

IMPACT OF DIGITAL MARKETING ON TOURISM-DRIVEN LOCAL ECONOMY IN VARANASI: A STUDY OF STAKEHOLDERS' PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Varanasi, one of the world's oldest living cities, has seen a phenomenal transformation of its tourism landscape in the last five years, from being a largely pilgrimage-based destination to becoming a globally recognised hub of spiritual and cultural tourism. This transformation has been accompanied by a widespread uptake of digital marketing tools — social media platforms, search engine optimization, online travel agencies, influencer collaborations, and government-led digital campaigns — by tourism stakeholders including hoteliers, tour operators, boatmen, artisans, and local authorities. The paper explores how and to what extent digital marketing has influenced the local economy of Varanasi, a city that thrives on tourism, and its stakeholders' point of view. The study is based on secondary data from government reports, industry sources, news articles, and peer-reviewed literature till March 2026. The paper documents the dramatic increase in tourist footfall especially foreign arrivals, along with the parallel expansion of digital engagement platforms used to promote the city. The findings suggest that digital marketing has significantly boosted Varanasi's visibility, diversified its tourist base and created income and employment opportunities for local stakeholders, while simultaneously highlighting infrastructural strain, digital literacy gaps and over-tourism concerns. The study concludes that the coordinated digital marketing strategy, supported by capacity-building measures for small and informal tourism enterprises, is essential for sustaining inclusive and long-term economic benefit within Varanasi's local economy.

KEYWORDS: Digital Marketing, Tourism Economy, Varanasi, Stakeholders, Social Media, Secondary Data, Spiritual Tourism.

1. INTRODUCTION

Varanasi, also known as Kashi or Banaras, is considered by many to be India's spiritual capital and one of the oldest living cities in the world. For centuries, the city's tourism economy depended on word-of-mouth recommendations, religious rites, and a limited amount of print or television promotion. However, the pattern has changed fundamentally in the last ten years. The explosion of smartphones, cheap mobile data and social media has changed the way that travelers discover, plan and share their experience of a destination, with Varanasi one of the most visible beneficiaries of this shift.

The inauguration of the Kashi Vishwanath Dham Corridor in December 2021 was a watershed moment, not only for the physical redevelopment of the religious heart of the city but also for how Varanasi has been promoted online ever since. Coordinated social media campaigns around the branding effort "Brand Banaras" to project the city as a global spiritual and cultural destination have been spearheaded by government agencies including the Uttar Pradesh Tourism Department and the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India. At the same time, private stakeholders such as hoteliers, homestay owners, boat operators, tour guides and handicraft sellers have independently adopted platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, YouTube and WhatsApp Business, as well as listings on online travel agencies (OTAs) such as MakeMyTrip, Goibibo and Booking.com to reach prospective visitors directly.

The changes in visitor numbers have been dramatic. The number of domestic visitors to Varanasi rose from around 30.7 lakh in 2021 to almost 11 crores in 2024 and the number of foreign tourists rose more than 120 times in the same period — from 2,566 in 2021 to over 3 lakhs in 2024. Later, the Uttar Pradesh government reported a record 7.26 crore visitors for the entire calendar year 2025, a number heavily influenced by the pilgrim traffic related to the Prayagraj Mahakumbh. The tourism boom has created jobs in hospitality, transport, retail and allied informal sectors, making Varanasi more popular in terms of visitors than long-established destinations like Goa and Shimla.

Digital marketing has been an equally important, if less tangible, driver of this transformation. But infrastructural investment – airport expansion, ghat beautification, the Varanasi Smart City initiative – has clearly played a central role. However, a significant portion of the existing literature on digital and social media marketing in tourism in India has revolved around national-level trends and other emerging destinations such as Ayodhya, Delhi NCR, and Rajasthan. This paper aims to fill this gap by analyzing the role of digital marketing in the experience and economic outcomes of different types of tourism stakeholders in Varanasi, such as government bodies, formal businesses, and informal workers with the help of secondary data. The rest of the paper is organized as follows: Section 2 reviews the existing literature on digital marketing and tourism with special reference to the Indian and Uttar Pradesh context. Section 3 states the objectives of the study. Section 4 describes the research methodology. Section 5 presents the results and findings of the study with the support of data table and diagram. Section 6 presents concluding observations and policy recommendations.

