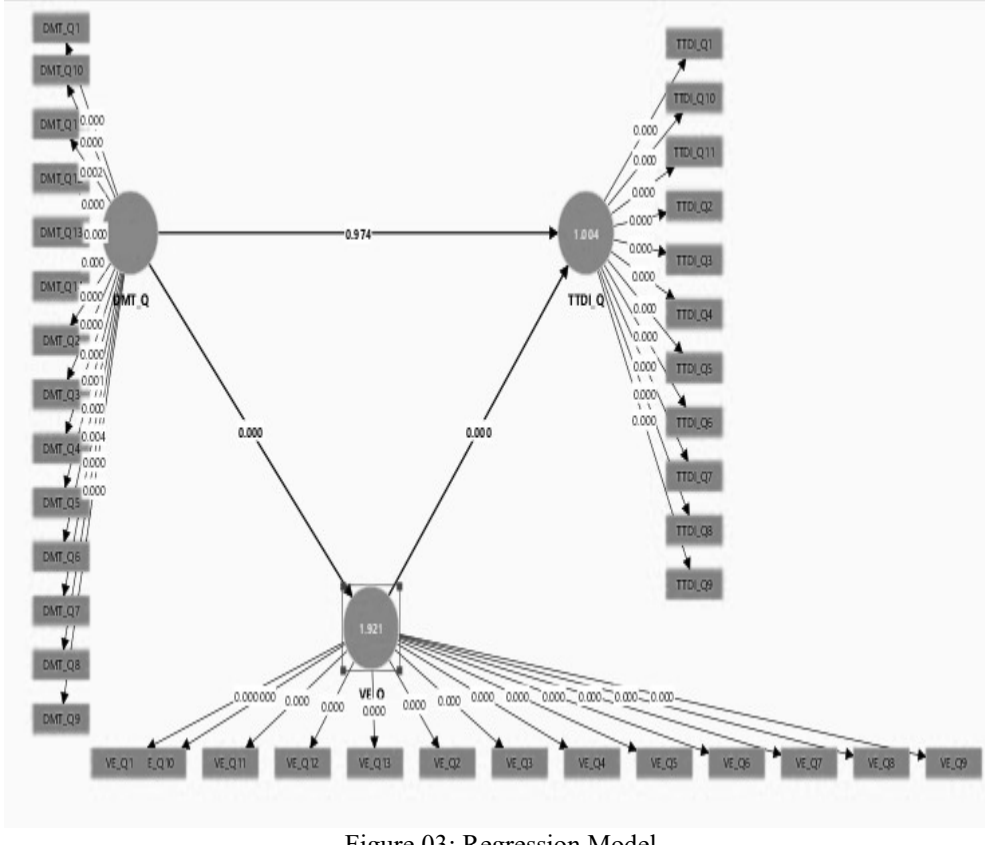


Figure 03: Regression Model

Path Coefficients

Table 07: Path coefficient

Path	Path Coefficient	P-Value
DMT_Q → TTDI_Q	0.002	0.974
DMT_Q → VE_Q	0.318	0.000
VE_Q → TTDI_Q	0.999	0.000

The path coefficient analysis indicates that digital marketing tools do not have a significant direct impact on tea tourism destination image (β = 0.002, p = 0.974). This finding suggests that exposure to digital marketing alone is insufficient to shape tourists' overall perceptions of tea tourism destinations. Instead, destination image appears to be influenced by broader experiential and cognitive factors developed during the visit. However, digital marketing tools have a significant positive influence on visitor experience (β = 0.318, p < 0.001), indicating that digital platforms enhance visitors' pre-visit engagement by providing destination information, visual content, and interactive communication. This finding is consistent with the Experience Economy Theory, which proposes that memorable experiences are created through meaningful engagement before and during consumption. Furthermore, visitor experience has a significant positive influence on tea tourism destination image (β = 0.999, p < 0.001), demonstrating that authentic and memorable experiences are the primary drivers of positive destination perceptions. Overall, the findings indicate that digital marketing tools contribute to tea tourism destination image indirectly by enhancing visitor experience rather than exerting a direct influence on destination image.

Specific Indirect Effects (Effect of Mediating Variable)

The results indicate that visitor experience significantly mediates the relationship between digital marketing tools and tea tourism destination image. The indirect effect is positive and statistically significant (β = 0.385, p < 0.001), indicating that digital marketing tools influence destination image primarily through improving visitor experience. This finding confirms that memorable tourism experiences are the principal mechanism through which digital marketing contributes to destination image formation.

