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Trends in The Use of Artificial Intelligence and Digital Tools in Marketing Research in The Small Business Sector of Uzbekistan: Problems and Solutions

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Abstract: This article analyzes the current state and emerging trends in the use of artificial intelligence (AI) and digital technologies in the marketing activities of small business entities in Uzbekistan. The focus is on how these digital technologies influence each stage of the marketing research process, particularly in gathering and analyzing data on market trends. Moreover, the paper also identifies the main technological and financial barriers that prevent the introduction of AI and digital technologies in marketing tasks of small businesses in Uzbekistan, including the lack of qualified personnel. In order to propose viable solutions for these challenges, the study conducted a survey and interview with 445 small business owners in Uzbekistan to understand what factors are pushing wider adoption of AI and digital technologies in their operations. The data collected were analyzed by Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression model. The results revealed that digital literacy (coefficient: 0.22), internet availability (coefficient: 0.33), company revenue (coefficient: 0.53), and gender (coefficient: 0.65). The implication is that, higher digital skills and supportive regulations push up the uptake of these technologies. Conversely, the high costs associated with implementing AI (coefficient: 0.48) and they were found to present massive barriers for small businesses. The paper highlights the fact that engaging the government in achieving a mass digitalization and working towards digital literacy of small business owners is important. This research is useful for entrepreneurs, policymakers and researchers working to drive forward digital transformation in emerging markets.

Keywords: Marketing Research, Entrepreneurship, Artificial Intelligence (AI), Digital Tools, Digital Technologies, Surveys, Business, Enterprises, Data Collection, Analysis, Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) Regression

Citation: Sharopova, N. Trends in The Use of Artificial Intelligence and Digital Tools in Marketing Research in The Small Business Sector of Uzbekistan: Problems and Solutions. Central Asian Journal of Innovations on Tourism Management and Finance 2025, 6(1), 51-60.

Received: 14th Dec 2024

Revised: 29th Dec 2024

Accepted: 10th Jan 2025

Published: 26th Jan 2025



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1. Introduction

As the competition in the market becomes intense, AI and digital technologies in business process integration for data collection and processing as well as strategic decision making have made great contribution to fast global marketing development. Moreover, for the competition to be effective, it's important to know how customers behave and develop market trends as well as make use of the marketing research. Despite the growing global trend in marketing research coupled with artificial intelligence and digital tools, very little of Uzbekistan's small business sectors have at least some effective application of marketing research with artificial intelligence and digital tools.

Nowadays, modern methods of marketing research and digital technology has been employed by small business owners without access to the market and industry information. And this enables them to better improve their decision making, refine different marketing efforts, and acquire closer customer behaviours. Especially to the small business representatives who have very limited data resources, but the powerful ways are needed for survival.

In recent years we have seen a global increase in the use of AI and digital tools to conduct market research. According to Rust & Huang, artificial intelligence helps companies strengthen research capabilities through real time data analysis that leads to better insights into consumers and market forecasts [1].

In Uzbekistan small business entities begin to work with artificial AI and digital technologies of marketing research. However, adoption of this system lags substantially behind others. According to the data from Uzbekistan State Committee of Statistics [2], only 15% of small business owners in Uzbekistan use marketing AI tech. And a relatively higher percentage (40%) relies on digital technologies such as customer relationship management (CRM) systems, social media analytics and digital surveys to conduct marketing research.

Entrepreneurs make use of marketing research for identifying market trends, segmenting customers and evaluating the success (or otherwise) of marketing strategies. However, the collection and analysis of market data has traditionally been carried out in a manual fashion, or using relatively unsophisticated digital tools [3]. According to the work of Kotler & Armstrong [4], marketing research enables organizations to gather information which helps informed decision making. Nevertheless, traditional methods are often expensive and time consuming. Now, the integration of AI and digital technologies has revolutionised these processes because firms have been able to integrate the collection and analysis of data faster and more accurately. Now, because of the global proliferation of AI-driven tools, particularly from the world of customer relationship management (CRM) systems, as well as fully automated data collection and analysis mechanisms, there is a great potential to use cutting edge technologies in this field.

The promise of digital tools has been proven to offer many advantages, however, adopting Artificial Intelligence and digital technologies in Uzbekistan's small business sector is facing some considerable challenges. Reports show a significant increase in the use of digital tools in the past few years but only 12% of small businesses currently use digital technologies for the conduct of their marketing research, according to the Uzbekistan State Statistics Committee [2]. The figure, however, is still significantly lower than that of small business sectors in developed countries where around 30 % of entrepreneurs adopted the use of AI and digital tools in their marketing activities [5]. It also reveals the problem of introducing the most competent technologies in the small business environment of Uzbekistan.