2. Literature Review: -

The theoretical basis for the study of digital marketing in tourism is the concept of e-tourism. E-tourism is the digitization of processes and value chains in the tourism, travel, hospitality and catering industries (Buhalis & Law, 2008). Buhalis and Law foresaw that the internet, and later social media, would enable destinations to promote themselves directly to a global audience

without reliance on traditional intermediaries, a prediction that has been strongly borne out in the Indian context over the last decade.

Numerous studies have demonstrated that social media is the most vital source of travel information for modern tourists. It has been demonstrated that platforms such as TripAdvisor, Instagram and YouTube have a significant influence on traveler decision making (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Leung, Law, van Hoof, and Buhalis (2013) found that influencers and travel bloggers have a direct impact on destination choice through visually compelling content. Furthermore, Fotis, Buhalis and Rossides (2012) highlighted the significance of user-generated content (UGC) in creating trust, stating that nowadays travelers are more likely to trust peer reviews and personal travel stories rather than official advertising. Gretzel, Fesenmaier and O'Leary (2006) connected social-media driven tourism to local economic growth, remarking that viral travel content may cause sudden surges in footfall that benefit the hospitality, transport and retail sectors, but also warning that unregulated increases risk straining infrastructure and natural resources – a caution that is particularly relevant to the pressures observed on Varanasi's Ghats during peak festival periods.

In a large scale study of inbound tourists across 93 nationalities, Manhas and Dogra (2019) found that in the Indian context specifically, platforms such as TripAdvisor and Facebook significantly shaped travelers' awareness of India and trip-planning decisions. Islam & Boro (2019) found that social media has become the most effective marketing channel for domestic Indian travelers, surpassing traditional media in creating travel interest. Along with this behavioral evidence, Salas-Olmedo et al. (2017) and Bassolas et al. (2016) showed that tourists leave a large number of digital traces (geotags, tweets, check-ins) that can be mined to understand mobility patterns and to inform destination marketing strategy.

The closest parallel to the present study are the works on the emerging spiritual-tourism circuit of Uttar Pradesh. Studies of Ayodhya, Chitrakoot and Prayagraj show how state tourism authorities and private actors use social media campaigns, content creation and technology-enabled services to promote these destinations. It was found that platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and YouTube had a significant impact on the travel decisions of younger demographics through visual storytelling of religious experiences (Pandey & Gupta, 2021).

This body of work also highlights persistent challenges, including digital-literacy gaps among small tourism providers and the need for continuous content creation to sustain audience engagement — challenges that arguably apply with equal force to Varanasi's informal tourism workforce.

At the enterprise level, Kapoor & Kapoor (2021) explored the transition from traditional to digital marketing practices in Indian hospitality, noting opportunities for direct customer engagement and operational and skill-related barriers. Gupta (2024) also noted that homestay businesses gain from digital transformation in their marketing, but require continued support in order to compete with larger, digitally savvy players. Studies of tourism SMEs across India show that while most operators know digital marketing is necessary for increasing visibility and bookings, many face budget constraints, lack of technical training, and infrastructure issues that hinder full adoption (Sharma & Aggarwal, 2021). This discussion was furthered by Sigala (2018) who demonstrated how AI-powered personalization on social platforms is becoming an ever more important factor in shaping individualized travel recommendations, and thus the importance for destination marketing organizations such as UP Tourism.

Finally, the destination-image research provides a significant explanatory link between the activity of digital marketing and the economic outcomes. The favorable destination image is often formed by online content and is found associated with increased visitation, satisfaction, repeat visits and positive word-of-mouth. However, this relationship is moderated by tourist motivation, accessibility and cost (Dogra & Rohan, 2020). Similarly, Krishnamurthy & Somasundaram (2022) and Chatterjee & Dsilva (2021) note the role of social media in destination branding and in promoting more responsible tourism, both of which are directly relevant to the sustainability concerns now emerging around the rapid growth of tourism in Varanasi.