Hypotheses Testing

Table 08: Hypotheses Testing Summary Table

	Hypothesis Path	Path Coefficient	P-Value	Decision
H1	Digital Marketing Tools → Tea Tourism Destination Image	0.002	0.974	Rejected
H2	Digital Marketing Tools → Visitor Experience	0.318	0.000	Accepted
H3	Visitor Experience → Tea Tourism Destination Image	0.999	0.000	Accepted
H4	Digital Marketing Tools → Visitor Experience → Tea Tourism Destination Image (Mediation)	0.385	0.000	Accepted

The hypothesis testing revealed that H1 was not supported (β = 0.002, p = 0.974), indicating that digital marketing tools alone do not directly influence the tea tourism destination image in Sri Lanka. This suggests that destination image is not formed solely through exposure to digital

promotional content but through tourists' cognitive evaluations and actual travel experiences. This finding is consistent with the principles of Destination Image Theory, which proposes that destination image develops through both information sources and direct destination experiences. In contrast, H2 was supported, demonstrating that digital marketing tools have a significant positive influence on visitor experience ($\beta = 0.318$, $p < 0.001$). This indicates that digital platforms contribute to visitor experience by providing destination information, generating expectations, and encouraging pre-visit engagement. H3 was also supported, confirming that visitor experience has a significant positive influence on tea tourism destination image ($\beta = 0.999$, $p < 0.001$). Furthermore, H4 was accepted, confirming the significant mediating role of visitor experience ($\beta = 0.385$, $p < 0.001$). These findings indicate that digital marketing tools influence tea tourism destination image primarily through enhancing visitor experience rather than through a direct effect, highlighting the importance of authentic and memorable experiences in destination image formation.

Existing Digital Marketing Practices of Tea Tourism Destinations in Sri Lanka

To achieve the first research objective, a detailed analysis of existing digital marketing strategies in Sri Lanka's tea tourist destinations was conducted through interviews of tea tourist service providers. The findings indicated that there is some use of digital marketing tools but not fully integrated and strategic in application. Instead of a structured digital marketing plan, most tea tourist providers still rely heavily on traditional marketing methods such as word-of-mouth recommendations, travel agencies, and local agents.

Table 09: Content Analysis Summary Table

Main Category	Subcategories	Description
1. Limited Use of Digital Marketing Tools	▪ Basic website and social media presence ▪ Lack of SEO, email marketing, or strategic campaigns ▪ No skilled staff for digital marketing	Tea tourism providers have minimal digital tools; most lack knowledge, expertise, and resources for advanced digital promotion strategies.
2. Reliance on Word-of-Mouth and Storytelling	▪ Visitor recommendations Emphasis on authentic narratives during tours ▪ Storytelling as an emotional engagement strategy	Providers rely on personal recommendations and traditional storytelling methods to attract and retain visitors, often preferring this over paid promotions.
3. Role of Travel Agencies and Brokers	▪ Heavy reliance on tour operators ▪ Lack of direct online booking systems ▪ Traditional partnerships for international and domestic tourist inflow	Travel intermediaries are still dominant; providers avoid online systems due to a lack of technical skills or the convenience of working with agents.

4. Ineffective Use of social media & Paid Ads	▪ Unstructured use of platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok ▪ Poor conversion of ads to bookings ▪ Infrequent posting or no engagement strategy	Social media and digital ads are underutilized and poorly managed; a lack of strategy leads to low engagement and conversion from digital visibility to real visitors.

While a few tea tourism businesses have some minimum online presence, e.g., having a website or social media profiles, marketing efforts are uncoordinated and fragmented on different digital media. This inconsistency reduces the effectiveness of online promotion and limits the scope to draw more tourists, particularly foreign visitors. According to their knowledge, all 12 respondents mentioned their existing digital marketing. According to the data gathered from the respondents, the following categories were developed.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that the relationship between digital marketing tools, visitor experience, and tea tourism destination image in Sri Lanka is more complex than a direct promotional effect. Although digital marketing tools are increasingly adopted by tea tourism providers, their direct influence on destination image was statistically insignificant ($\beta = 0.002$, $p = 0.974$). This finding challenges the common assumption that greater digital visibility automatically enhances destination image. Instead, it suggests that tourists evaluate tea tourism destinations through authentic experiences rather than promotional content alone, supporting the argument that destination image develops through the interaction between information sources and lived experiences (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Echtner & Ritchie, 1993). This finding extends previous research by demonstrating that digital marketing functions primarily as an awareness-building mechanism rather than an independent driver of destination image (Chen et al., 2025; Leung et al., 2013; Li et al., 2020; Zeng & Gerritsen, 2021).

Conversely, visitor experience emerged as the strongest determinant of destination image ($\beta = 0.999$, $p < 0.001$), while digital marketing tools significantly influenced visitor experience ($\beta = 0.318$, $p < 0.001$). Furthermore, the significant indirect effect ($\beta = 0.385$, $p < 0.001$) confirms that visitor experience mediates the relationship between digital marketing tools and destination image. These findings reinforce the Experience Economy Theory, which argues that memorable experiences create greater value than promotional communication alone (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Therefore, digital marketing should be viewed as an enabler of experience by shaping expectations before travel rather than as the principal determinant of destination image (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Gretzel et al., 2015; Hosany & Gilbert, 2010; Mariani et al., 2018; Neuhofer et al., 2015; Sigala, 2018; Xiang et al., 2017).

