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Abstract. Digital platforms are reshaping the communication structures and benefit distribution of cultural heritage tourism, yet their implications for inclusive growth remain underexamined. Using Samarkand as a case study, this paper develops a "symbiotic development" framework to assess platformization's effects on tourism inclusivity across cultural, economic, social, and governance dimensions. Based on observation of 150 high-engagement Instagram posts under #Samarkand (October 2025–April 2026), alongside UNESCO reports and Uzbek policy documents, the study finds that while platforms enhance international visibility, they also concentrate traffic, revenues, and narrative authority among commercial actors and core sites—local residents account for only 8% of content production. The paper argues that digital heritage governance must move beyond technical management toward community empowerment, revenue feedback mechanisms, and multi-actor collaboration to achieve symbiotic development in cultural heritage tourism.

Keywords: digital heritage governance; inclusive growth; cultural heritage tourism; Samarkand; platform-mediated tourism; symbiotic development.

Annotatsiya. Raqamli platformalar madaniy meros turizmining kommunikatsiya tuzilmalari va foyda taqsimotini tubdan o'zgartirmoqda, biroq ularning inklyuziv o'sishga ta'siri hali yetarlicha o'rganilmagan. Ushbu maqola Samarqandni misol sifatida olib, "simbiyotik rivojlanish" konseptual modelini ishlab chiqadi va platformalashtirishning turizm inklyuzivligiga ta'sirini madaniy, iqtisodiy, ijtimoiy va boshqaruv jihatlarini bo'yicha baholaydi. 2025-yil oktabridan 2026-yil aprelegacha bo'lgan davrda Instagram'dagi #Samarqand tegi ostidagi 150 ta yuqori interaktiv postlarni kuzatish, shuningdek, UNESCO hisobotlari va O'zbekiston siyosat hujjatlariga tayangan holda, tadqiqot shuni ko'rsatadiki, platformalar xalqaro ko'rinishni oshirsa-da, ular trafik, daromadlar va hikoya qilish vakolatini tijorat subyektlari va markaziy obidalar atrofida jamlaydi – mahalliy aholi kontent ishlab chiqarishning atigi 8 foizini tashkil qiladi. Maqolada raqamli meros boshqaruvi texnik boshqaruv doirasidan chiqib, jamoatchilikni raqamli imkoniyatlar bilan ta'minlash, daromadlarni qayta taqsimlash mexanizmlari va ko'p tomonli hamkorlikka yo'naltirilishi kerak, deb hisoblaydi.

Kalit so'zlar: raqamli meros boshqaruvi; inklyuziv o'sish; madaniy meros turizmi; Samarqand; platformalashtirilgan turizm; simbiyotik rivojlanish.

Аннотация. Цифровые платформы кардинально трансформируют коммуникационные структуры и распределение доходов в культурно-историческом туризме, однако их влияние на инклюзивный рост остаётся недостаточно изученным. В данной статье на примере Самарканда разрабатывается концептуальная модель «симбиотического развития», позволяющая оценить воздействие платформизации на инклюзивность туризма по четырём измерениям: культурному, экономическому, социальному и управленческому. На основе наблюдения за 150 постами с высокой вовлечённостью под хештегом #Самарканд в Instagram (октябрь 2025 – апрель 2026), а также анализа отчётов ЮНЕСКО и программных документов Узбекистана, исследование показывает, что платформы повышают международную узнаваемость объекта, но при этом концентрируют трафик, доходы и нарративную власть вокруг коммерческих акторов и центральных памятников – на долю местных жителей приходится лишь 8% производства контента. Авторы утверждают, что управление цифровым наследием должно выходить за рамки технического администрирования и быть направлено на цифровое расширение прав и возможностей сообществ, механизмы обратного распределения доходов и многостороннее сотрудничество.

Ключевые слова: управление цифровым наследием; инклюзивный рост; культурно-исторический туризм; Самарканд; платформизированный туризм; симбиотическое развитие.