The literature as a whole supports the view that digital marketing has a measurable impact on destination visibility, tourist decision-making and downstream economic activity, but also warns that the benefits are not evenly distributed and are accompanied by issues of infrastructure and digital literacy. However, very few studies have specifically examined these dynamics for Varanasi from a multi-stakeholder economic perspective. This is the gap that this paper attempts to fill.

3. Objectives of the Study: -

The present study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To examine the trend of tourist arrivals in Varanasi between 2021 and March 2026 using available secondary data.
2. To identify the key digital marketing tools and platforms used by government and private stakeholders to promote tourism in Varanasi.
3. To assess the perceived impact of digital marketing on different categories of tourism stakeholders — accommodation providers, transport and boat operators, artisans, tour guides, and government bodies.
4. To evaluate the contribution of digital marketing-led tourism growth to the local economy of Varanasi, including income and employment generation.
5. To identify challenges associated with digital marketing adoption among Varanasi's tourism stakeholders and to suggest measures for more inclusive digital engagement.

4. Research Methodology: -

The research design is descriptive-analytical based on only secondary data, as the aim of the study is not to generate fresh primary evidence but to investigate established patterns and documented results. This is consistent with a growing tradition in Indian tourism research, which uses secondary sources to undertake stakeholder-oriented analyses, especially in situations where primary fieldwork among a large and dispersed informal stakeholder base would be resource-intensive.

Data for this study were collected from three broad categories of secondary sources. Initially, the quantitative data on domestic and foreign tourist arrivals were collected from the official statistics and press releases of the Uttar Pradesh Tourism Department and Ministry of Tourism, Government of India. Secondly, these statistics were corroborated and contextualized with reporting from 2025 and early 2026, by news and industry-monitoring sources including Organizer, TravelBiz Monitor, Curly Tales and Whalesbook. Third, peer-reviewed and academic sources published in journals such as International Journal of Novel Research and Development (IJNRD), International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (IJFMR), Journal of Emerging

Technologies and Innovative Research (JETIR), Advances in Consumer Research, International Education and Research Journal (IERJ), Journal of Marketing & Social Research were examined to determine the conceptual basis of the literature review and to inform the interpretation of stakeholder level impact.

For analytical purposes, tourism stakeholders in Varanasi were conceptually classified into six categories: (i) government and destination-marketing bodies; (ii) accommodation providers from branded hotels to small guesthouses and homestays; (iii) transport and boat operators; (iv) artisans and handicraft sellers especially weavers of the GI-tagged Banarasi saree; (v) tour guides and travel agencies; and (vi) digital content creators and local influencers. Relevant data for each category were extracted, tabulated and analyzed using simple trend and content analysis. Quantitative figures on tourist arrivals were arranged in a comparative table and graphically represented to visualize growth patterns over the period 2021-2025.

The study period begins with 2021 as the base year affected by the pandemic and extends to available data until March 2026. It should be noted that there are some limitations to this secondary-data approach. Different secondary sources may also have reported different numbers due to differences in the reporting period (calendar year vs. half-year), the scope of the definition of “tourist” (pilgrims visiting temple precincts vs. overnight stays), and the timing of data release in relation to major events such as the Prayagraj Mahakumbh. Where such discrepancies exist, the paper transparently notes the figures rather than selecting one or the other, and flags the source of each statistic. Further, as the study does not contain primary survey data from the stakeholders themselves, its conclusions on perceived impact must be inferred from documented behavior, reported outcomes, and previous stakeholder-oriented studies in similar Indian tourism destinations.

5. Results and Findings: -

5.1 Tourist Arrival Trends:

Table 1 summarizes the trend in domestic and foreign tourist arrivals in Varanasi between 2021 and 2025, compiled from Uttar Pradesh Tourism Department and Ministry of Tourism data as reported in secondary sources.

