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The Role of Digital Marketing and Local Communities in Rural Tourism Development in the Mountainous Shirvan Economic Region

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Abstract. Digital marketing can widen access to rural destinations, but visibility alone does not guarantee locally beneficial development. This article examines how digital marketing and community participation can be combined in the Mountainous Shirvan Economic Region of Azerbaijan. A structured qualitative assessment was conducted using official tourism materials and twelve recent sources published in 2023–2026. The analysis treats digital marketing as a visitor journey that links discovery, trust, booking, experience and advocacy, while community participation is assessed through decision-making power, content ownership, enterprise access and benefit retention. The findings show that the region needs a shared digital presence, verified village profiles, bookable local bundles and common service information; however, these instruments should be governed with resident consent and supported by digital skills. A community-owned marketing cycle and an indicator matrix are proposed. The model prioritises direct conversion to local providers, authentic but permission-based storytelling, inclusion of women and young people, and monitoring of local expenditure rather than reach alone. It offers a practical basis for later field testing across Aghsu, Ismayilli, Gobustan and Shamakhi.

Keywords: digital marketing; rural tourism; local communities; Mountainous Shirvan; community participation; destination management; Azerbaijan.

1. Introduction

Rural tourism is increasingly discovered and compared through search engines, social media, online maps and booking platforms. For a small village enterprise, digital visibility can reduce geographic isolation, show seasonal products and create direct contact with visitors. Yet the same platforms can concentrate market power, standardise destination images and redirect value to intermediaries. The policy question is therefore not simply how to attract attention, but how to

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convert attention into locally retained and responsibly managed demand [3, 4].

The aim of this article is to develop an evidence-informed framework for combining digital marketing with local community participation in rural tourism development. It asks three questions: which marketing functions matter most for small rural providers; how can residents influence the content and rules used to promote their villages; and which indicators can distinguish useful market access from digital activity that produces little local benefit?

2. Conceptual framework

2.1. Digital marketing as rural market access

Digital marketing in rural tourism should be understood as an access system rather than a stream of promotional posts. It includes discoverability, credible information, communication, availability, payment, review management and customer retention. Recent evidence shows that digitalisation can strengthen rural tourism, but its effects vary across places and scales; more technology does not automatically produce greater efficiency [7, 8]. The relevant unit is the complete visitor journey, not the number of platforms used.

2.2. Community participation as destination governance

Local communities are not only sources of images, labour and hospitality. They hold knowledge about appropriate seasons, sacred or private spaces, visitor behaviour, resource limits and the meaning of cultural practices. Contemporary rural-tourism research therefore links sustainability to empowerment, local control and belonging [5, 6, 12]. Participation is substantive when residents can shape products, approve representation, set capacity and share income, not merely appear in campaigns designed elsewhere.

Technology may strengthen this role if residents can use it. A 2025 study of tourism villages found that technology adoption reinforced the relationship between resident empowerment and support for sustainable tourism, while also highlighting the importance of digital literacy, infrastructure and policy support [11]. Community participation and digital readiness should therefore be planned together. Training without market access is ineffective, but market access without community authority can deepen dependency.

3. Materials and methods

The study applies a structured qualitative review and contextual regional assessment. Twelve sources from 2023–2026

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were selected because they address at least one of four themes: rural tourism development, digitalisation or digital marketing, local community participation, and current Azerbaijani tourism evidence. The set includes peer-reviewed articles, an OECD report, a joint UN Tourism policy study and official Azerbaijani tourism materials [1–12].

4. Regional context of Mountainous Shirvan

4.1. Resource base and market fragmentation

The region's strength is complementarity. Ismayilli can connect village life, crafts, gastronomy and forest-linked recreation; Shamakhi combines heritage, wine, food and mountain experiences; Aghsu can develop farm, orchard and landscape-based products; and Gobustan offers pastoral, architectural and semi-arid settings. A common regional brand should make these differences legible rather than repeat one generic rural image across every district.

The main marketing constraint is fragmentation. A visitor may encounter separate social-media pages, map entries and telephone contacts with uneven naming, languages, prices and update cycles. Small providers then compete for attention without a shared route or referral system. The result is visibility without itinerary formation: people may know a place name but cannot combine accommodation, meals, guiding, transport and experiences into a confident multi-day purchase.

Current policy signals create an opportunity to address this gap. In 2025, State Tourism Agency grant projects supported tourism-village infrastructure, environmental protection, women and youth, and new products, including work connected with Ivanovka in Ismayilli [2]. Such initiatives can be reinforced by digital marketing only if supported providers enter a verified regional inventory and receive practical assistance with content, pricing, response standards and bookings.

4.2. Digital readiness and community capacity

Digital readiness has three levels. Connectivity determines whether providers can communicate; operational capability determines whether they can maintain calendars, prices and responses; and governance determines who owns accounts, data and customer relationships. International policy evidence likewise couples rural digital connectivity with skills and integrated local value chains [4]. Improving only the first level will not solve the organisational weaknesses that interrupt conversion.

