



## DIGITAL MARKETING STRATEGIES FOR POSITIONING RELIGIOUS TOURISM DESTINATIONS: EVIDENCE FROM BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

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### Abstract:

This paper examines the role of digital marketing in positioning religious tourism destinations, focusing on Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). Using a mixed-method approach, the study integrates institutional and tourist perspectives to identify digital tools and governance strategies that improve destination visibility, visitor engagement, and competitiveness. Findings show a significant gap between the perceived potential of religious tourism and its limited operational framework, mainly due to institutional fragmentation and weak digital capacity. Social media, digital storytelling, and influencer collaborations stand out as key drivers of visitor decisions, loyalty, and destination image. The research introduces the Development–Cooperation–Dialogue framework, linking digital maturity and inter-institutional coordination as core factors of destination management in post-conflict, multi-faith societies. Policy recommendations emphasize the need for coordinated governance, digital innovation, and sustainable branding of sacred sites to boost Bosnia and Herzegovina's visibility as a spiritual destination.

### Keywords:

religious tourism; digital storytelling; destination governance; Bosnia and Herzegovina; spiritual heritage.

### JEL Classification:

M31, Z33

## INTRODUCTION

Religious tourism is among the oldest forms of travel, intertwining spiritual, cultural, and historical dimensions of human experience (Timothy & Olsen, 2006). In the digital era, destination marketing increasingly depends on online visibility, storytelling, and user engagement, transforming how sacred heritage communicates its value to global audiences (Kasemsarn & Nickpour, 2025).

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), as a spiritual crossroads of Europe, offers a unique multi-faith landscape; however, its religious tourism potential remains underdeveloped. Institutional fragmentation, lack of coordination, and the absence of unified digital strategies hinder the sector's competitiveness (Center of Excellence for Evaluation and Policy Research, 2022).

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Previous studies have examined emotional attachment to sacred sites and emerging digital practices (Obradović, 2024; Zeković & Gluhović, 2022), yet few have systematically linked digital marketing with institutional coordination in post-conflict, multi-faith contexts. This gap highlights the need to explore how digital transformation can foster cooperation, intercultural dialogue, and sustainable tourism growth in BiH.

This paper investigates how digital marketing tools contribute to the positioning of religious tourism destinations in BiH. The hypothesis assumes that religious tourism possesses strong developmental potential but remains limited by weak institutional and digital frameworks. The research integrates quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews, conducted between June and September 2025, to examine the interplay between institutional readiness, digital maturity, and visitor experience.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: DIGITAL MARKETING AND DESTINATION POSITIONING IN RELIGIOUS TOURISM**

Digital marketing represents the strategic use of online communication channels and data-driven tools to reach, engage, and influence target audiences (Smith, 2013). In tourism, it encompasses website optimization, search engine marketing, social media platforms, mobile applications, and interactive content such as blogs, videos, and virtual tours. These instruments enable destinations to personalize messages, encourage user participation, and measure engagement in real time – features that are essential in a competitive and experience-driven market (Wu *et al.*, 2024).

While destination marketing primarily focuses on the communication, promotion, and image-building aspects of tourism, digital governance refers to the institutional, strategic, and coordination mechanisms that enable these marketing processes to function effectively across multiple stakeholders. In other words, destination marketing operates on the communicative and experiential level – how destinations are perceived and promoted – whereas digital governance functions on the organizational level, determining how information, resources, and decision-making are managed within and between institutions. This conceptual distinction is crucial for multi-faith and post-conflict contexts such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the success of digital marketing depends not only on technological tools but also on coherent governance and inter-institutional alignment.

Religious tourism, also referred to as pilgrimage or sacred tourism, involves travel motivated by faith, spirituality, or the search for authentic encounters with sacred places, rituals, and communities (Durán-Sánchez *et al.*, 2018). Beyond worship, visitors are often drawn by the artistic, cultural, and symbolic value of sacred places. Emotional and affective dimensions – such as devotion, belonging, and spiritual fulfillment – play a decisive role in shaping visitor satisfaction and loyalty (Obradović, 2024). These experiences are reinforced through ritual practice, symbolic attachment, and narratives of faith that connect the pilgrim to place identity and tradition.

In marketing theory, destination positioning refers to creating a distinctive image of a destination in the minds of target audiences relative to competitors (Correia *et al.*, 2013). Effective positioning requires identifying unique attributes, defining visitor segments, and developing a coherent brand identity communicated consistently across channels. For religious destinations, positioning extends beyond functional attributes to emphasize authenticity, emotional resonance, and spiritual meaning. Digital channels such as social media and influencer networks offer new opportunities for co-creating destination images through user-generated content (UGC), testimonials, and immersive storytelling.



Recent research underlines that interactive, emotional, and value-driven narratives on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube significantly increase user engagement and perceived credibility (Zlatanov & Popesku, 2021). In this context, digital marketing acts as a bridge between institutions, local communities, and visitors, facilitating not only promotion but also dialogue and participation. When aligned with religious and cultural values, digital communication enhances transparency, fosters trust, and strengthens the identity of sacred destinations. However, religious tourism marketing must respect ethical and cultural boundaries. Over-commercialization or inappropriate digital representation can undermine authenticity and sacredness. Therefore, strategies should balance promotional goals with reverence for spiritual context, manage visitor expectations, and involve religious communities in content creation and storytelling.