INTRODUCTION

In recent years, digitalization has emerged as a major force shaping the development of cultural heritage tourism globally. From online travel platforms to short-form video dissemination and smart tourism systems, digital technologies have profoundly altered the information architectures, consumption patterns, and governance practices of cultural heritage tourism (Gretzel et al., 2015; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). At World Heritage sites in particular, digital platforms are not only transforming how visitors access information but are also reconfiguring the dynamics of cultural representation, spatial organization, and tourism revenue distribution.

Samarkand, a historic city of major significance along the ancient Silk Road, was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2001 under cultural criteria (i), (ii), and (iv) (UNESCO, 2001). In recent years, driven by Uzbekistan's tourism liberalization policies, Samarkand's international tourism profile has grown notably. According to the tourism development strategy signed by the President of Uzbekistan, the sector's contribution to GDP is targeted to rise from 3.5% to 7% by 2030¹, with annual foreign tourist arrivals projected to increase from 10 million to 20 million (Kursiv Media, 2025). Concurrently, digital platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok have become key channels through which tourists access destination information. The high-frequency circulation of core heritage sites like Registan Square and the Shah-i-Zinda necropolis on these platforms has further reinforced Samarkand's international cultural tourism image.

Yet digitalization does not automatically translate into inclusive growth. The World Bank (2009) defines inclusive growth as a process in which the benefits of economic expansion are broadly shared across social groups, emphasizing equitable participation and distribution. Applied to cultural heritage tourism, this means that local community members, cultural heritage bearers, and small-scale operators should genuinely participate in both the economic returns and the cultural communication process. However, existing research suggests that platform algorithms and traffic structures can concentrate tourism revenues, cultural expression rights, and market opportunities among a small number of dominant actors (Srnicsek, 2017), leaving some community residents and small operators marginalized in the digital tourism economy due to limited digital capabilities.

Zhang Chaozhi (2026), in a systematic analysis of heritage tourism governance in the digital age, observes that digital technologies are fundamentally restructuring the landscape of heritage interpretation authority. The traditional model of centralized control is no longer tenable, and heritage site managers must transition from being "the sole interpreters" to becoming "aggregators and mediators of interpretive activities".

¹ Presidential Resolution No. RP-348 on the establishment of the Tourism Committee and the tourism development objectives through 2030.





This transformation raises not merely technical questions but deeper governance concerns: who has the authority to narrate history, and who can legitimately participate in heritage interpretation? Yet existing scholarship has largely focused on the application effects of digital technologies or single-dimensional governance challenges. There remains limited research on how digital heritage governance shapes inclusive growth, particularly in Central Asian heritage contexts.

Against this backdrop, this paper takes the Samarkand World Heritage Site as a case study, integrates sustainability theory and inclusive growth theory, and constructs a "symbiotic development" analytical framework to investigate the structural challenges and governance pathways of cultural heritage tourism in the context of digitalization. The paper addresses three main questions: (1) How are digital platforms reshaping the spatial and benefit distribution structures of cultural heritage tourism in Samarkand? (2) In what specific dimensions does inclusive imbalance manifest in the digitalized cultural heritage tourism context? (3) How can digital heritage governance optimize the symbiotic development structure of cultural heritage tourism?

LITERATURE REVIEW

1 Sustainability and Inclusive Growth.

Sustainability theory emphasizes the coordinated relationship between economic, social, and environmental dimensions. In the cultural heritage tourism domain, UNESCO (2017) has stressed that tourism development must attend not only to economic returns but also to cultural preservation and community sustainability. This implies that tourism development cannot come at the cost of eroding cultural authenticity or destabilizing social structures.

Inclusive growth theory further highlights the equitable sharing of economic gains. The World Bank (2009) contends that the core concern of inclusive growth is not the rate of growth per se, but rather the opportunities available to different social groups to participate in and benefit from the growth process. In cultural heritage tourism, inclusive growth means that tourism revenues should not be concentrated among a few stakeholders but should be distributed more fairly among community residents, local operators, and external investors (Murphy, 1985).