Table 1: Tourist Arrivals in Varanasi, 2021–2025 (Secondary Data Compilation)

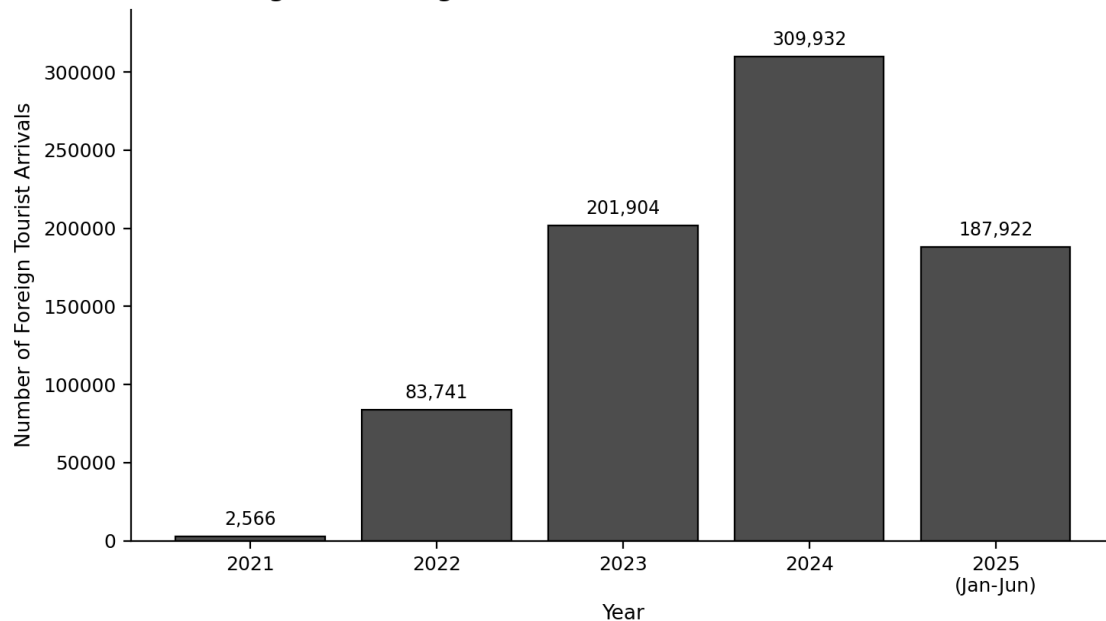
Year	Domestic Tourist Arrivals	Foreign Tourist Arrivals	Total Tourist Arrivals (approx.)	Key Associated Development
2021	~30.7 lakh	2,566	~30.7 lakh	Pandemic-recovery phase; low base year
2022	Not separately reported	83,741	Not separately reported	Kashi Vishwanath Dham Corridor inaugurated (Dec 2021)
2023	Not separately reported	2,01,904	~9.3 crore	Airport expansion; ghat beautification drive
2024	~10.97 crore	3,09,932	~11.0 crore (18.7% YoY growth)	Intensified “Brand Banaras” digital campaigns

Year	Domestic Tourist Arrivals	Foreign Tourist Arrivals	Total Tourist Arrivals (approx.)	Key Associated Development
2025 (Jan–Jun)	~12.9 crore (H1, as reported)	1,87,922	Not directly comparable*	Prayagraj Mahakumbh spillover tourism
2025 (Full Year)	Not separately reported	Not separately reported	7.26 crore (UP Govt. release)	Record year; ~2.87 crore linked to Mahakumbh pilgrims

**Note: The Jan–Jun 2025 “total arrivals” figure of ~12.9 crore, as reported in one secondary source, appears inconsistent with the UP Government’s later full-year 2025 release of 7.26 crore and is likely to reflect a different counting methodology (e.g., cumulative ghat/temple footfall versus city-level visitor arrivals). Both figures are reported here for transparency, consistent with the methodological limitations discussed in Section 4.*

The data show a consistent and, in the case of foreign arrivals, exponential upward trend across the study period. Figure 1 presents this trend graphically for foreign tourist arrivals, which offer the most consistently reported and comparable figures across sources.