Integrating these theoretical perspectives reveals that digital marketing serves a dual purpose in religious tourism: it supports competitive positioning while nurturing intercultural understanding and sustainable heritage management. This balance is particularly relevant for multi-faith and post-conflict contexts such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, where digital communication can promote both destination visibility and interreligious dialogue. Accordingly, the theoretical framework adopted in this study views digital marketing, institutional coordination, and visitor experience as interdependent dimensions of destination development. These concepts form the foundation for the empirical analysis that follows.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital marketing has become a central theme in tourism research, especially in studies on destination communication, competitiveness, and visitor engagement. Early analyses emphasized online visibility and promotional functions (Wu *et al.*, 2024), while recent studies have expanded toward strategic and emotional dimensions of digital interaction (Zarkada *et al.*, 2025). The convergence of technological innovation and experience-driven tourism has transformed how destinations build identity, communicate authenticity, and measure performance in real time.

### Digital Transformation and Destination Marketing

Within the hospitality and tourism sector, digital marketing orientation is increasingly linked to organizational performance and adaptability. Research across the Western Balkans identifies three dominant dimensions: strategic emphasis, digital intelligence, and resource provisioning (Zeković & Gluhović, 2022). Destinations that adopt data-driven decision-making and interactive online tools report higher competitiveness and improved visitor satisfaction. Zlatanov and Popesku (2021) showed that emotionally engaging content on Facebook significantly increases user interaction, while Londhe *et al.* (2024) highlighted artificial intelligence and analytics as drivers of personalized visitor experiences.

Despite progress, studies from Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) reveal inconsistent application of digital tools and limited institutional coordination. Vaško & Vaško (2018) observed that online promotion remains largely descriptive, while Zec *et al.* (2020) identified low budgets and digital literacy as persistent barriers. Collectively, these findings suggest that technological adoption in tourism is uneven and often disconnected from broader strategic planning.



## Emotional and Symbolic Dimensions of Religious Tourism

Religious tourism, or pilgrimage travel, is shaped by faith-based motivation, emotional experience, and cultural identity (Raj & Griffin, 2015). Studies emphasize that visitors seek authenticity and spiritual fulfillment rather than conventional entertainment. Emotional attachment and sense of belonging are key predictors of satisfaction and loyalty (Obradović, 2024). Bjeljac *et al.* (2016) demonstrated that place attachment at monasteries in Serbia strengthens revisit intention and supports identity-based marketing. Similarly, Aulet & Duda (2020) viewed sacred sites as both religious symbols and tourism products, requiring balanced management between devotion and visitor access.

Digital storytelling plays a growing role in mediating these experiences. By combining images, narratives, and testimonies, destinations can evoke empathy and a faith connection while maintaining authenticity. Interactive platforms also enable pilgrims to co-create content through reviews, blogs, and shared imagery, reinforcing the communal aspect of religious travel (Zlatanov & Popesku, 2021).

## Institutional and Governance Perspectives

A parallel body of research highlights that institutional readiness and governance in digital tourism vary widely among tourism entities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with significant opportunities for growth through training, inter-sectoral cooperation, and improved digital literacy. Regional initiatives, such as cross-border projects promoting spiritual heritage, further demonstrate the value of collaboration and shared storytelling in enhancing digital tourism strategies (Unkić, 2025).

Internationally, frameworks for smart destinations stress data-driven governance, participatory management, and networked collaboration (Gretzel *et al.*, 2015). However, these models often overlook the sensitivities of post-conflict or multi-faith contexts, where tourism must balance visibility with social cohesion. In BiH, institutional fragmentation and differing entity priorities complicate coordination between ministries, tourism boards, and religious communities (Zeković & Gluhović, 2022).

## Conceptual Gaps and Research Rationale

The reviewed literature converges on several insights. First, digital transformation is essential for competitiveness, but it is unevenly implemented across regions. Second, emotional and symbolic dimensions of religious tourism require communication strategies rooted in authenticity and respect for sacredness. Third, institutional governance and inter-faith cooperation remain underexplored factors in destination positioning.

Few studies have systematically integrated several dimensions – digital maturity, institutional coordination, and visitor experience – within a unified analytical framework. Existing works tend to isolate technological, emotional, or managerial aspects without examining their interdependence. This omission is particularly significant in post-conflict and multi-religious environments, where tourism serves not only economic but also sociocultural and peacebuilding functions. Addressing this gap, the present research combines governance and communication perspectives to analyze how institutional readiness, digital innovation, and visitor behavior jointly shape the digital positioning of religious tourism in Bosnia and Herzegovina. By linking these components, the study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how destinations can leverage digital tools to strengthen cooperation, intercultural dialogue, and sustainable development.



To synthesize prior research and clarify the positioning of the present study, Table 1 provides an overview of selected empirical and conceptual works addressing digital marketing, governance, and religious tourism. It highlights how existing studies emphasize technological and emotional dimensions, while this paper uniquely integrates digital maturity, institutional coordination, and intercultural dialogue into a unified analytical framework.