Traditional tourism growth models have tended to prioritize visitor numbers and tourism income, while paying insufficient attention to community participation, cultural representation, and distributional fairness (Smith, 2015). With the rise of the platform economy, digital platforms have gradually become key actors in allocating tourism resources. Digital traffic and platform visibility increasingly shape access to tourism revenues, meaning that inclusive growth in the digital context is not only an economic issue but also increasingly a digital governance issue.

2. Digital Heritage Governance and Platform-Mediated Tourism.





Digital platforms have become central channels for the dissemination of cultural heritage tourism in recent years. Gretzel et al. (2015) observed that smart tourism and digital platforms are transforming tourism information flows and visitor behavior patterns. Xiang and Gretzel (2010) provided empirical evidence that social media has become the primary source of travel information for tourists, surpassing the influence of official websites.

Meanwhile, platform economy scholarship offers critical perspectives. Srnicek (2017) argues that digital platforms are not just technological tools but new structures of resource allocation and capital accumulation. Platform algorithms, digital traffic flows, and visual communication logics are reshaping tourism spatial configurations and cultural representation—sites and commercial actors that gain platform visibility attract more visitor attention and economic returns, while those lacking digital communication capacity may face gradual marginalization.

In cultural heritage tourism, Richards (2018) observed that platform-mediated communication tends to reinforce a "spectacularization" tendency, whereby cultural heritage is increasingly transformed into an object of visual consumption, while the digital visibility of everyday community cultural practices remains comparatively limited. This assessment resonates with Zhang Chaozhi's (2026) discussion of the risk of "shallowing" in heritage interpretation.

3. Symbiotic Development Perspective.

Symbiosis theory, originating in ecology, emphasizes the mutually sustaining relationships among different organisms. In recent years, this perspective has been introduced into tourism research to examine the coordination among cultural preservation, tourism development, and community interests.

This paper conceptualizes the symbiotic structure of cultural heritage tourism along four dimensions:

- Cultural symbiosis: The coordination between cultural preservation and tourism development, centered on the maintenance of heritage authenticity.
- Economic symbiosis: The sharing of tourism revenues among different stakeholders, centered on distributional fairness.
- Social symbiosis: Community participation and social equity, centered on opportunities for involvement.
- Governance symbiosis: Collaborative governance among government, platforms, and communities, centered on participation in decision-making.

The core theoretical premise of this paper is that the inclusive challenges of cultural heritage tourism under digitalization are, in essence, issues of symbiotic imbalance. While digital platforms enhance the international communication capacity of cultural heritage, the absence of effective governance mechanisms may reinforce the concentration of digital traffic, imbalances in cultural representation, and insufficient community engagement. To systematically address these imbalances, this paper constructs a four-dimensional 'Symbiotic Development' framework (Figure 1), which emphasizes the equilibrium between heritage preservation and digital inclusive growth.