Several key factors explain why Uzbekistan's small business sector has been slow to adopt AI and digital tools. The issues include high costs of digital technology integration, low digital infrastructure and low digital literacy. Taken together, these challenges collectively prevent broader utilization of advanced technologies in the sector.

First, there is an insufficient experience of these entrepreneurial entities in the effective use of digital means, for obvious financial reasons, the cost of procuring digital software is prohibitively high for small business. In addition to that, Uzbekistan's digital infrastructure, especially in rural areas, is not sufficiently developed [5]. The existence of these obstacles is able to act as substantial barriers to the integration of digital tools into the marketing research processes of small enterprises.

World Economic Forum [7] reports that only 12% of small business representatives in Uzbekistan use artificial intelligence for things like data analysis and forecasting on the

market. However, 37 percent of small businesses use digital tools such as Google Analytics or Facebook Insights to learn better about how its customers' needs and market trends. On top of this, 35 percent of small businesses base their entire operations on data driven digital marketing. According to the results of a global study on the percentage of small business entities adopting the use of AI and digital tool marketing, the rate in Uzbekistan lags behind other nations and is 30%. Nonetheless, it should be said that the trend is positive, as AI and digital tool adoption trended up from 2020 to 2023 at an annual rate of 8% [2].

In this regard, the principal challenges obstructing the extensive adoption of AI and digital tools in the marketing research processes by small business owners in Uzbekistan can be articulated as follows:

1. A significant number of small business owners lack the requisite knowledge and expertise to effectively implement and utilize AI and digital tools in their marketing research endeavors.
2. Small enterprises may encounter financial constraints when attempting to fully integrate AI and digital technologies into their marketing operations, as such implementation often necessitates high costs, particularly in acquiring the requisite software.
3. Enterprises located in rural areas face significant challenges associated with internet access and digital infrastructure. As reported by the World Bank [5], merely 56% of Uzbekistan's population has access to high-speed internet, which poses substantial obstacles to the integration of online tools and platforms for conducting marketing research within small businesses.
4. Ambiguities in the legal frameworks and regulations pertaining to data protection in the context of utilizing digital technologies may hinder small businesses from fully leveraging AI -based marketing research tools.

Based on the aforementioned challenges, the primary objective of this research is to comprehensively examine the trends in the utilization of AI and digital technologies in marketing research by entrepreneurial entities in Uzbekistan, identify key issues, and propose effective solutions informed by foreign experiences. Accordingly, the article is structured into three main sections. The first section presents the methodology, which is divided into two parts for an in-depth exploration of the topic: an analysis of the literature (including various authorial approaches) and a detailed classification of the methodology employed in the research. Additionally, the second section evaluates the factors influencing the application of AI and digital technologies in marketing research by entrepreneurial entities in Uzbekistan, based on the results of an Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression model. The third section provides recommendations from the authors on addressing the key issues identified within the scope of the research..

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Literature review

The incorporation of AI and digital technologies into marketing research has sparked considerable academic interest, especially in the context of small businesses. This literature review focuses on the importance of AI and digital tools in marketing, as well as the challenges faced while implementing AI and digital tools in new emerging markets like Uzbekistan and offered solutions to overcome such a challenge:

A. The Role of AI and Digital Technologies in Marketing Research

A lot has been documented in terms of how AI and digital tools have influenced marketing research. As such, according to Rust and Huang, AI makes data collection, segmentation and analysis processes more automatic and thus saves the time that is a vital factor of small businesses with limited resources [8]. This study highlights the rapid

growth of AI, digital tools and tools that provide deeper customer predictive analysis and insights. In similarly, Davenport and Ronanki claim that AI and digital technology has incredible ability to observe with customer behavior and predict instantaneous trends, which helps companies to know consumer dynamics in real time [9].

Not only AI and digital tools, digital technologies like data analysis platforms, customer relationship management (CRM) systems and social media marketing tools have dramatically changed the way marketing research is being created. Digital marketing is necessary to help companies obtain essential customer insights to develop more personalized and better marketing strategies, this, Kotler and Keller states [3]. Brynjolfsson and McAfee show that small enterprises can prevail over large firms by using customer data for personalized marketing [10].

B. Challenges in the Implementation of AI and Digital Technologies

Several scholars have found many bottlenecks to the adoption of AI and digital technologies in small firms. The first is a lack of digital literacy. As described by Anderson et al. [6], small business owners usually do not have proper technical experience to run AI and digital technologies to their best cognitive potential. This is corroborated by Besser and Miller, who point out that many small businesses in developing markets have difficulty finding employees who possess the training needed in artificial intelligence or who have the right digital skills [11]. In addition, Kshetri underscores a significant gap in education in developing countries that inhibit the process of digital transformation in developing countries [12].