The qualitative findings further indicate that many tea tourism providers continue to depend on word-of-mouth promotion and travel intermediaries due to limited digital expertise and fragmented marketing practices. This suggests that the limited effectiveness of digital marketing in Sri Lanka is not necessarily a weakness of digital platforms themselves but rather reflects inadequate strategic implementation and capability among destination stakeholders (Buhalis et

al., 2023; Dwivedi et al., 2021; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Mishra & Rai, 2024; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Recent studies also emphasize that digital transformation in tourism requires not only platform adoption but also organizational readiness and data-driven marketing capabilities (Gössling, 2021; Hays et al., 2022). Consequently, this study contributes theoretically by demonstrating that visitor experience is the primary mechanism through which digital marketing enhances destination image, thereby extending existing tourism marketing literature from a direct promotional perspective to an experience-driven destination branding perspective.

Conclusion

This research investigated the role of digital marketing tools in forming the destination image of Sri Lanka's tea tourism sector, with a particular emphasis on the mediating effect of visitor experience. Through a mixed-methods approach involving structured questionnaires from 382 foreign tea tourists and semi-structured interviews with 12 tea tourism service providers, the study offered a holistic understanding of how digital strategies interact with tourist experiences and perceptions. The findings confirmed that while digital marketing platforms like websites, social media, and online advertisements are in use across the tea tourism sector, their direct impact on destination image formation is statistically insignificant. This highlights a critical gap between digital exposure and emotional engagement. Visitor experience emerged as the most influential determinant in forming destination image, demonstrating a strong positive impact. Tourists' firsthand involvement in immersive, sensory, and cultural activities, such as tea plucking, factory visits, and engaging with local communities, proved to be central to shaping favorable perceptions of Sri Lankan tea destinations. Moreover, digital marketing tools were found to have a significant indirect impact by enhancing the quality and depth of these visitor experiences.

The qualitative analysis supported the statistical results, revealing that traditional marketing approaches like word-of-mouth, storytelling, and tour operator dependency are still dominant. Industry stakeholders acknowledged the limitations of paid advertising and emphasized the need for more experiential and authentic forms of digital engagement. Growth opportunities were evident in areas such as immersive storytelling, influencer partnerships, user-generated content, and smart technologies like VR and AR.

Overall, the research confirms that digital marketing's success in tea tourism lies not in isolated promotional campaigns, but in strategically enhancing and amplifying the visitor experience. To strengthen destination branding and international appeal, Sri Lanka's tea tourism industry must move toward an experience-driven digital model that bridges emotional storytelling with innovative technology.

Implications

Based on the research findings, several practical and strategic implications are proposed for tea tourism stakeholders, policymakers, and tourism marketers to maximize the effectiveness of digital marketing and enhance the sector's competitiveness. Government agencies such as the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA) and regional tourism boards should take a leading role in designing and implementing a national digital marketing strategy focused on tea tourism. Policy interventions are required to create enabling environments that support digital

innovation, facilitate public-private partnerships, and promote Sri Lanka's tea heritage globally. Dedicated promotional campaigns and incentive-based support for digital transformation should be introduced.

Moreover, there is a critical need to enhance the digital literacy of tea tourism service providers, especially small and medium-scale operators. Targeted training in areas such as content marketing, SEO, social media management, and digital storytelling will empower stakeholders to manage their online presence more effectively. Investment in upskilling programs, workshops, and toolkits will enhance the sector's ability to compete in digitally saturated global tourism markets. The study underscores the need for experiential content over conventional digital advertising. Tourism marketers must create emotionally resonant narratives using real visitor testimonials, interactive media, and immersive visuals. Technologies like VR (virtual tours of tea estates) and AR (interactive storytelling through product labels) should be integrated into campaigns to allow potential tourists to connect with the destination before their arrival.

User-generated content (UGC) such as photos, videos, and travel reviews should be actively promoted through official tea tourism portals and social media. Stakeholders should encourage visitors to share their experiences using destination hashtags, and reward engagement through competitions or re-posting. Collaborations with travel influencers specializing in eco-tourism, food tourism, or cultural travel can further amplify brand awareness. Systematic collection and analysis of visitor feedback should be incorporated into destination management. Online reviews and satisfaction surveys can guide data-driven improvements to services, infrastructure, and marketing content. Responsiveness to both positive and negative feedback will reinforce brand trust and improve tourist retention. Smart tourism tools such as AI-powered chatbots, interactive travel guides, and multilingual apps can improve the pre-, during-, and post-visit experience. Strengthening digital infrastructure, such as reliable internet connectivity in rural tea-growing areas, will enable tourists to share experiences in real time, promoting organic marketing and improving the visitor journey. The fragmented nature of tea tourism marketing can be addressed through an integrated national platform that brings together government agencies, private operators, and destination marketers. A unified branding campaign featuring Sri Lanka's tea tourism narrative can ensure consistent messaging and better international visibility.

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