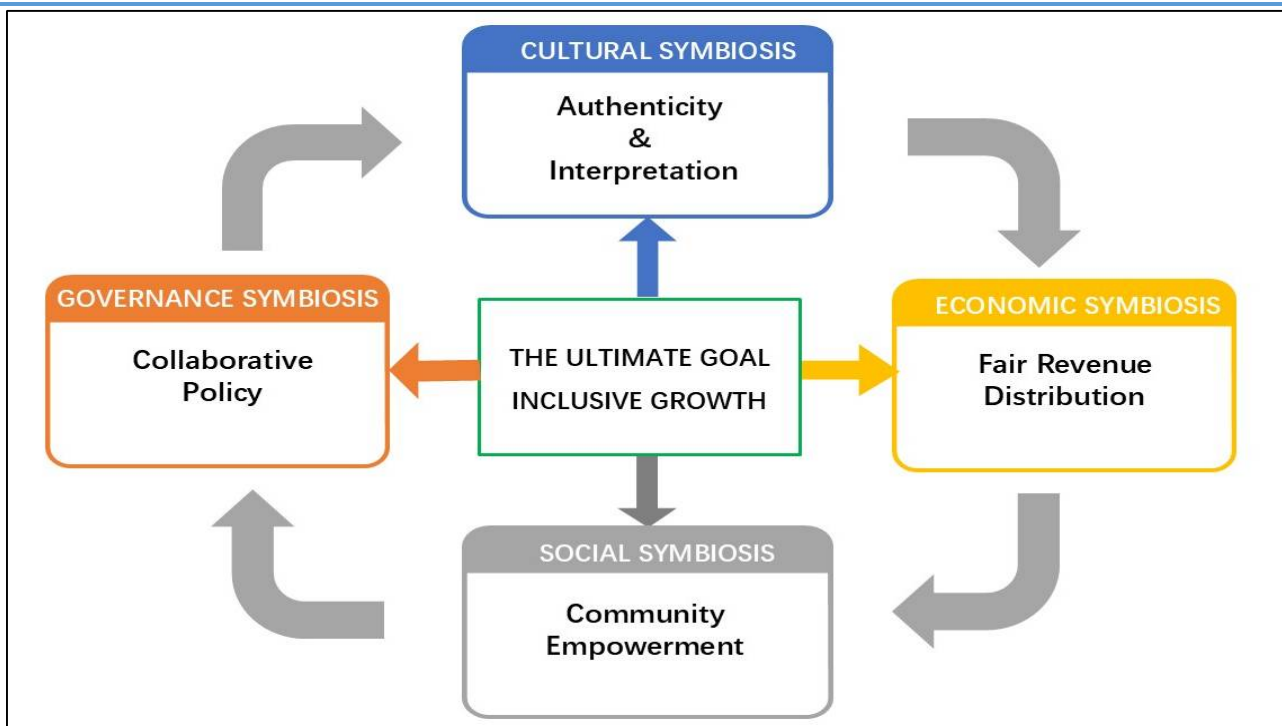


Figure 1. The Symbiotic Development Framework for Digital Heritage Tourism Governance

METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts an exploratory case study approach, taking the Samarkand World Heritage Site as its research object. The selection of Samarkand was motivated by several considerations: (1) its international renown as a core Silk Road heritage site; (2) the recent rapid advancement of Uzbekistan's tourism digitalization policies; (3) the persistent tensions between heritage preservation and tourism development reflected in UNESCO state of conservation reports; and (4) the accessibility of publicly available information.

Given objective constraints in accessing Uzbekistan's micro-level tourism statistics, community survey data, and platform internal data, this paper does not employ the causal identification methods of econometrics but instead adopts a combination of case study and exploratory analysis.

Data for this paper were drawn from three types of sources:

First, international organization and government documents:

- UNESCO World Heritage Centre state of conservation reports on Samarkand (2001 nomination file, 2016, 2020, and 2024–2025 advisory mission reports)
- Policy information on Uzbekistan's tourism development (based on 2025 reporting by Kursiv Media)
- Information on the trilateral cooperation agreement among Samarkand, Gulangyu, and Beiting Old City (Guo, 2025)

Second, publicly accessible digital platform content:

- Platform observed: Instagram
- Observation period: October 2025 to April 2026
- Sample: 150 top posts sorted by engagement under the hashtags





#Samarkand and #Самарканд

- Analytical dimensions: poster type (official accounts/influencer KOLs/local residents/ordinary tourists), content theme (historical interpretation/consumption-oriented display/everyday life), and authenticity labeling

Third, academic literature: Domestic and international research on tourism digitalization, inclusive growth, and heritage governance.

