



Role of Digital Media in Promotion of Homestay Tourism: A Study on Mirik in Darjeeling District of West Bengal, India

Rajaul Karim

Department of Tourism Management, The University of Burdwan, Golapbag, West Bengal 713104, India

Corresponding Author's Email: rkarim@scholar.buruniv.ac.in

Abstract

Introduction: Tourism in North Bengal has a unique blend of nature and culture, which is evident in the picturesque locations and local hospitality by the local residents. Homestays not only provide lodging facilities but also provide a glimpse of local hospitality, culture, and cuisine through guest-host interactions. Through homestays, tourists come in close contact with the family members of the homestay owners and get an opportunity to share various diversities. These homestay owners are dependent on tourist inflows, which generate income for them. In contrast to hotels, homestays typically struggle with poor publicity and promotional issues as a result of limited knowledge, skill, and computerization. This study aims to understand the role of digital media in the promotion of homestays in Mirik by examining operators' demographic and operational profiles, their use of digital platforms and the impact of these tools on bookings and visibility. **Methods:** Descriptive and exploratory research design was employed. Data was collected through a structured questionnaire from homestay operators about their operational challenges and utilization of digital media to address several facets of demographics, operations and digital behavior. Further, regression analysis was conducted to investigate the connection between digital activities and booking performance. **Results:** Regression results confirmed a positive correlation between digital engagement and booking conversion rates. Challenges including limited digital marketing skills, lack of professional content and poor internet connectivity were found. Despite this, a majority expressed strong interest in digital training and acknowledged the potential of digital strategies to improve visibility and sustain business growth in rural destinations like Mirik. **Conclusion:** The study concludes that digital media platforms are an essential medium for the growth of homestays in destinations like Mirik; as such, the operators of homestays who are active in updating digital content, use various social media platforms and get more online inquiries are more likely to secure significant bookings through digital channels.

Keywords: Digital Media; Homestay Tourism; Mixed Methods; Tourism Promotion of Mirik

Introduction

Homestay is an evolving concept in the tourism industry and an important sector that serves as an alternative to hotel accommodation (Patwal *et al.*, 2023). As per a study made by Dar *et al.* (2024), homestays offer largely distinct services as compared to what hotels offer. Homestays are located from unknown hamlets to towns and even cities in various countries. Homestay tourism mainly deals with a type of tourism which involves tourists staying in the home of a host and enjoying the hospitality and food that the hosts offer in an unaltered way. A form of tourism where tourists spend time in the homes

of the hosts with their family members, which involves social and cultural interactions as well as visiting various destinations and gathering experiences (Government of West Bengal, Tourism Department, 2017).

These homestays, if marketed efficiently through digital platforms with skilled manpower would result in greater convenience for both tourists as well as hosts. The findings of Kapri and Sharma (2024) & Febdilan *et al.* (2024) support this, which suggest that digital channels play an important part in helping homestays reach visitors and in facilitating bookings, which increases convenience for tourists. It is implied that both parties benefit from increased convenience and efficiency when hosts make successful use of digital platforms. Mirik is a picture-perfect location in terms of tourism and tourism-related allied activities and homestays in Mirik offer not only accommodation but also a blend of homeliness and eco-friendly practices, which maintain a healthy guest-host relation. The popularity of Mirik began in the 1980s as a little hill resort at an elevation of 1,767 meters. Lake Samendu, a 1.25-kilometer-long lake, is the focal point of the small town. High forested slopes and tea gardens encircle the immaculate lake. For the tourists, boating facilities are available on the lake, which is an exciting pastime maintained by the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA). Besides the lake, Mirik also has cardamom farms, orange orchards and tea estates which are all well-known. A little footbridge in the shape of an arch that spans 80 feet is located on the lake and there is a floating fountain at the center of it. The various other prominent tourist attractions in the destination include (1) Kawayl Dara, famous for its fabulous view of plains as well as mountains; (2) Deosi Dara, famous for its observatory point and landscape view; (3) Rai-dhap, famous as a picnic spot; (4) orange orchards located about two km from Mirik, famous for beautiful orange plantations and well known in West Bengal; (5) Tea Estates—There are about eight tea gardens in Mirik, which are comprised of Gopaldhara Tea Garden, Ghayabaree Tea Garden, Millikthong Tea Garden, Okayti Tea Garden, Phuguri Tea Garden, Seeyok Tea Garden, Singbulli Tea Garden and Thurbo Tea Garden. These tea gardens also offer factory visits for the tourists with the permission of the manager for watching the various tea processing techniques as well as for tea tasting.

The tourism industry has witnessed a revolution with the emergence of digital media, which has made it possible for places to reach audiences throughout the globe that was previously unthinkable. Prior to the emergence of social media, prospective travelers had to solely rely on various promotional materials to find out about a place, but now social media provides the prospective tourists with direct access to factual and objective information about a destination's offerings (Kolb, 2017).

Digital channels are essential for marketing distinctive lodging options like homestays, which provide tourists with authentic and immersive experiences, especially in remote and lesser-known areas (Sari *et al.*, 2023). In areas like Mirik, a tranquil hill town in the state of West Bengal in India, homestays have grown in popularity among tourists looking for personalized and culturally immersive experiences.