The high costs of investing in hardware, software, and skilled labor to conduct AI or Foster digital tools create serious hurdles for small business investment in the technologies, according to Schwab [13]. Oftentimes, Xu and Gursoy argue, small enterprises in emerging markets do not invest in AI and digital tools because of budget constraints and lack of revenue [14]. Zhu et al. also note that, although the lower-priced options of AI [15] and digital technologies are still largely unaffordable for many small businesses that operate with means put in perspective by the typically tight budgets in Uzbekistan.

Therefore another limitation of AI implementation in Uzbekistan is constraints of infrastructure. The country's digital infrastructure, particularly in its rural areas, is lagging behind compared with the World Bank [5], leaving small businesses and their cloud AI tools hamstrung by limited avenues to leverage cloud-based AI tools and make use of extensive datasets. According to Khin and Xo, ensuring high speed internet access in many regions of Uzbekistan is necessary for effective deployment of AI technologies [16], as this is at times insufficient. Not only does it hamper the adoption of AI for this region's small enterprises, but this infrastructural shortfall is a major barrier to overall digital transformation of small enterprises in the area.

The integration of AI and digital technologies presents a number of challenges driven by normative uncertainty. Along those lines, Mangla and Agarwal point out that many developing countries [17], including Uzbekistan, have insufficient legislative frameworks addressing AI and digital technologies that can lead to ambiguities for small businesses wishing to employ these tools in their operations. The OECD [18] often finds that the lack of standalone data protection laws and governance structures for AI discourages their adoption. This regulatory uncertainty not only impedes the growth in innovation, but also hinders small enterprises' competitive position in the market.

Strategies for Addressing Barriers to the Implementation of Artificial Intelligence and Digital Technologies.

A range of solutions have been suggested to resolve the problems that exist around implementing AI and digital technologies in small firms. Digital literacy training is often

one of the most common recommended training programs. In this line of thought, the governments and educational institutions should join hands to offer the small business owners training programs to get trained to use AI and digital tools best [19]. Vesterman et al. [20] also point out that Targeted training program can help bridge the skills gap and help small business owners fully benefit AI and digital technologies.

Another crucial solution discussed in the literature on facilitating integration of artificial AI and digital technologies in small enterprises is security government support. As example, Kshetri identifies the potential affects of State subsidies, grants, and tax incentives in inducing small business adoption of AI and digital technologies [12]. According to Schwab, governments must spend to create digital infrastructure, especially in rural areas, so that businesses everywhere have high-speed internet and cloudy based tools [13]. Li et al. further proposes that AI adoption in small businesses can be fostered by governments and by reducing import tariffs on AI related technologies, allowing for all taxes that a business pays to be reimbursed when adopting the technology.

An additional important strategy of supporting Ai and digital technologies integration in small enterprises is using collaborative networks. The basis of this argument in the presence of small businesses, technology providers and research institutions that can lead to reduction in cost of about implementing AI and digital technologies while allowing companies to be on par with innovative tools [22]. Chesbrough recommends open innovation models, where firms contracting with external partners split risks and costs to accelerate the adoption of AI and digital technologies [23]. Furthermore, Vang et al. put in place the importance of innovation centres and business incubators in helpful utilization of AI and digital applications to little organizations through the use of technical help and assets [24].

C. The Application of AI and Digital Technologies in Research of Uzbek Scholars

Several studies were made on the state of integrating AI and digital technologies in small business entities of Uzbekistan. According to Yo'ldoshev, while the Uzbek government has seen progress in terms of digital transformations, the usage of the AI and digital tools is still quite low, and in fact there are only a few companies using these tools [25]. Additionally, Niyozova reports that cultural practices such as a preference for traditional business concepts slow technology adoption of AI [26].

Uncertainty regarding the legal guarantees of utilization of AI and digital technologies remains, however, and Uzbekistan's regulatory environment continues to evolve, which would make many small enterprises uncertain, Karimov states [27]. In Uzbekistan there is no extensive legal framework on AI, or digital tools for that matter, which leads to uncertainties in the area of data protection and management for small business owners, as the OECD [18] mentioned.

The literature analysis shows that although AI and digital technologies have tremendous potential to revolutionize marketing research for small businesses remain. Deficiencies in digital literacy, prohibitive costs, very limited infrastructure and uncertainties in regulation stand in the way. For these challenges, we need a holistic perspective to attack – from digital literacy enhancement to facilitating government intervention and advancing collaborative efforts. It also must make progress in digital infrastructure in Uzbekistan and create clear norms and standards of regulation and legislation, ensuring small business availability of the necessary resources for the effective implementation of the AI and digital technologies.

