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SOCIAL MEDIA AND DESTINATION IMAGE: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF UZBEKISTAN, TURKEY AND MOROCCO

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Abstract: Social media is becoming one of the key methods for people to discover new travel destinations. This article will analyse how Uzbekistan, Turkey and Morocco are represented online on Instagram, Tik Tok and YouTube. It will also look into why certain places seem more appealing to people online despite being a higher cost. The study is qualitative. Academic literature has been used alongside publicly available information on how visible each destination is online. This could suggest that those with a clear visual identity and high user generated content receive more attention. In terms of Uzbekistan it has a rich heritage however a tourism official has stated there was not enough quality content online. To improve their image they should produce short videos, work with appropriate influencers, encourage tourists to post and make 'easy' photo opportunities around food and crafts.

Keywords: Social Media, Destination Image, Uzbekistan, Turkey, Morocco, Instagram, Tik Tok, YouTube

1. Introduction

Social media is now a common practice when planning a holiday. Travel experiences on platforms such as Instagram, Tik Tok & YouTube allow people to get real insight into a place through viewing pictures, videos and reviews.

For example, many travel enthusiasts will often choose to visit Dubai over Almaty due to it being more expensive but appearing frequently on social media. This is because people will view images of tall skyscrapers, luxurious hotel and exciting activities. Many people would choose to visit Dubai rather than Almaty. This is due to the city itself being portrayed frequently on social media and therefore creating an attraction. This can be supported by research. According to "Players Time" list of the most Instagrammable spots in the world in 2026 Dubai is ranked as the number 1 spot. It has over 190 million publications on Instagram and Tik Tok combined. (North Africa Post, 2026)

Many people visit Istanbul and like to try the San Sebastian cheesecake in the area around the Galata Tower. In 2022, a Spanish newspaper called El Pais reported that the dessert, originally from the Basque region in Spain, has created a social media phenomenon in Turkey. (Cumhuriyet, 2022) Signs have been put up advertising the cheesecake and there are dozens of social media posts with the Galata Tower in the background. (Daily Sabah, n.d.) The Turkish food website reports that in recent years it has become synonymous with Galata. (Yemek.com, 2026) Therefore, food trends can be just as attractive as historical sites.

Uzbekistan has lots to offer. Samarkand, Bukhara & Khiva have a rich Silk Road history, beautiful Islamic architecture, crafts, bazaars and delicious food. Areas such as Registan Square & Shah-i-Zinda

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look amazing in photos and videos. However, does Uzbekistan make use of social media as effectively as other popular destinations?

This article will compare Uzbekistan to Turkey and Morocco. Turkey is highly prominent on social media. Morocco has a similar cultural reputation to Uzbekistan with lots of historic cities, markets and crafts.

Research Question: How is Uzbekistan portraying itself on Instagram, Tik Tok & YouTube compared to Turkey and Morocco and how can Uzbekistan improve its digital destination image?

2. Literature Review

Social media is a key part of tourism marketing. Previous studies have looked into the impact that social media has on destination image, decision making and marketing.

A study done by Hays, Page and Buhalis (2013) looked into how national tourism organisations use social media. It was found that social media provides opportunities for the organisations to connect with people globally. This is important for Uzbekistan as official tourism organisations can showcase their historical sites and traditions. (Hays et al., 2013)

Pan, Rasouli and Timmermans (2021) did a study looking into how destination images are formed by individuals within a social networking site. It was found that peoples opinions often change due to the posts of friends and other users. (Pan et al., 2021)

Influencers can play a big part in influencing their audience. Liu, Liu and Park (2026) found that tourism influencers can influence intentions to visit by creating trust. Tourism boards should ensure they work with creators that match their target audience. (Liu et al., 2026)

User generated content is also a factor. Oliveira, Araujo and Tam (2020) did a study to understand why people share their travel experiences online. The main reason given was enjoyment. However, there were concerns around privacy. (Oliveira et al., 2020)

Short video content is very popular. Zhou, Sotiriadis and Shen (2023) did a study into how young tourists use Tik Tok when deciding where to visit. Trust and entertainment were both important factors. (Zhou et al., 2023) Li and Rui (2025) also showed that short videos have an impact on travel intentions to cities. (Li & Rui, 2025)

There are several studies looking at the three countries in this article. Akyol and Arıca (2016) did a content analysis looking at photos posted by foreign users using the hashtag #turkeyholiday on Instagram. (Akyol & Arıca, 2016) Çelik, Yüzbaşıoğlu and Topsakal (2017) did a review of 1300 photos from the official Home Turkey account in Turkey. These were categorised into seven themes. (Çelik et al., 2017) El Bouchikhi (2023) did a study into six influential media accounts in Morocco. It was noted that Morocco use social media to promote their cultural heritage and natural beauty. However, there is little academic work looking into this. (El Bouchikhi, 2023) A study by Fayzullaev, Heldt Cassel and Brandt (2021) looked into how the image presented by the national tourism organisation compares to user generated content. It was found that both are dominated by heritage content and mentions of historic cultural traditions. (Fayzullaev et al., 2021) Eitzenberger and Thimm

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(2024) looked into how people who have never visited Uzbekistan view the country. It was concluded that having more informed marketing can help increase international tourists. (Eitzenberger & Thimm, 2024)

Mukhammadieva (2026) did a study into food travel vlogs on YouTube about Uzbekistan. It was argued that creators can influence the image of an emerging destination. (Mukhammadieva, 2026)

Most of these studies only look at one country or one platform. There is not much comparing Uzbekistan to other popular destinations and looking at multiple platforms. This article aims to address this.