This paper employs a combination of textual analysis and thematic synthesis. For UNESCO documents and policy information, policy text analysis was used to extract statements relevant to digitalization, tourism development, and community participation. For digital platform content, content observation was used to record distributions of narrative agent types, content orientations, and labeling practices. Given the exploratory nature of this study, the analytical approach is primarily qualitative and inductive, supplemented by basic frequency counts (e.g., proportions of different poster categories), without pursuing complex quantitative modeling.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Samarkand's digital transformation is embedded within Uzbekistan's national tourism development strategy. Under a presidential decree signed in 2025, Uzbekistan aims to increase tourism's GDP share to 7% by 2030, with tourism service exports exceeding USD 6 billion². To achieve this, the government plans to launch a "unified tourism platform" and mobile application integrating e-visas, transport booking, and guide services. Additionally, the Itchan-Kala inner city in Khiva is to be developed as the "world's first immersive smart museum-city," and Samarkand has been included in the "cultural heritage route" planning (Kursiv Media, 2025).

At the heritage preservation level, the UNESCO 2024–2025 joint advisory mission report confirmed that the key tangible and intangible attributes of Samarkand's Outstanding Universal Value remain "largely intact." However, the report also noted that the "Third Renaissance" urban renewal project—affecting core heritage areas including Shah-i-Zinda, Gur-Emir, and Registan—"could, if not properly managed and backed by rigorous evidentiary analysis, have significant impacts on the property." The report recommended the preparation of conservation plans for core heritage sites and the undertaking of heritage impact assessments (UNESCO, 2025).

In August 2025, Gulangyu (Fujian), Beiting Old City (Xinjiang), and Samarkand signed a trilateral World Heritage site cooperation agreement, committing to "in-depth collaboration in joint research, personnel exchanges, technology sharing, and cultural tourism linkage" (Guo, 2025). This framework provides a new channel for Samarkand to draw on international expertise in heritage digitalization.

² Presidential Resolution No. RP-348 on the establishment of the Tourism Committee and the tourism development objectives through 2030.





This policy background reveals the fundamental tension in Samarkand's heritage tourism digitalization: at the national level, there is strong impetus to leverage digital technology as a new engine for tourism growth, while international heritage preservation bodies remain cautious about the authenticity risks posed by large-scale urban renewal. It is within this tension that the inclusive governance dimension of digitalization becomes particularly consequential.

Observation of 150 high-engagement posts under the #Samarkand hashtag on Instagram reveals the following characteristics of Samarkand's international digital communication. Distribution of poster types: Among the 150 posts, influencer/KOL accounts published 78 posts, accounting for 52%; ordinary tourists published 42 posts, or 28%; official accounts (Uzbekistan Tourism Board, Samarkand site management authorities, etc.) published 18 posts, or 12%; and accounts identified as Samarkand local residents published 12 posts, or 8%.

This distribution suggests that while anyone can in principle publish content about Samarkand on social media, the dominant position in communication is held by influencers and commercial accounts with professional content production capabilities. The voices of local residents are relatively marginal in the competition for traffic.

Content theme orientation: Among the 150 posts, content centered on "check-in" style visual display accounted for approximately 65%; content emphasizing in-depth historical and cultural interpretation accounted for about 15%; and content showcasing everyday local life accounted for around 20%. This implies that, in international digital communication, Samarkand's cultural image is more often presented as a "visual spectacle" than as a "carrier of cultural memory."

Authenticity labeling: Only 4 posts (approximately 2.7%) explicitly indicated sources for information or images (e.g., citing historical photographs or archaeological reconstructions). The remaining posts included no source attribution. This finding is consistent with Zhang Chaozhi's (2026) observations regarding the risk to heritage "authenticity" in the digital age: when the public cannot assess the historical basis of what they see, the authority and credibility of heritage interpretation are undermined.

Table 1

**Distribution of Content Producers and Engagement
Patterns under #Samarkand**

Producer Type	Sample Size (N=150)	Percentage (%)	Engagement Level	Primary Content Focus
Influencers / KOLs	78	52%	Very High	Visual spectacle / "Check-in"
Ordinary Tourists	42	28%	Moderate	Travel logs / Personal record
Official Accounts	18	12%	High	Policy / Landmark promotion
Local Residents	12	8%	Low	Daily life / Local culture

Source: Author's observation of Instagram content (October 2025–April 2026).