Figure 1: Foreign Tourist Arrivals in Varanasi (2021-2025)

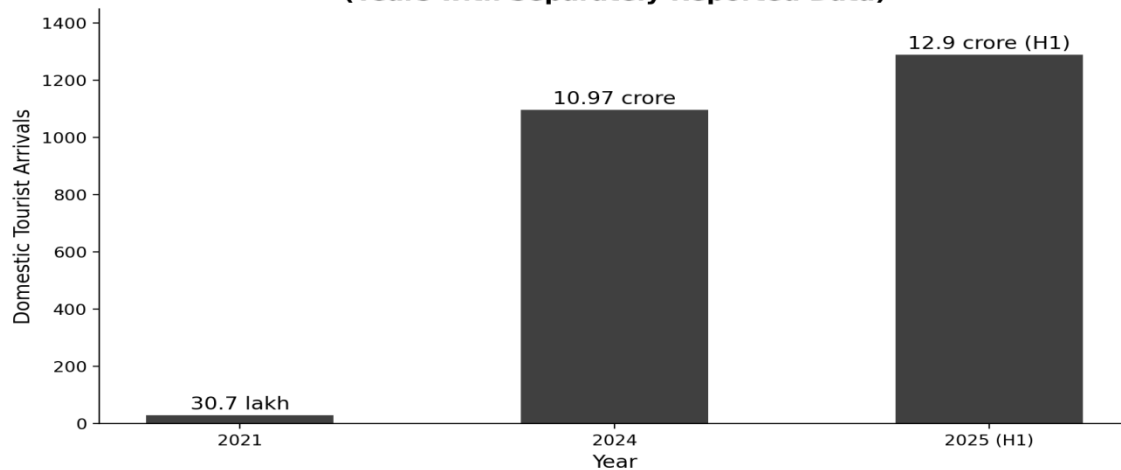


Source: Compiled by author from Uttar Pradesh Tourism Department / Ministry of Tourism data as reported in Organizer (2025) and Curly Tales (2025).

The nearly uninterrupted rise in foreign arrivals, from a low base of 2,566 in 2021 to over 3 lakh in 2024, almost perfectly coincides with the period when digital promotion of Varanasi gained momentum after the opening of the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor. This growth is surely due in part to infrastructural improvements, but the timing is also consistent with broader literature suggesting that destination-image content shared through social media and travel platforms has a disproportionate effect on international travelers who generally have less access to informal, word-of-mouth information about a destination and thus rely more heavily on digital research before travel.

Figure 2, which parallels the foreign-arrival trend presented in Figure 1, shows the growth of domestic tourist arrivals for the years in which domestic figures were separately reported, highlighting the scale of growth in visitors documented for Varanasi overall.

**Figure 2: Domestic Tourist Arrivals in Varanasi
(Years with Separately Reported Data)**



Source: Compiled by author from Table 1 data (Uttar Pradesh Tourism Department / Ministry of Tourism, as reported in Organizer, 2025 and TravelBiz Monitor, 2026).

5.2 Digital Marketing Channels Observed:

The digital marketing channels have been suggested in the secondary sources through which Varanasi has been promoted. The Uttar Pradesh Tourism Department and the Ministry of Tourism at the government level have been running a coordinated campaign on Instagram, Facebook and YouTube under destination-branding efforts related to “Brand Banaras”, which often feature the Ganga Aarti, the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor and the beautified ghats. In parallel to all this, private accommodation providers from luxury hotels to small homestays also have listings on OTAs like MakeMyTrip, Goibibo and Booking.com, and also have their own social media pages for engagement and reputation management. Informal stakeholders including boatmen and tour guides increasingly use WhatsApp Business for direct communication of bookings and short form video content (Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts) that in a number of documented cases has gone viral and generated sudden peaks in demand for certain ghats or guides. Artisans making the GI-tagged Banarasi saree and other handicrafts have expanded their market reach through e-commerce marketplaces and storefronts on Instagram, reducing their dependence on footfall-based, in-person sales alone.

Table 2 summarizes the primary digital channels used by each stakeholder category discussed above.