3. Methodology

This is a qualitative and exploratory research. It has three sections:

1. **Literature review.** I looked at academic articles including destination marketing, destination image, user-generated content, influencers and short videos.
2. **Secondary data.** I used publicly available data around online visibility. This includes the 2026 Players Time ranking of Instagrammable locations (as reported in the North Africa Post) and the number of Instagram users in Uzbekistan (NapoleonCat 2026). There were also news articles around tourism campaigns and the Galata cheesecake trend.
3. **Comparison.** I have compared Uzbekistan, Turkey and Morocco looking at their image, content types and user/influencer relationships. Short examples have been provided around Dubai and Istanbul's cheesecake trend showing how online visibility can influence choices.

There are limitations to this research. I did not collect any primary data such as a survey. The data around the rankings were from an analytics company which was not part of the original research and was taken from a news article. The social media data is constantly changing. The data sources did not provide any data around specific locations in Uzbekistan such as Registan Square so it is not possible to directly compare these locations numerically to Dubai or Chefchaouen.

4. Findings

4.1 Uneven online presence

Table 1 shows statistics from the Players Time ranking (North Africa Post, 2026). Although the places are not evenly represented due to Dubai being an entire city and Jemaa el-Fna being one specific landmark, this demonstrates how large the differences in online presence can be.

Place	Instagram and Tik Tok Content	Monthly Google Searches
Dubai (UAE)	More than 190 million publications (Instagram and Tik Tok combined)	3.43 million
Chefchaouen (Morocco)	More than 1.1 million Instagram publications and about 95,000 Tik Tok pieces	More than 156,000
Jemaa el-Fna, Marrakech	Close to 15,000 Instagram publications	More than 5,200

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Place	Instagram and Tik Tok Content	Monthly Google Searches
(Morocco)		

Table 1: Online presence of select locations (source: North Africa Post, 2026).

This shows how small towns can gain substantial online visibility if they have a photogenic aesthetic. Chefchaouen is now referenced as a case study with regards to destination branding due to its beautiful blue streets and location in the mountains (North Africa Post, 2026).

4.2 Turkey

Turkey has a well-structured social media presence via its official page. It has a clear structure with the images shared by their official page falling into 7 distinct themes based on the Home Turkey study (Çelik et al., 2017). User generated content is also popular with many photos using the hashtag #turkeyholiday (Akyol & Arıca, 2016). It also has strong food trends like the San Sebastian cheesecake near the Galata Tower helping to bring people in and generate new posts without them having to do anything themselves (Daily Sabah, n.d. & Yemek.com, 2026).

4.3 Morocco

Morocco has a strong presence by promoting their culture and natural beauty. Both official and private accounts are used to promote the country (El Bouchikhi, 2023). Locations like Chefchaouen are easily identifiable in photos helping them to go viral on Instagram and Tik Tok (North Africa Post, 2026).

4.4 Uzbekistan

Research shows that Uzbekistan has a strong online presence with a focus on their heritage and Silk Road (Fayzullaev et al., 2021). They have a large target audience with around 16.6 million Instagram users in September 2026 making up 47.1% of the population (NapoleonCat, 2026). Their largest age group was 25-34. They have also worked with influencers with around 100 bloggers being invited to visit Khiva, Bukhara and Samarkand in August 2019 by the State Committee for Tourism Development (Kun.uz, 2019). At this time a tourism adviser commented to RFE/RL that "One of the problems in the industry is the lack of quality content about Uzbekistan" (RFE/RL, 2019). I couldn't find any more recent data to show how this has changed.

4.5 Influence from Peers

There is agreement within the literature that peer reviews and trusted creators help to increase trust (Oliveira et al., 2020 & Liu et al., 2026). A high volume of views may not always result in a true impact so authentic content and correct audience is vital.

5. Discussion

From this comparison it has been identified that Uzbekistan should not aim to be a luxury city like Dubai. They can look to implement successful strategies used by Turkey and Morocco, such as clear imagery, local cuisine, markets and authentic experiences to build their image. As they have a strong image of being a heritage country (Fayzullaev et al., 2021), they need to ensure it is visible to the younger generation.

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The following ideas can be taken from the literature and comparison:

- Create more short films showing the architecture, plov, crafts and bazaars of Samarkand (Zhou et al., 2023; Li & Rui, 2025).
- Encourage tourists to share by using official hashtags and photo competitions (Oliveira et al., 2020).
- Collaborate with influencers that are appropriate for cultural tourism and have a credible audience (Liu et al., 2026).
- Use multiple platforms to engage with different audiences. For example, using YouTube to create food vlogging content to showcase Uzbek cuisine in more depth (Mukhammadieva, 2026).

The cheesecake trend in Istanbul has shown that having a small, easy to photograph experience can attract tourists. The same can be done in Uzbekistan by creating photo opportunities relating to their food and crafts. This could include taking photos of plov, tandoor bread or ceramics workshops.

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