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5. Results and discussion

5.1. From visibility to bookability

The first result is that reach is an incomplete performance measure. Impressions and followers show exposure, but they do not reveal whether visitors found accurate information, contacted a local provider, booked directly or spent money within the village. OECD guidance increasingly calls for granular tourism evidence that covers social and environmental outcomes in addition to conventional economic measures [3]. Rural marketing dashboards should follow this broader logic.

Bookability does not require every household to join a global platform. A practical architecture can offer three routes: direct online booking for ready enterprises, assisted booking through a local coordinator, and a clear inquiry channel for seasonal or customised experiences. Common minimum data should include location, availability, price range, languages, accessibility, transport, safety conditions and response time. These elements turn promotion into a service promise.

5.2. Community-produced content and trust

The second result concerns trust. Rural content is persuasive when it is specific, current and connected to identifiable hosts, yet authenticity should not be reduced to an advertising style. Residents should decide which stories can be published, how people are photographed and whether sensitive places require limits. Community-approved content is more accurate and protects the relationship between destination image and lived culture [6, 9, 12].

5.3. Digital marketing and participation matrix

Table 1

Digital marketing and community participation matrix

Visitor stage	Digital marketing task	Community role	Core indicator
Discovery	Searchable pages, maps and short-form stories	Select and verify assets; approve imagery	Verified profiles; reach; map views
Consideration	Current prices, calendars, transport and access details	Define promises, limits and visitor rules	Content completeness; inquiries
Conversion	Availability, direct booking and payment options	Set capacity, terms and local bundles	Inquiry-to-booking rate; direct share

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Table continuation 1

Visitor stage	Digital marketing task	Community role	Core indicator
Experience	Mobile or offline guides and location-based information	Host, guide and supply food, crafts and services	Local spend; satisfaction; complaints
Advocacy	Reviews, ethical user content and referral messages	Respond, correct and control reuse of content	Review sentiment; repeat/referral
Governance	Shared dashboard and scheduled content audit	Set priorities and review benefit distribution	Local revenue; inclusion; pressure triggers

Source: developed by the authors from references [3]–[12].

5.4. Community-owned marketing cycle

The proposed cycle begins with asset mapping and consent, not publication. Product design follows, after which content is distributed through channels selected for a defined market segment. Conversion should connect visitors to local providers; experience data should then inform service improvement. The final stage reviews benefits, pressures and skills before the next campaign. This keeps digital activity accountable to community outcomes.

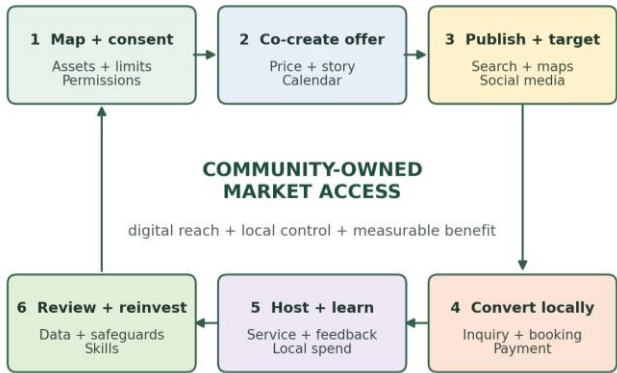


Figure 1
Community-owned digital marketing cycle for Mountainous Shirvan

5.5. Measurement and safeguards

Measurement should combine four levels. Market indicators include search visibility, map views and qualified inquiries. Conversion indicators include booking rate, response time, cancellation and direct-booking share. Community indicators include local revenue retention, number of active

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enterprises, participation of women and young people, and paid content work. Destination indicators include complaints, waste, congestion and pressure on sensitive cultural or natural sites.

6. Strategic recommendations

Governance should be formalised through a regional marketing council with village, enterprise and public-sector representation. Its responsibilities should include consent rules, campaign priorities, data access, dispute resolution and an annual benefit report. Official statistics can provide the regional baseline [1], while provider and visitor data supply the finer evidence needed to assess local conversion and inclusion.

7. Limitations

This article is based on secondary evidence and does not include original interviews, platform analytics or household income data from Mountainous Shirvan. The proposed relationships are therefore analytical propositions rather than measured effects. International cases were used for transferable functions, not as templates to be copied. Future research should conduct district-level digital audits, resident surveys and pilot campaigns with before-and-after indicators.

8. Conclusion

Digital marketing can support rural tourism development in Mountainous Shirvan when it is treated as community-owned market access. The priority is not maximum online exposure, but a reliable path from discovery to local booking, responsible experience and reinvestment. Verified information, bookable clusters, permission-based storytelling, practical skills and shared governance are mutually dependent. The matrix and cycle proposed in this article provide a testable structure for coordinating them while keeping local benefit, cultural continuity and environmental limits at the centre of regional tourism development.

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