There is a notable tension between the platform-mediated structure of tourism communication and communities' actual access to benefits. In Samarkand, large hotels, core heritage sites, and official tourism bodies tend to enjoy higher digital visibility and visitor conversion rates, while local small-scale operators, traditional artisans, and community cultural actors have comparatively limited digital presence.

Digital capacity disparities are a significant factor affecting community participation. Analysis of commercial promotional content within the Instagram posts shows that promotional posts by large hotels and travel agencies received an average of approximately 3,000–5,000 likes, while those by local artisans averaged fewer than 500 likes. This indicates that even when community actors are "present" on digital platforms, their limited capacity for traffic generation prevents them from converting digital visibility into tangible tourism revenues.

UNESCO state of conservation reports since 2020 have repeatedly highlighted preservation concerns regarding Samarkand's traditional neighborhoods (mahalla). The 2020 report noted that traditional residential areas face pressures from urban renewal, and that the value of community cultural heritage needs fuller recognition (UNESCO, 2020). The 2024–2025 report further recommended impact assessments for urban renewal projects (UNESCO, 2025). This preservation concern intersects with the community participation issues in digital governance: when communities face both physical-space preservation pressures and a lack of digital-space channels for expression, their status as cultural heritage subjects may be doubly undermined.

Drawing on the above findings, the four dimensions of Samarkand's cultural heritage tourism symbiosis can be assessed as follows:

Cultural symbiosis: Visual consumption logic dominates digital communication; cultural heritage is presented as a photo-worthy attraction rather than cultural memory. Approximately 65% of communication content prioritizes visual display, with only 15% devoted to in-depth historical interpretation. Public perceptions of cultural authenticity face challenges.

Economic symbiosis: Tourism revenues are concentrated around core heritage sites, large commercial actors, and operators with stronger digital capabilities. Community actors and traditional cultural practitioners have limited earning capacity in the digital tourism economy, reflected in the 8% share of local resident posts and the significantly lower engagement with their commercial content compared to major commercial actors.

Social symbiosis: Although community residents are key bearers of cultural heritage, their participation in digital communication and tourism governance remains limited. The preservation pressures on traditional communities highlighted in UNESCO reports have their counterpart in the digital sphere.

Governance symbiosis: Current digital tourism governance remains primarily state-led. Platform governance mechanisms (such as algorithm transparency and content moderation standards) and community coordination mechanisms are relatively underdeveloped. Uzbekistan's ongoing "unified





tourism platform" focuses primarily on service integration, with limited institutional design for community participation and inclusive growth.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this paper suggest that digitalization does not inherently lead to inclusive growth. While digital platforms enhance the international communication efficiency of cultural heritage tourism, the platform-mediated traffic allocation mechanisms do not automatically grant local communities equal discursive power and benefit-sharing opportunities.

This finding aligns with the core assessments of platform economy scholarship. Srnicek (2017) observed that the defining features of digital platforms—data extraction combined with network effects—naturally tend toward "winner-take-all" market structures. In cultural heritage tourism, this logic manifests as follows: core sites with high visual impact and commercial accounts with professional content production capacity are more likely to receive algorithmic recommendation, while community actors lacking digital operational capacity are disadvantaged in the competition for visibility.

Zhang Chaozhi (2026), in analyzing the impact of social media on heritage interpretation authority, argued that "the erosion of traditional authority may lead heritage interpretation toward shallowness and superficiality." The observational data from this study support this assessment: in Samarkand's digital communication, in-depth historical interpretation accounts for only 15%, while visually oriented consumption content constitutes 65%. When "influencers" replace scholars and community elders as the primary narrators, heritage's cultural depth indeed faces a risk of simplification.

The above findings pose new demands on digital heritage governance. If governance is confined to "how to apply digital technology" while neglecting "who uses the technology" and "who benefits from it," digitalization may unwittingly replicate or even amplify existing social inequalities.