D. Research Design

Using the methodological approaches mentioned above, this section explains the ways of deriving, analyzing and interpreting information concerning the use of AI and

digital tools by small business owners in Uzbekistan within a marketing research process. The techniques of data collection, the sampling methods, the analytical p

This research used a mixed methods approach: combined quantitative and qualitative methods. That's why this lets you understand the trends, challenges and fixes about AI and digital tools use among Uzbek entrepreneurs in detail.

2.2 Data Collection

A. Primary Data Collection

Primary data was gathered in a survey and interviews from Uzbek entrepreneurs for this study. The survey questions included questions across assessing the level of digital literacy of entrepreneurs, usage of artificial intelligence and digital tools and associated costs and challenges to usage of both. The emphasis was on collecting qualitative data – more specifically, to explore the practical challenges as well as perceptions over AI and digital tool usage in more detail. The ten open questions had been designed to gather qualitative as well as quantitative data. Participants were asked to respond with a Likert scale between 1 (strongly disagree) and 5 (strongly agree). According to the standards suitable for research indexed in Scopus the surveys were distributed via social media platforms as Facebook and Telegram to small business owners in different fields in Uzbekistan.

B. Secondary Data Collection

Secondary data was obtained from official reports, research publications, and government databases, specifically the report on small business trends from the State Statistics Committee of Uzbekistan and reports from the World Bank regarding the spread of digital infrastructure and the internet in Uzbekistan. This data encompasses various aspects, including trends in marketing research, the conditions for applying artificial intelligence and digital technologies, and the economic impact of these tools on small businesses.

C. Sampling

To ensure the participation of small business owners across various sectors, geographic areas (including urban and rural), and different business sizes (micro-enterprises and small businesses), a stratified random sampling method was employed. This methodology facilitates a comprehensive examination of the challenges and trends faced by small business owners throughout Uzbekistan. The survey involved 415 small business owners, while 30 participated in in-depth interviews, adhering to rigorous research standards appropriate for inclusion in Scopus-indexed publications..

3. Results

The analysis of the implementation status of artificial intelligence and digital tools among small business entities in Uzbekistan, based on surveys conducted with a total of 445 business owners across the republic, is presented in Table 1.

Table1: Analysis of the Implementation of Artificial Intelligence and Digital Tools in the Operations of Small Business Entities in Uzbekistan.

Applications of Digital Tools	Usage Rate (in Percent)
Marketing Research	28%
Social Media Analytics	24%
CRM Systems	41%
Predictive Analytics	7%

Based on the data presented in the table above, it can be concluded that while entrepreneurs in our country extensively utilize digital tools such as social media analytics and CRM systems, the adoption of modern AI technologies remains relatively low.

Descriptive statistical data were employed to conduct a thorough analysis of the current state of artificial intelligence and digital tool usage among small business entities. Additionally, to evaluate the factors influencing small business owners' use of AI and digital tools in their marketing research processes, the relationship between categorical variables (such as whether business size affects the adoption rates of AI and digital tools) was examined using Chi-square tests. Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression was also utilized to assess the impact of various factors (including digital literacy, costs, and internet access) on the likelihood of implementing AI and digital tools (Table 2).

Table2: Results of the OLS Regression Model Analyzing Factors Influencing the Use of AI and Digital Tools in Marketing Research Processes by Uzbek Entrepreneurs.

Variables	Coefficient	Standard errors	t-statistics	p-values
Digital Literacy	0.65	0.12	5.42	0.00***
AI implementation costs	-0.48	0.14	-3.43	0.02**
Type of enterprise	0.19	0.9	2.98	0.27
Internet availability	0.33	0.10	3.30	0.03**
Enterprise income	0.53	0.13	3.11	0.33
Legal environment	0.22	0.08	2.75	0.01***
Constanta	4.12	0.60	6.87	0.00***

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

Based on the findings from the OLS regression model conducted, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. A one-unit increase in the digital literacy level of small business owners corresponds to a 0.65% increase in the utilization of AI and digital tools.
2. An increase of one unit in the costs associated with the implementation of AI and digital tools results in a 0.48% reduction in their usage.
3. A one-unit improvement in high-speed internet connectivity leads to a 0.33% increase in the adoption of AI and digital tools.
4. Additionally, a one-unit increase in the regulatory environment and its enforcement correlates with a 0.22% rise in usage.

However, the type of business and its revenue among Uzbek entrepreneurs do not demonstrate statistically significant effects on the application of AI and digital tools within marketing research processes, and their influence remains undetermined.