Table 2: Digital Marketing Channels Used by Varanasi Tourism Stakeholders

Stakeholder Category	Primary Digital Channels	Typical Use Documented in Secondary Sources
Government & DMOs	Instagram, Facebook, YouTube ("Brand Banaras")	Destination branding; showcasing Ganga Aarti, the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor, and beautified ghats
Accommodation Providers	MakeMyTrip, Goibibo, Booking.com; Facebook/Instagram pages	OTA listings, reputation management, and direct engagement
Boat Operators & Ghat Workers	WhatsApp Business; Instagram Reels/YouTube Shorts	Direct booking communication; viral short-form content driving demand spikes
Artisans & Handicraft Sellers	E-commerce marketplaces; Instagram-based storefronts	Market reach beyond footfall-based, in-person sales
Tour Guides & Travel Agencies	Online reviews; digital reputation platforms	Booking generation through reputation and visibility

Source: Compiled by author from the secondary-source review in Section 5.2 (Organizer, 2025; Curly Tales, 2025; TravelBiz Monitor, 2026).

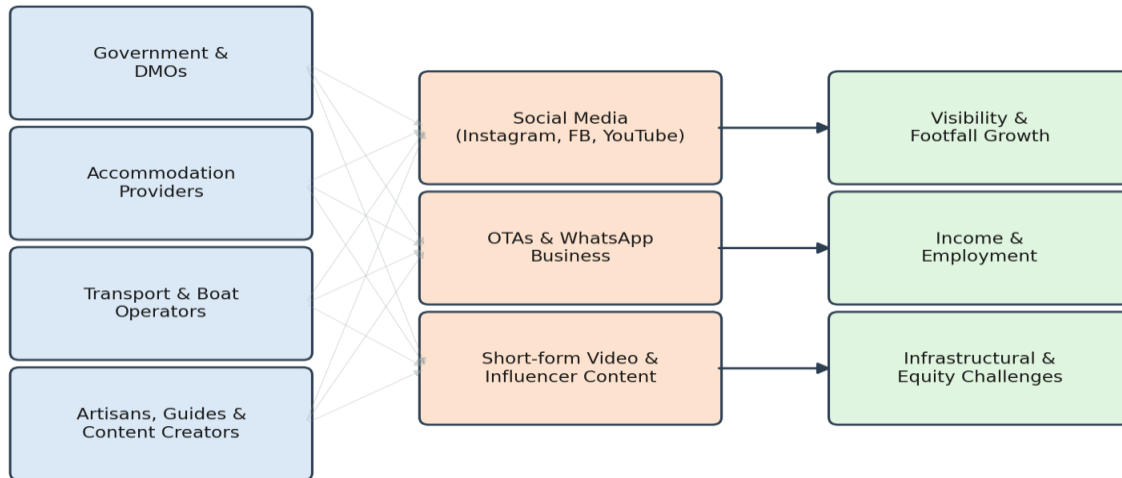
5.3 Stakeholder-wise Impact:

The secondary evidence reviewed points to differentiated impacts of digital marketing across stakeholder categories:

- **Accommodation providers:** Branded hotels and larger guesthouses are almost fully booked during peak times, supported by a robust OTA presence and the management of social media reputation. Smaller, unofficial guesthouses have benefited from the increased foot traffic but often lack the financial resources or computer literacy to maximize web listings and thus are unable to take a fair share of the expansion.
- **Boat operators and ghat workers:** Viral short-form video material has clearly increased the demand for boat rides and ghat experiences, but the largely unregulated and informal nature of the segment has also led to concerns regarding irregular pricing and safety during busy periods.
- **Artists and handicraft vendors:** Middlemen and lack of digital expertise still limit the share of value that individual weavers and crafters can capture, but digital marketplaces and social media-based selling have created new revenue streams beyond tourist foot traffic.
- **Tour guides and travel companies:** more and more bookings are made based on online reviews and digital reputation; guides and agencies with an active, well-managed internet presence have a competitive advantage over their informally operated peers with no such online presence.
- **Coordinated digital campaigns and infrastructure** investment appear to have been key in repositioning Varanasi as one of India's top destinations for both domestic and international tourists, with the city overtaking popular tourism hubs such as Goa and Shimla in terms of overall visitors.

Figure 3 synthesizes this discussion into a conceptual framework linking stakeholder categories, the digital channels they primarily use, and the economic outcomes and challenges documented in the secondary sources reviewed.