**Table 1.** Key Studies on Digital Marketing, Institutional Communication and Religious Tourism

Author(s) / Year	Context / Country	Focus / Method	Key Findings	Gap Addressed by This Study
Durán-Sánchez <i>et al.</i> (2018)	Global bibliometric review	Quantitative bibliometric mapping	Religious tourism is expanding but remains digitally under-theorized.	Absence of models connecting digital maturity and religious destination management.
Zlatanov & Popesku (2021)	Facebook promotion of religious sites (Balkans)	Content analysis of NTOs' posts	Emotionally engaging content increases credibility and visitor interaction.	Lack of institutional coordination and cross-faith integration in digital promotion.
Zeković & Gluhović (2022)	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Qualitative study on digital tourism innovations	Identified uneven levels of digital adoption across administrative entities.	Limited analysis of inter-institutional cooperation and governance aspects.
Caber <i>et al.</i> (2024)	International sample of religious tourists visiting Vatican City, Italy	Quantitative survey (N=325 international tourists), modelling antecedents of sharing tourism experiences on social media; based on the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) framework	Social media user experience level influences perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use. These two perceptions significantly determine intention to share tourism experiences on social media. Religiosity level plays a negative moderating role in the relationship between perceived usefulness/ease of use and sharing intention.	Although religious tourism is growing, little research has examined how religious tourists share experiences on social media and how their religiosity affects that behavior; the study fills this gap by focusing on social media sharing intention among religious tourists, using TAM and introducing religiosity as moderator.
Obradović (2024)	Monasteries in Serbia	Mixed-method study of emotional experience	Emotional attachment drives revisit intention and loyalty.	Missing link between emotional engagement and digital storytelling strategies.
Tran & Davies (2024)	International (virtual pilgrimage environments)	Theoretical & qualitative analysis; conceptual modelling	Virtual pilgrimage can increase accessibility and emotional resonance, but authenticity depends on design and narrative.	The study does not explore institutional frameworks or coordinated digital strategies. This research fills the gap by linking virtual pilgrimage tools with institutional digital development (development within the D-C-D framework).



Author(s) / Year	Context / Country	Focus / Method	Key Findings	Gap Addressed by This Study
Maurya & Singh (2025)	Prayagraj Maha Kumbh Mela, India, a major religious pilgrimage event	Secondary-data analysis: official government reports, app/web analytics, media coverage, social media campaign data	Digital marketing (social media, apps, government website) significantly boosted global reach, pilgrim engagement, and participation. Smart technologies (AI, IoT) improved crowd management, safety, and real-time communication. Cashless payments and digital platforms spurred economic gains. But challenges: digital divide (access and literacy), data privacy concerns, infrastructure reliability.	Previous research lacked empirical assessment of how digital marketing and smart tech integrate at mega religious events. This study fills with systematically evaluating the Digital Kumbh transformation through digital platforms, governance, pilgrim experience, and economic impact.
Unkić (2025)	Tourist boards in BiH	Case study on AI and digital standards	Highlights the potential of AI and web innovation for improving competitiveness.	Focused on tools, not governance or interfaith dialogue.
Zarkada <i>et al.</i> (2025)	Makkah and Medina (Saudi Arabia)	Netnographic analysis of traveler reviews	Revealed the emotional and symbolic dimensions of faith-based destinations.	Lack of a European and post-conflict comparative perspective.
Wang <i>et al.</i> (2025)	China (provincial digital governance and tourism development)	Quantitative study; structural equation modelling; national dataset	Digital governance significantly drives tourism development; effect is mediated by resource quality and moderated by institutional capacity. Public institutions are central actors.	Existing research does not address religious tourism or the emotional–communicative aspects of digital positioning. This study fills the gap by integrating institutional, emotional, and communicative factors through the D–C–D framework.
Kasemsarn & Nickpour (2025)	International / youth and cultural tourism	Systematic review of digital storytelling & social media engagement	Digital storytelling frameworks increasingly include short formats, co-creation, and participatory narratives. Authenticity is key for younger groups.	The study does not examine religious tourism or the role of public institutions. This paper fills the gap by incorporating dialogue and institutional communication into the analysis of digital storytelling.
Cristòfol Rodríguez <i>et al.</i> (2025)	Spain (Holy Week processions, religious brotherhoods)	Systematic review of social media strategies	Religious organizations actively use social media for community engagement and identity. UGC and visual content are key to visibility.	The focus is limited to religious organizations and lacks examination of national or institutional coordination. This study fills the gap by analyzing inter-institutional cooperation within the D–C–D model.

Source: Authors



## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a mixed-method design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine how digital marketing contributes to the positioning and sustainable development of religious tourism destinations in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). The mixed-method approach was selected to triangulate institutional and visitor perspectives, ensuring both statistical generalization and contextual understanding of the dynamics between governance, digital communication, and visitor experience.

The study was conducted between June and September 2025 as part of a broader doctoral project focusing on digital transformation in religious tourism. It comprised two complementary components: (1) institutional assessment and (2) tourist survey and perception analysis.

### Institutional Research Design

The institutional component targeted organizations directly involved in the planning, management, and promotion of religious tourism. A purposive sample of 11 institutions was selected out of approximately 15 active entities, including ministries, regional tourism boards, and representatives of religious communities in both the Federation of BiH and Republika Srpska. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire containing 18 items measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The instrument was designed to evaluate four key dimensions:

- perceived level of religious tourism development,
- degree of inter-institutional cooperation,
- digital visibility and communication capacity, and
- contribution to interfaith dialogue and social cohesion.

The items were adapted from prior studies on destination governance and digital readiness (Zeković & Gluhović, 2022; Gutierriz *et al*, 2025) and contextualized for BiH. Reliability analysis indicated satisfactory internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.86$ ). Content validity was ensured through a review by three academic experts in tourism and digital marketing.