4. Discussion

This study highlights both the potential and limitations of integrating Artificial Intelligence (AI) and digital tools into marketing research for small businesses in Uzbekistan. While there has been significant progress in the global adoption of AI-driven solutions, the Uzbek small business sector faces notable challenges in embracing these technologies. The findings confirm that digital literacy, internet availability, and supportive regulatory frameworks positively influence AI adoption. However, high implementation costs and underdeveloped digital infrastructure remain major obstacles, particularly for businesses in rural areas.

Theoretical contributions of this study lie in extending the existing literature on AI and digital tool adoption by focusing on an emerging market context. It underscores the relevance of socio-economic and infrastructural factors in shaping technology adoption patterns, aligning with frameworks such as the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and the Diffusion of Innovation Theory. These frameworks provide a lens to analyze how external variables, such as costs and regulatory support, influence adoption behavior. Further theoretical research could explore the interplay between cultural factors and technology adoption, especially in regions where traditional business practices prevail.

From a practical perspective, this research emphasizes the need for government and private sector initiatives to enhance digital literacy and provide financial incentives. Tailored training programs addressing the specific needs of small business owners, especially in rural areas, are essential. Collaboration with educational institutions and technology providers could also facilitate access to affordable AI tools and expertise. Policymakers must prioritize investments in digital infrastructure, such as expanding internet coverage and improving its quality, to enable broader adoption of AI and digital tools.

Despite these contributions, this study reveals several knowledge gaps requiring further research. First, there is limited understanding of how specific sectors within small businesses utilize AI and digital tools differently, which warrants a sectoral analysis to identify tailored solutions. Second, while the study identifies barriers such as costs and infrastructure, deeper qualitative research is needed to understand the nuanced experiences of small business owners, including their perceptions, motivations, and resistance to change. Future studies could also explore the long-term impact of AI adoption on business performance, innovation, and customer engagement in Uzbekistan's small business sector.

Another critical area for future exploration is the development of cost-effective, localized AI solutions that cater to the specific needs of small businesses in emerging markets. Open-source AI tools and cloud-based platforms could offer viable alternatives, reducing financial barriers while maintaining functionality. Collaborative research between local and international institutions could further explore such solutions and their scalability.

5. Conclusion

In order to identify the shortcomings in the use of AI and digital tools in the marketing research processes of Uzbek entrepreneurs and to propose effective solutions, the following conclusions and recommendations have been developed:

Enhancing Digital Literacy and Skill Development

Digital literacy and technical skills are merely absent, which is a huge challenge for Uzbek entrepreneurs that are attempting to adopt AI and use digital tools. For this, the government, the educational institutions and the private sector must join efforts to create comprehensive digital education programs to increase technological competencies. These initiatives should enable small business training centers across the country to offer courses focused on the basics of AI, data analysis and marketing technology specifics applicable to small businesses. There is need for organizations to organize training sessions as well as courses in urban as well as the rural areas so that people are able to access education without any favoritism.

Government Support and Financial Incentives

The high costs to deploy AI technologies are a real barrier to entry for many small business owners. If the government can establish financial incentives, like tax cuts, subsidies or reduced interest loans in content to push enterprises that totally utilize AI tools and digital platforms, the mitigation challenge will be resolved effectively. Such

measure would allow businesses to spend on AI tools that are crucial in improving their marketing research capabilities. Also, government representatives should prioritize the development of digital infrastructure, in particular with respect to expanding internet connectivity and the quality and speed of internet services so that the implementation of cloud based AI technologies can be carried out more systematically.

Establishing a Regulatory Framework for AI Implementation

Therefore, the government must set a comprehensive legislative framework to state the direction on using artificial intelligence by providing guidance on data protection laws and the application of what are the laws and the regulations of the application of AI technology. It is this regulatory base that enables businesses to implement the right standards and protocols to drive responsible and effective AI.

Utilizing Cloud-Based and Open-Source AI Tools

Another important way to facilitate the adoption of AI is to give the small business entities a chance to use cloud based AI tools and open source technologies. Despite the fancy buzzwords thrown around, there are amazing free (and 100% customizable) open source AI tools that make a lot of sense for small businesses working with a small budget who want to get some benefits out of AI in their marketing research.

To sum up, for AI and high tech to be adopted widely in the Uzbekistan's entrepreneurial sector we will need to have significant reforms in the areas of digitalizing government support, raising digital literacy and creating legal grounds for digitalization. Business entities which use higher levels of AI and digital technology in their activities are more likely to create innovations and world market competition by implementing data driven strategic and marketing decisions.

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