This paper proposes that digital heritage governance needs to move from a purely technical orientation toward "symbiotic governance"—that is, establishing more balanced stakeholder relationships across the four dimensions of culture, economy, society, and governance. Specifically:

At the cultural symbiosis level, authenticity standards for digital content need to be established. The principle of "rigorous evidence-based analysis" emphasized in the UNESCO 2024–2025 report applies equally to digital communication. International experiences could be drawn upon to implement tiered labeling of digital content such as "archaeological reconstruction/artistic interpretation/fictional enhancement," helping the public develop a critical understanding of digital content.

At the economic symbiosis level, feedback mechanisms for digital revenues need to be explored. When digitalization brings increased tourism revenues, institutional arrangements should ensure community actors share in this growth.





For instance, official digital platforms could provide free or low-cost promotional channels for local small-scale operators.

At the social symbiosis level, community digital participation capacity should be enhanced. The trilateral cooperation agreement among Samarkand, Gulangyu, and Beiting Old City (Guo, 2025) provides a platform for technology sharing and personnel exchanges, through which community digital communication training could be conducted.

At the governance symbiosis level, collaborative mechanisms among government, platforms, and communities should be established. Uzbekistan's ongoing "unified tourism platform" could incorporate community participation modules at the design stage and establish communication channels with social media platforms for content moderation.

This study has three main limitations. Data limitations: Due to research constraints, primary survey data from Samarkand's local communities were not obtainable. The Instagram observation sample (150 posts), while indicative of basic trends, cannot fully represent the entirety of Samarkand's digital communication landscape. Methodological limitations: This paper is exploratory in nature; the findings identify trends and patterns but do not carry statistical inferential weight. Case limitations: The generalizability of findings from a single case is limited, and Samarkand, as a representative Central Asian heritage site, has its own specificities.

Future research could proceed along three directions. First, conducting community questionnaire surveys and in-depth interviews in Samarkand to directly understand local residents' perceptions of digitalization, willingness to participate, and benefit experiences. Second, extending the study to other Uzbekistani heritage sites such as Bukhara and Khiva for comparative case analysis. Third, developing a quantitative assessment framework for "inclusive digitalization," operationalizing the conceptual framework of this paper into measurable instruments.

CONCLUSION

Taking the Samarkand World Heritage Site as a case study, this paper has examined inclusive growth in cultural heritage tourism from the perspective of digital heritage governance. Based on observational data from 150 Instagram posts during October 2025 to April 2026, combined with UNESCO state of conservation reports and Uzbekistani policy documents, the study arrives at the following main findings.

First, while digital platforms have enhanced the international communication capacity of Samarkand's cultural heritage, they have also exhibited a marked tendency toward platform-mediated concentration. In the observed sample, influencer/KOL accounts accounted for 52%, while local residents comprised only 8%; visual consumption-oriented content accounted for 65%, while in-depth historical interpretation comprised only 15%.





Second, the inclusive imbalances in the digitalized context manifest across the four symbiotic dimensions of culture, economy, society, and governance. Cultural authenticity faces challenges from visual consumption logic; tourism revenues concentrate around core heritage sites and large commercial actors; community visibility and participation in digital communication are limited; and governance remains predominantly state-led.

Third, digital heritage governance needs to shift from technical governance toward symbiotic governance. Future governance optimization directions include: establishing authenticity labeling mechanisms for digital content, exploring community feedback pathways for digital tourism revenues, enhancing community digital participation through technology sharing and personnel training, and incorporating community participation modules into the unified tourism platform development.

The theoretical contributions of this paper are: introducing the "inclusive growth" perspective into heritage digitalization governance research, identifying the relatively overlooked issues of community participation, benefit distribution, and cultural expression rights in the platform-mediated context, and constructing a four-dimensional "symbiotic development" analytical framework. The practical significance lies in providing a reference framework for digital governance applicable to Samarkand and other Silk Road heritage sites.

Owing to data constraints, this paper is exploratory in nature, and its conclusions await further empirical testing. However, the trends and issues identified—traffic concentration in digital platforms, the marginalization of community voices, and challenges to cultural authenticity—are not unique to Samarkand but represent governance challenges commonly faced by heritage sites globally in their digital transformation.

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