In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six key stakeholders from both entities to explore institutional challenges in more depth. Qualitative transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model. Two researchers independently coded the data to ensure intercoder reliability (agreement = 92%), revealing six recurring themes: digital readiness, cooperation mechanisms, leadership and responsibility, interfaith dialogue, sustainability, and visitor management.

### Tourist Survey and Data Collection

The quantitative component of the research focused on the demand side – domestic and international visitors to religious and heritage sites. A total of 645 respondents participated in the survey, conducted at five major locations: Međugorje, Tekija Blagaj, Osovica Monastery, Sarajevo Old Town, and Travnik Franciscan Monastery. A convenience sampling method was used. Interviewers approached every fifth visitor at entrances and information centers to minimize bias. The tourist questionnaire consisted of 22 items, divided into four thematic sections:



- motivation for visiting religious sites,
- perception of digital accessibility and information availability,
- satisfaction with services and interpretation, and
- evaluation of destination image and social contribution.

A pilot test with 20 participants confirmed clarity and comprehension, with Cronbach’s  $\alpha = 0.83$  indicating good reliability. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and all respondents were informed about the study’s objectives and their right to withdraw at any stage.

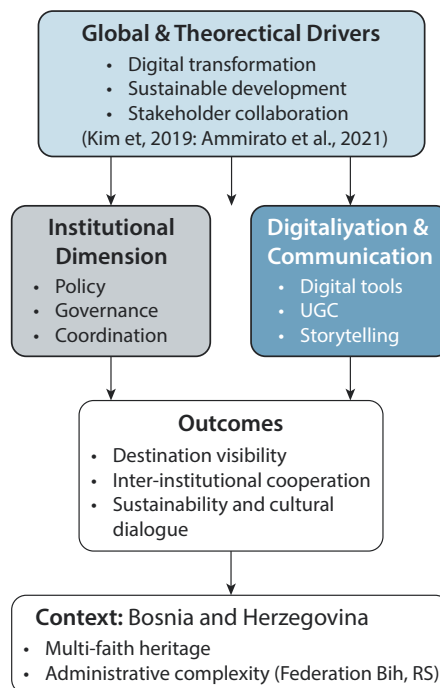
### Data Analysis and Integration

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS 29.0. The following statistical methods were applied:

- Descriptive statistics to summarize central tendencies and variability,
- Pearson’s correlation coefficients to test associations among institutional indicators ( $p < 0.05$ ),
- One-way ANOVA to compare differences between the Federation of BiH and Republika Srpska, and
- Cross-tabulation to identify relationships between institutional and visitor responses.

Qualitative data from interviews were coded thematically and used to interpret and enrich quantitative findings. This triangulation of methods enabled a comprehensive understanding of the complex interplay between digital marketing, governance coordination, and visitor experience. The integrated results informed the development of the Conceptual Framework for Religious Tourism Development in BiH (Figure 1), which visualizes the interconnections among institutional cooperation, digital transformation, and sustainable outcomes.

**Figure 1.** The Development-Cooperation-Dialogue (D-C-D) Framework for Digital Positioning of Religious Tourism in BiH



Source: Authors



The Development-Cooperation-Dialogue (D-C-D) framework conceptualizes how digital transformation, institutional alignment, and value-based communication jointly influence the positioning of religious tourism destinations. *Development* represents the institutional and technological capacity to design, manage, and maintain digital tools – websites, social media channels, multilingual content, and immersive technologies. Strong development ensures that visitors receive accurate, consistent, and accessible information. *Cooperation* functions as the structural mechanism that amplifies digital development. It captures how ministries, tourism boards, and religious communities coordinate strategies, share resources, and align communication standards. When cooperation is weak, digital output remains fragmented even when individual institutions are digitally active. *Dialogue* reflects the emotional, cultural, and interpretative dimensions of digital communication. Through storytelling, user-generated content, and online interaction, visitors co-create meaning and form affective bonds with sacred sites. Dialogue transforms digital content from a promotional tool into a space for trust-building, empathy, and intercultural understanding.

The mixed-method design was applied not only to measure institutional and visitor perspectives but also to operationalize the D-C-D framework within the research process. Quantitative indicators (development scores, cooperation levels, digital visibility, and dialogue contribution) provided measurable insight into each component of the framework. Qualitative interviews deepened this understanding by revealing the mechanisms behind these scores – digital literacy gaps, coordination challenges, leadership inconsistencies, and perceptions of interfaith dialogue.

Through methodological triangulation, the study examined how the D-C-D elements interact in practice. Institutional surveys showed that uneven development directly reduces the quality and accuracy of online information, while interview data confirmed that cooperation acts as the main multiplier of digital capacity. Visitor surveys further demonstrated that dialogue-related indicators – authenticity, emotional resonance, and narrative clarity – strongly affect satisfaction and loyalty. By integrating these datasets, the methodology provides a comprehensive lens for analyzing how development, cooperation, and dialogue collectively shape digital positioning and competitiveness in religious tourism.

