

ENHANCING MARKETING STRATEGIES FOR UGANDA'S TOURISM SECTOR



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PROFILE Immaculate Comfort Masika is a Library and Information scientist and Counsellor passionate about reading, and engaging in community development activities. She currently serves as Program Coordinator at Kasese Tourism Investors Forum (KTIF) which focuses at promoting tourism and providing community development services in Uganda hence fostering community growth and social impact. Masika holds a Bachelor degree in library and information science from Makerere University, a Certificate of Proficiency (COP) from Insurance Training Institute and she is currently pursuing Certification in Counseling. Her expertise spans program planning and coordination, public speaking and community counselling. Her background includes roles from other organizations like Prudential Assurance Uganda Limited and One stop Centre-Kasese Municipality where she executed number of duties thus expanding her working, communication and interpersonal skills. Masika is dedicated to creating inspirational narratives that promote hope and growth especially for women in suburban and rural communities.

Executive Summary

Well known as the Pearl of Africa, Uganda is endowed with world-class attractions ranging from gorilla trekking in Bwindi and adventure sports on the Nile to vibrant cultural festivals and UNESCO heritage sites. Despite this richness, the country has struggled to translate its natural and cultural assets into sustained tourism growth. Uganda's international visibility remains weak compared to regional competitors like Kenya, Rwanda and Tanzania, largely due to underfunded and fragmented marketing efforts. Past branding campaigns, including Gifted by Nature and Friend a Gorilla, generated publicity but collapsed due to lack of coordination, limited resources, and minimal stakeholder ownership.

The newly launched National Destination Marketing Strategy (2024–2029) by the Uganda Tourism Board (UTB) offers an opportunity to redefine the country's tourism identity and increase revenue. However, without substantial reforms in marketing approaches, investment in digital storytelling, and diversification beyond wildlife tourism, the strategy risks repeating the shortcomings of earlier initiatives. This brief analyses Uganda's marketing challenges and policy gaps and proposes concrete recommendations for strengthening UTB, broadening branding, and adopting innovative marketing tools to reposition Uganda as a premier African destination.

Introduction

Tourism is one of Uganda's most important economic sectors, contributing significantly to GDP, foreign exchange earnings, and rural livelihoods (Bugonga et al., 2022). With attractions such as gorilla trekking, the Rwenzori mountains, and cultural sites like the Kasubi Tombs, Uganda has the potential to become a leading destination in Africa (Krantz, 2020). Yet despite this strong endowment, the sector has remained underdeveloped. The core issue lies in weak, inconsistent, and poorly coordinated marketing, which has prevented Uganda from achieving visibility in global tourism markets (Otundo Richard, 2024).

Over the past two decades, Uganda has attempted several branding campaigns to boost its image abroad. Gifted by Nature in 2005, Friend a Gorilla in 2009, and Seven Wonders in 2011 were designed to create strong destination identities (Tukamushaba, 2013). However, each of these initiatives failed to achieve sustainable results. Analysts point to chronic underfunding of the Uganda Tourism Board, which has long operated with marketing budgets far below international standards, making it impossible to sustain global advertising, attend travel fairs consistently, or build strong digital platforms (Daily Monitor, 2025). In many cases, the campaigns collapsed soon after launch, leaving little long-term impact.

At the same time, Uganda's reliance on gorilla and safari tourism has created a narrow branding focus. While gorilla trekking is a unique selling point, this singular narrative has overshadowed

other opportunities such as agro-tourism, cultural festivals, and adventure experiences in less visited regions (Spanaki, 2018). The result has been a concentration of tourist arrivals in southwestern Uganda, while large parts of the country remain excluded from tourism benefits. Negative publicity has further compounded the problem, as international media often highlight political instability, health crises, or governance challenges, which shape perceptions and discourage travel (Daily Monitor, 2025).

The Uganda Tourism Board has made attempts to reposition the country with the launch of the National Destination Marketing Strategy (2024–2029), which promises to increase revenue through sustainable tourism and diversification (UTB, 2025). However, like earlier efforts, the strategy faces risks of inadequate funding, weak coordination with private stakeholders, and limited adoption of modern marketing tools such as influencer campaigns and digital storytelling (Nile Post, 2025). Unless these structural weaknesses are addressed, Uganda will remain unable to fully leverage its tourism potential.

Policy Options

- Uganda already has in place a range of policies and programs intended to guide tourism promotion. The Uganda Tourism Policy (2014) set the foundation for sustainable tourism, emphasizing marketing as a strategic pillar. Similarly, the Tourism Development Master Plan (2014–2024) identified international visibility as a key driver of sector growth, calling for stronger branding and participation in global travel fairs. More recently, the Uganda Tourism Board launched the National Destination Marketing Strategy (2024–2029), which aims to increase revenue to US \$5 billion by 2029 through product diversification and regional equity (UTB, 2025).
- Despite these frameworks, significant gaps remain. The Uganda Tourism Policy and the Master Plan recognized marketing as a priority but failed to secure adequate funding to operationalize their ambitions (Mugarura et al., 2025). Without ring-fenced resources, most of the outlined activities were not implemented, and UTB remained financially constrained (Daily Monitor, 2025). The Master Plan also relied heavily on wildlife-based tourism and did not adequately develop strategies for promoting cultural, agro, or community-based tourism. The new Destination Marketing Strategy is more ambitious, but experts note

that it risks falling into the same trap if financial resources, institutional coordination, and innovative approaches are not prioritized (Nile Post, 2025).

- Furthermore, existing policies indicate limited use of modern marketing techniques. While global competitors invest heavily in influencer-driven campaigns, digital platforms, and familiarisation tours for travel agents and journalists, Uganda has yet to institutionalize such practices. A recent familiarisation tour for Turkish media influencers showed potential, but such initiatives remain one off rather than integrated into UTB's core programming (Krantz, 2020). Similarly, the digital presence of Uganda's tourism sector is weak, and negative narratives continue to dominate international perceptions due to the absence of counter-strategies (Akaranga, 2021).
- Uganda's tourism policies recognize the importance of marketing, but their implementation has been undermined by underfunding, over-reliance on limited branding, and lack of innovation. This analysis justifies the need for reforms that not only strengthen UTB's capacity but also diversify Uganda's branding and institutionalize innovative marketing practices to achieve sustainable tourism growth.

Policy Recommendations

- The Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development (MoFPED) should first increase investment in the Uganda Tourism Board and provide the financial and technical capacity necessary to implement the National Destination Marketing Strategy. This should be accompanied by stronger accountability mechanisms to ensure that funds are used efficiently.
- The Uganda Tourism Board (UTB) and Ministry of Tourism, Wildlife and Antiquities should diversify its tourism branding beyond gorilla trekking by integrating cultural festivals, adventure sports, and community-based tourism into national campaigns.
- Uganda Tourism Board should institutionalize familiarisation tours, influencer partnerships, and structured media engagements to increase visibility in target markets.
- Uganda should adopt robust digital storytelling strategies, including video marketing and virtual tours, to reshape its international image and counter negative publicity.

Conclusion

Uganda has the natural and cultural endowment to become a leading African destination, but its potential has long been undermined by weak and inconsistent marketing. Existing policies and plans such as the Tourism Policy, Tourism Development Master Plan, and the National Destination Marketing Strategy provide a framework, yet their effectiveness has been limited by underfunding, narrow branding, and lack of modern approaches. By reforming UTB, diversifying its tourism narrative, and embracing digital and innovative marketing tools, Uganda can reposition itself globally and ensure that tourism benefits are spread equitably across the country.

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