Figure 3: Conceptual Framework of Digital Marketing Diffusion Among Varanasi Tourism Stakeholders



Source: Author's conceptualization, informed by the e-tourism framework of Buhalis & Law (2008) and the stakeholder-wise evidence discussed in Section 5.3.

Table 3 presents a condensed summary of the stakeholder-wise impact discussed above.

Table 3: Summary of Stakeholder-wise Impact of Digital Marketing in Varanasi

Stakeholder Category	Documented Impact of Digital Marketing	Key Constraint
Accommodation Providers	Near-full occupancy for branded hotels via strong OTA and social media visibility	Small guesthouses lack digital literacy/resources to optimize listings
Boat Operators & Ghat Workers	Viral short-form content drives visible demand spikes for rides and experiences	Informal, unregulated segment; inconsistent pricing and safety concerns
Artisans & Handicraft Sellers	New revenue channels via digital marketplaces beyond tourist footfall	Middlemen and limited digital skills constrain value captured
Tour Guides & Travel Agencies	Competitive advantage from active, well-managed digital presence	Informally operating counterparts lack comparable visibility
Government & DMOs	Coordinated campaigns aid repositioning above Goa and Shimla in visitor volume	Sustaining inclusive benefit for informal stakeholders remains a challenge

Source: Compiled by author from the stakeholder-wise analysis in Section 5.3.

5.4 Economic and Employment Implications:

The scale of tourism growth reported in secondary sources has been associated with substantial job creation in the hospitality, transport and retail sectors, including new jobs for tourist guides, drivers, artisans and vendors. But this growth seems to benefit some more than others. Formal businesses with a strong digital presence appear better placed to capture a larger share of tourist spending, while informal actors, while benefiting from more footfall, continue to face obstacles in terms of digital literacy, access to capital for content creation and susceptibility to volatile, trend-driven demand spikes.

5.5 Challenges Identified:

The secondary sources reviewed consistently identify a number of challenges. The strain on infrastructure during peak periods, particularly around major festivals and the pilgrim influx related to the Mahakumbh, has tested the carrying capacity of ghats and civic amenities. Small and informal operators' digital-literacy gaps constrain their ability to reap proportional benefits of digital visibility. The fickle, trend-oriented quality of viral content results in demand volatility that may be hard for small businesses to plan around. And finally, as is the case with other fast-growing Indian destinations, there are early signs of over-tourism-related concerns, echoing caution expressed in the wider literature about the dangers of unregulated, digitally amplified visitor surges.

6. CONCLUSION: -

The study was done from the perspective of different stakeholders of Varanasi to understand the impact of digital marketing on the tourism driven local economy of Varanasi. The study took secondary data up to March 2026. The evidence reviewed indicates that digital marketing, including coordinated government campaigns, social media interaction by private sector players, listings on OTAs and informal digital tools like WhatsApp Business, has been a major factor, along with infrastructure development, in the rise of Varanasi as one of India's fastest growing tourist destinations. Between 2021 and 2024, foreign tourist arrivals increased by over 120 times and the total number of visitors to the city reached 7.26 crore in 2025, a record level, consistent with the broader literature associating digital visibility with destination growth. Such growth is welcome, but its benefits appear to be unevenly distributed among different stakeholders. Digital literacy and resource constraints have limited the ability of informal stakeholders – boatmen, small guesthouse owners, artisans, and independent guides – to share proportionately in the increased economic benefits of increased footfall, even as they experience increased footfall and, in many cases, increased earnings compared to the pre-2021 baseline. Based on these findings, this paper suggests that tourism stakeholders and policymakers of Varanasi should adopt a more coordinated and inclusive digital marketing strategy. This includes structured digital-literacy and content-creation training for small and informal operators, closer public-private coordination in destination-branding campaigns, mechanisms to handle the volatility created by viral, trend-driven demand, and continued investment in infrastructure to ensure that digitally amplified visitor growth remains sustainable rather than a source of ghat and civic overcrowding. A study using primary survey data, directly capturing the views and lived experience of the tourism stakeholders of Varanasi would supplement and expand the secondary-data findings discussed in this paper and would be a worthwhile area for future research.

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