### Operationalization of Key Concepts

To strengthen analytical clarity, this study explicitly operationalizes three core constructs central to the narrative: dialogue, authenticity, and spiritual meaning. Dialogue is defined as the degree of cross-institutional cooperation and communication between religious communities, ministries, and tourism boards. It was operationalized through institutional indicators measuring perceived cooperation intensity, information-sharing practices, and participation in interfaith or intercultural initiatives. Authenticity refers to visitors' perception that digital and on-site representations of sacred sites reflect their genuine spiritual, cultural, and ritual character. This construct was measured through visitor evaluations of credibility, emotional resonance, and alignment between online content and actual experience. Spiritual meaning captures the extent to which visitors experience personal reflection, transcendence, or emotional depth during their encounter with sacred spaces. It was operationalized through survey items related to spiritual motivation, emotional engagement, and the subjective significance attributed to site narratives. Clarifying these constructs ensures coherence between the methodological approach and the interpretative dimensions discussed in the findings.



## RESULTS

### Institutional Assessment

The institutional survey results reveal a moderate level of development and digital readiness within organizations engaged in religious tourism in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The mean composite score for perceived development reached 3.4 on a five-point scale, while inter-institutional cooperation averaged 3.1, suggesting that collaboration remains inconsistent across entities. Digital visibility indicators – such as social media presence, website activity, and search optimization – scored slightly higher (3.6), showing that individual institutions increasingly recognize the importance of digital communication, yet lack a coordinated strategy.

**Table 2.** Institutional Readiness Indicators (Mean and Standard Deviation)

Dimension	Description	Mean	SD
Development	Overall progress in implementing religious tourism strategies	3.4	0.72
Cooperation	Level of inter-institutional collaboration across entities	3.1	0.84
Digital Visibility	Presence and activity on websites, social media, and online platforms	3.6	0.69
Dialogue Contribution	Institutional engagement in interfaith and intercultural initiatives	3.3	0.77

*Source:* Authors

Correlation analysis indicates strong relationships between cooperation, digital readiness, and perceived destination visibility. A statistically significant correlation was found between inter-institutional cooperation and perceived development ( $r = 0.81$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), confirming that collective coordination substantially enhances visibility and competitiveness. Institutions with established partnerships reported higher engagement with local communities and greater perceived contribution to intercultural dialogue ( $r = 0.65$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

Qualitative interviews support these quantitative findings, emphasizing six recurring themes: (1) insufficient leadership and coordination mechanisms, (2) uneven digital literacy, (3) dependence on external funding, (4) limited joint marketing initiatives, (5) underdeveloped sustainability strategies, and (6) growing awareness of interfaith cooperation as a potential driver of tourism growth. Respondents repeatedly highlighted that digital promotion remains reactive rather than strategic, with fragmented efforts across administrative entities and religious communities.

### Digital Challenges Faced by Religious Institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Despite the increasing awareness of the importance of digital communication, religious institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina face several structural and operational challenges that limit their ability to fully utilize digital tools. First, many institutions operate with limited staff and technical expertise, often relying on volunteers or part-time personnel who lack formal training in digital marketing, website management, analytics, or content creation. As reported in the interviews, the absence of dedicated digital communication roles leads to irregular updates, inconsistent messaging, and reactive rather than strategic use of online platforms.



Second, there is uneven digital development across entities, dioceses, parishes, and religious communities. Some institutions maintain active websites and social media channels, while others lack even basic digital visibility. This disparity results in a fragmented presentation of religious heritage and makes it difficult to generate a coherent national narrative about spiritual tourism. The lack of uniform standards for website quality, multilingual content, and visual storytelling further amplifies inconsistencies.

Third, institutions frequently report resource constraints, including insufficient budgets for digital infrastructure, professional content production, cybersecurity, and paid promotional campaigns. Many rely on outdated equipment and free website templates, which limit their capacity to implement multimedia formats, search engine optimization, or accessible design.

Fourth, managing online communication poses significant challenges due to sensitivities surrounding sacred content, concerns about misinterpretation, and the need to balance openness with respect for religious norms. Institutions struggle to moderate comments, respond to inquiries, and engage with diverse audiences in a timely manner. Several interviewees emphasized difficulties in coordinating communication between clergy, tourism boards, and administrative bodies, which often results in delays or conflicting messages.

Finally, the absence of a centralized digital governance framework complicates cooperation between institutions. Without shared guidelines, joint branding strategies, or common digital protocols, individual institutions are left to develop their own communication practices, leading to duplication of effort and inconsistent visibility across the country.

These challenges collectively constrain the digital maturity of religious institutions and highlight the need for capacity building, coordinated governance, standardized digital guidelines, and sustainable investment in human and technical resources.

### Visitor Experience and Perception

The tourist survey, conducted among 645 visitors at five sacred sites (Međugorje, Tekija Blagaj, Osovica Monastery, Sarajevo Old Town, and the Travnik Franciscan Monastery), provides insight into visitor motivation and satisfaction. Descriptive results show that 61% of respondents identified spirituality and peace-seeking as their primary motivation, while 24% emphasized cultural interest and 15% heritage-related curiosity.

**Table 3.** Visitor Motivation and Information Sources

Motivation / Information Source	Percentage of Respondents (%)
Spiritual motivation/pilgrimage	61
Cultural curiosity and heritage interest	24
Leisure and educational purposes	15
Primary online source of information:	
Social media (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube)	58
Travel blogs and forums	23
Institutional or tourism board websites	19

Source: Authors



Regarding digital accessibility, only 42% of visitors considered online information about religious sites easily available and reliable. Social media was the dominant source of pre-visit information (58%), followed by travel blogs (23%) and institutional websites (19%). Visitors particularly valued visual storytelling and user-generated content that conveyed authenticity and emotional connection.

Satisfaction levels were generally high (overall mean = 4.2/5), with the strongest ratings for hospitality and local guides. However, digital interpretation and multilingual availability received lower scores (3.1/5), indicating a need for improved online and onsite informational services.

Correlation tests confirm that digital accessibility positively affects both satisfaction and intention to revisit ( $r = 0.63$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Similarly, visitors who engaged with online religious content before travel reported a stronger emotional connection and higher loyalty intentions.

**Table 4.** Correlations between Key Institutional and Visitor Indicators

Variables	Institutional Cooperation	Digital Visibility	Visitor Satisfaction	Dialogue Contribution
Institutional Cooperation	1.00	0.81**	0.58*	0.65*
Digital Visibility		1.00	0.63**	0.59*
Visitor Satisfaction			1.00	0.54*
Dialogue Contribution				1.00

Source: Authors

These findings reinforce the notion that digital storytelling is not merely a promotional tool but a catalyst for experiential and spiritual engagement.

Visitors' perception of authenticity plays a pivotal role in shaping their emotional engagement and overall satisfaction with religious destinations. Recent research shows that authenticity encompasses both cognitive and affective dimensions, including the perceived genuineness of practices, atmosphere, rituals, and community involvement (He & Timothy, 2024). When visitors believe that the narratives, imagery, and digital representations reflect the "true" spiritual and cultural character of a site, they report stronger emotional attachment and higher revisit intentions. Our findings support this pattern: respondents who rated digital content as credible and authentic also demonstrated higher satisfaction levels and greater willingness to recommend the destination. These results align with contemporary studies indicating that authenticity significantly enhances cultural attachment, meaning making, and the perceived value of heritage experiences (Lin *et al.*, 2024).

Digital stories and visual narratives commonly evoke a set of emotional responses that strongly influence visitor behavior. Recent studies identify awe, nostalgia, empathy, and a sense of belonging as the most frequent emotional reactions triggered by digital storytelling formats, particularly those that combine personal testimonies, symbolic imagery, and immersive historical or spiritual narratives (Yu, 2025). Our survey confirms this trend: visitors who engaged with emotionally rich digital content reported a deeper sense of connection with the site and showed a higher likelihood of sharing their experiences online. These emotions act as mediators that reinforce satisfaction, destination image, and loyalty. Research on digital storytelling further highlights the effectiveness of short-form videos, user-generated content, and participatory formats in amplifying emotional resonance and strengthening the perceived authenticity of religious destinations (Kasemsarn & Nickpour, 2025; Li, 2025).



Our analysis reveals notable differences between domestic and foreign visitors in how they interpret and respond to religious tourism experiences. Foreign visitors tend to place greater emphasis on symbolic authenticity, spiritual ambiance, and the uniqueness of the cultural landscape, and are more likely to describe their experiences in emotional or transcendent terms. Domestic visitors, on the other hand, are more attuned to practical aspects of the experience, such as information accessibility, language availability, service quality, and the reputational context of the site within local culture. These distinctions echo findings from comparative research, which show that non-resident visitors often idealize or romanticize sacred destinations, whereas domestic visitors evaluate them through a more pragmatic and familiarity-based lens (Lin, 2024). Consequently, digital communication strategies should be tailored to reflect these differences: international audiences respond more strongly to symbolic and narrative-driven content, while domestic audiences benefit from clear, practical, and community-oriented information.

These distinctions highlight the importance of segment-specific digital communication strategies that balance symbolic storytelling with practical informational content.

### **Integrated Outcomes**

Integrating both institutional and visitor data reveals a systemic gap between the potential of religious tourism and its current operational framework. Institutions display growing awareness of digital importance but remain hindered by fragmented governance and limited coordination across entities. Conversely, visitors demonstrate strong emotional engagement and interest yet encounter inconsistent communication and service standards.

This misalignment suggests that digital maturity and governance integration jointly determine destination competitiveness. Where cooperation is strong – such as in interfaith initiatives around Sarajevo and Herzegovina – destinations exhibit higher online visibility and better visitor evaluations. The empirical evidence thus supports the assumption that collaborative governance and digital innovation reinforce one another, shaping how sacred sites are positioned within domestic and international tourism markets.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Interpretation within the Development–Cooperation–Dialogue Framework**

The findings demonstrate that the three components of the D-C-D framework form an interdependent system in which each element reinforces or constrains the others. Development alone, even when institutions have active websites or social media profiles, cannot ensure competitive digital positioning if the content remains inconsistent across administrative entities. The results show that limited digital maturity manifests in fragmented narratives, outdated information, and uneven multilingual availability.

Cooperation amplifies or suppresses the effectiveness of digital development. Institutions with stronger cooperation networks displayed more coherent messaging, higher digital visibility, and more effective joint promotion. Quantitative results confirm this mechanism: cooperation is strongly correlated with both perceived development and contribution to intercultural dialogue. This indicates that coordinated governance serves as the backbone of the digital ecosystem.



Dialogue strengthens the emotional and interpretative layer of digital communication. Visitor data reveal that emotionally meaningful narratives, stories highlighting authenticity, sacredness, and intercultural respect, significantly enhance satisfaction, perceived credibility, and intention to revisit. Dialogue, therefore, transforms digital outreach from simple promotion into a value-based interaction between institutions and visitors.

When viewed together, the results show that the elements of the D-C-D framework function synergistically:

- Without development, there is no credible digital content.
- Without cooperation, development remains isolated and inconsistent.
- Without dialogue, digital communication fails to generate emotional engagement and long-term loyalty.

Thus, the full impact of digital marketing in religious tourism emerges only when development provides technological foundations, cooperation ensures strategic alignment, and dialogue creates meaningful connections that resonate with visitors and reinforce social cohesion.

### Comparison with Previous Studies

Recent studies indicate that emotional and participatory content play a significant role in tourism communication. Emotionally engaging social media posts have been shown to enhance destination credibility, aligning with the observation that authenticity and storytelling drive visitor satisfaction. Data analytics and personalization are linked to improved visitor experiences, while effective governance integration is highlighted as an equally vital condition.

At the institutional level, digital maturity among tourism entities in Bosnia and Herzegovina varies, with weaknesses often stemming from fragmented leadership and insufficient cross-entity coordination rather than technological deficits. This finding corroborates previous research, which found that emotional attachment to sacred sites enhances revisit intentions, supporting the argument that affective dimensions of religious tourism can be leveraged through strategic digital storytelling.

Recent research from 2023 to 2025 further contextualizes and strengthens the interpretation of this study's findings. For example, Caber *et al.* (2023) demonstrated that social media user experience and perceived usefulness are central predictors of sharing intentions among religious tourists visiting Vatican City. This aligns with our result that digital accessibility significantly shapes emotional connection and revisit intention, confirming that user experience on digital platforms is becoming a decisive component of religious destination competitiveness. Similarly, Zarkada *et al.* (2025) emphasized the symbolic and affective dimensions of religious destinations through netnographic analysis, supporting our observation that emotionally grounded narratives and authentic storytelling directly enhance visitor satisfaction and loyalty.

The findings also correspond to the growing body of literature on digital transformation and governance. Wang *et al.* (2025) showed that digital governance acts as a structural driver of tourism development, mediated by resource quality and institutional capacity. This reinforces our finding that institutional coordination is a critical multiplier of digital marketing effectiveness in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Additionally, recent research on cultural and heritage tourism highlights the expansion of participatory and short-form digital storytelling formats (Kasemsarn & Nickpour, 2025), which parallels the increasing role of user-generated content identified in our visitor survey.



## International Comparison: Lessons from Italy, Spain, and Israel

A comparative perspective with other leading religious tourism destinations offers additional insight into the specific challenges faced in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In Italy, particularly in Vatican City, religious tourism is supported by a highly structured digital ecosystem, standardized communication, and data-driven content strategies (Caber *et al.*, 2023). These practices contrast with the fragmented digital presence in BiH, where individual institutions often operate independently without unified branding or coordinated messaging.

Similarly, studies from Spain emphasize the strong role of religious brotherhoods and community organizations as active digital communicators during major events such as Holy Week (Cristófol Rodríguez *et al.*, 2025). Their coordinated social media strategies demonstrate how religious stakeholders can successfully shape destination images when they are systematically included in communication processes. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, by contrast, religious communities participate in tourism promotion but typically lack formalized frameworks for cooperation with tourism boards and ministries, resulting in inconsistent visibility.

Israel represents another relevant point of comparison, as it integrates national-level digital platforms, smart tourism technologies, and strong inter-institutional coordination to promote sacred sites across various faith traditions. This multi-layered digital governance model illustrates how a unified approach to digital transformation can enhance both operational efficiency and international visibility. While the sociopolitical context differs significantly from BiH, the Israeli model highlights the potential benefits of harmonized digital standards and central leadership in managing diverse sacred destinations.

Together, these comparisons underscore that Bosnia and Herzegovina's key challenge is not a lack of digital potential but the absence of systemic coordination that would allow its multi-faith heritage to be presented through cohesive, high-quality digital narratives.

## Practical Implications

From a managerial and policy perspective, the results suggest several strategic priorities. First, there is a pressing need to establish a unified digital platform integrating religious sites across entities and faiths. Such a platform could host standardized information, virtual tours, and booking functionalities while maintaining authenticity and respect for sacred values. Second, capacity building and digital literacy training for local tourism boards and religious institutions are essential. This would ensure that digital channels are not managed sporadically but as part of a coordinated marketing strategy. Third, the creation of a Religious Tourism Coordination Council, including representatives from ministries, religious communities, and tourism boards, could institutionalize interfaith cooperation and align communication standards.

Finally, adopting data-driven approaches – analytics dashboards, SEO performance monitoring, and social media engagement metrics – would allow institutions to measure visibility and adapt strategies in real time, turning digital presence into a measurable asset for sustainable development.



## Linking Institutional Findings to EU Digital Frameworks

The forward-looking recommendation to align digital competences with EU-level programs is directly related to the empirical challenges identified in this study, namely the limited digital capacity of institutions, fragmented governance structures, and uneven adoption of digital tools across entities. These findings indicate that domestic institutions often lack the technical, financial, and organizational resources needed to implement advanced digital solutions. EU frameworks such as the Digital Europe Program (European Commission, 2021) and Creative Europe's cross-sectoral strand on digital transformation (European Commission, 2022) explicitly target capacity-building in cultural and heritage sectors, including digital skills development, interoperable digital platforms, and cross-border collaboration. Similarly, Interreg transnational cooperation programs (European Commission, 2023) emphasize the valorization of cultural heritage through digital innovation and interregional partnerships. Linking BiH's institutional needs to these established funding and support mechanisms provides a realistic and evidence-based pathway for addressing the structural constraints revealed in our research.

## Theoretical Contribution

Theoretically, this study bridges three streams of literature: destination marketing, religious tourism, and digital governance. It advances the concept of digital marketing as a social integrator, demonstrating that online narratives about sacred sites can enhance both competitiveness and community cohesion. The D-C-D framework thus contributes to the emerging discourse on digital ethics in tourism, emphasizing that technology-mediated communication must respect sacred authenticity while promoting inclusivity and cooperation. The hypothesis that institutional fragmentation and limited digital maturity constrain destination competitiveness is empirically supported.

## Limitations and Future Research

The study's limitations stem from its cross-sectional design and convenience sampling. Although the data encompasses diverse institutions and visitor groups, future research could expand the geographic scope to include cross-border comparisons across the Western Balkans. Longitudinal studies would further clarify how digital strategies evolve over time and how online narratives affect long-term visitor loyalty.

Additionally, integrating sentiment analysis or social network analytics could enrich the understanding of how pilgrims and institutions co-create destination meaning in virtual spaces. Future research should also examine the balance between commercialization and spiritual authenticity in digital marketing, ensuring that sacredness remains central to tourism promotion.

The combined findings confirm that the success of religious tourism in Bosnia and Herzegovina depends on the synergy between digital innovation, institutional cooperation, and respect for sacred heritage. Strengthening governance integration and digital literacy will allow the country to transform its spiritual diversity into a sustainable and competitive advantage. The study thereby underscores that in multi-faith societies, destination positioning is not only a marketing challenge but also a cultural mission – rooted in dialogue, authenticity, and shared development.



## CONCLUSIONS

This study provides clear empirical evidence that the digital positioning of religious tourism destinations in Bosnia and Herzegovina is shaped by the interplay of uneven institutional digital capacity, fragmented governance structures, and strong visitor demand for authentic and emotionally resonant narratives. The institutional survey revealed moderate but inconsistent levels of digital development across entities, while interviews highlighted recurring constraints such as limited staff, scarce resources, and the absence of unified communication standards. Visitor data further showed that emotional engagement, perceived authenticity, and digital accessibility significantly predict satisfaction, loyalty, and intention to revisit, demonstrating how digital maturity directly shapes destination competitiveness.

Building on these findings, the study shows that digital marketing functions not only as a promotional instrument but as a structural mechanism influencing cooperation, dialogue, and sustainable heritage management. The proposed Development-Cooperation-Dialogue (D-C-D) framework integrates institutional readiness with visitor behavior, offering a comprehensive model for understanding how digital transformation can enhance visibility, interfaith collaboration, and long-term destination development. In practical terms, the results point to the need for coordinated governance, capacity building, and data-driven decision-making, including the potential development of a national digital platform for religious tourism aligned with EU programs such as Interreg, Creative Europe, and Digital Europe.

Although Bosnia and Herzegovina lags behind countries such as Italy, Spain, and Israel, where unified digital platforms and coordinated governance structures support religious tourism, our findings indicate that strengthening cross-entity cooperation and aligning digital standards with international best practices would enable BiH to position its multi-faith heritage more effectively within the European cultural landscape. The study also contributes theoretically by framing digital marketing as a vehicle for cultural communication and social integration in multi-faith contexts, underscoring the need for ethically grounded, authenticity-centered digital strategies. Future research should adopt longitudinal and comparative approaches to examine how digital maturity evolves and how it shapes long-term visitor loyalty and interreligious understanding.

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## DIGITALNE MARKETINŠKE STRATEGIJE ZA POZICIONIRANJE DESTINACIJA VERSKOG TURIZMA: EMPIRIJSKA ANALIZA U BOSNI I HERCEGOVINI

### Rezime:

Ovaj rad istražuje ulogu digitalnog marketinga u pozicioniranju destinacija religijskog turizma, sa posebnim fokusom na Bosnu i Hercegovinu. Primenom kombinovanog metodološkog pristupa, studija integriše institucionalne i turističke perspektive u cilju identifikovanja digitalnih alata i upravljačkih strategija koje unapređuju vidljivost destinacije, pažnju posetilaca i konkurentnost. Nalazi istraživanja ukazuju na značajan jaz između percipiranog potencijala religijskog turizma i njegovog ograničenog operativnog okvira, što je pre svega posledica institucionalne fragmentacije i niskog nivoa digitalne zrelosti. Društvene mreže, digitalno pripovedanje i saradnja sa influenserima izdvajaju se kao ključni pokretači odluka posetilaca, njihove lojalnosti i imidža destinacije. Istraživanje uvodi okvir Razvoj-Saradnja-Dijalog, koji povezuje digitalnu zrelost i međuinstitucionalnu koordinaciju kao osnovne faktore upravljanja destinacijom u postkonfliktnim, multi-konfesionalnim društvima. Preporuke za kreiranje politika naglašavaju potrebu za koordinisanim upravljanjem, digitalnim inovacijama i održivim brendiranjem svetih mesta, s ciljem unapređenja vidljivosti Bosne i Hercegovine kao duhovne destinacije.

### Ključne reči:

religijski turizam;  
digitalno pripovedanje;  
upravljanje destinacijom;  
Bosna i Hercegovina;  
duhovno nasleđe.

### JEL klasifikacija:

M31, Z33