In light of the potential tourism opportunities in Mirik, this study is significant in exploring the various roles digital media platforms may play in promoting and publicizing homestays in the area. It also aims to identify the challenges and opportunities involved, which, if addressed properly, could transform the destination into a hub for both homestay tourism and ecotourism with sustainable practices.

Literature Review

The impact of digital media platforms on homestay owners' businesses using primary survey data from six different states in India was examined by Suteeshna and Mukhopadhyay (2022) in their study. They further explored the current regulatory loopholes that could be addressed to encourage the homestay industry from a policy perspective. The findings led to the conclusion that encouraging homestays can help local residents realize their dreams of creating jobs and a means of subsistence, while also advancing sustainable tourism objectives and boosting traveler volume. Ramlan *et al.* (2023) observed in their study the relationship between the adoption of social media and homestay performance. Their findings showed that despite efforts from Kampungstay and the Homestay Association Malaysia, in collaboration with Tourism Malaysia, to develop an online platform to promote the program, the homestay program has limited resources for social media and a limited ability to recognize it. As such, the study's uniqueness will serve as a guide for upcoming investigations, offering empirical data for this

study and helping to craft the most successful homestay business plan. A study by Afren (2024) revealed the effects of digital marketing on tourism businesses, particularly in relation to social media. To obtain a deeper understanding of this effect, various sources were examined, including government papers, academic studies, industry reports and online platforms. The study further demonstrates that social media-based digital marketing is not only a conventional method but also an effective tool for travel agencies. Businesses may engage with visitors, share their experiences and forge closer ties by learning how people use social media and the internet. The results showed that social media and video marketing, which are forms of digital marketing significantly influence people's desire to travel. Chatterjee and Dsilva (2021) examined in their study the contribution of social media platforms to the promotion of environmentally friendly travel in the Indian states of Odisha and Assam. The research offered valuable understanding and connections between social media use and environmentally conscious travel, specifically with regard to economically disadvantaged areas. Two key conclusions on views toward social goals were womens' empowerment and poverty alleviation. A noteworthy finding of the study is that individuals who have never traveled before may not always choose sustainable tourism as their first option. It would therefore be more successful to market sustainable tourism to the upper and middle classes. The results further suggest that older adults use social media and the internet more than previous research suggests. However, more investigation and study are required to fully understand this connection. Van Nuenen and Scarles (2021) examined the simultaneous processes that various digital technologies facilitate in the tourism industry including increased familiarization, responsiveness and responsibility. The application of artificial intelligence in tourism and the methodological possibilities of digital technology for tourism research were also investigated.

Social media platforms, travel websites and messaging applications now play a central role in influencing tourist decision-making and shaping the visibility of local destinations (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2012; Leung *et al.*, 2013). For homestay operators, particularly in developing regions, digital tools enable direct communication with customers, promotion of unique offerings and management of customer feedback without intermediaries (Guttentag, 2015). Investigations made by Febdilan *et al.*, (2024) regarding the effect of online reservations on the number of people visiting the Kuta Mandalika, Central Lombok homestays. It is found that the Increased occupancy at the Mandalika Kuta homestay in Central Lombok can be attributed to the homestay manager's use of digital marketing techniques as well as online reservations. Using homestays in Beijing as the research object Liu *et al.* (2022) conducted a study that discusses the marketing innovation behavior of homestays after joining the platform using the case study technique. They also go over the prospective homestay marketing model's development path, which has important theoretical and practical implications for the innovation and enhancement of conventional homestay marketing.

Several studies have explored the role of digital media in enhancing tourism-related services in rural and semi-urban contexts. For instance, Sharma (2016) discussed how India's "Digital India" initiative has empowered small businesses in remote areas to adopt digital tools for economic growth. Similarly, Lama and Singh (2024) studied to understand the factors responsible for the success of homestays in the villages of Darjeeling Hills in West Bengal. However, these studies remain geographically limited and do not provide micro-level insights specific to smaller regions like Mirik.

Digital transformation has become a driving force in tourism marketing, particularly for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) such as homestays. With the proliferation of smartphones and internet access, digital platforms now offer low-cost tools for branding, bookings and guest interaction (Hudson & Thal, 2013). Platforms like Facebook, Instagram and Google My Business enable local tourism providers to showcase their offerings, collect reviews and interact with potential customers in real time (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). This aspect is particularly relevant for rural destinations, where traditional marketing avenues are often limited or inaccessible. To identify successful, cutting-edge development strategies for the promotion of tourism destinations, Lian (2023) elaborates on new media and tourism destination marketing, which also discusses the features of tourism marketing within the new media environment and the primary marketing forms of new media.

Research by Pantelidis (2010) found that online reviews and user-generated content significantly influence consumer choice in hospitality. Likewise, Banerjee and Chua (2016) emphasized that digital reputation management is essential for small hospitality businesses competing in the digital economy. Studies also show that customer engagement via social media directly contributes to perceived trustworthiness and can lead to increased bookings (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014).

Initiatives like Digital India and the development of rural tourism programs have helped digital tourism in India gain traction. Investigations have been done by Sutheeshna and Mukhopadhyay (2020) regarding how digital platforms have affected homestay owners' business operations in India. Their results draw the conclusion that homestays can fulfill the goals of creating jobs and a means of subsistence for the local population as well as achieving objectives of sustainable tourism while boosting India's tourism business as a whole.

As per the above literature review, it is observed that Mirik is not included in the current literature on digital marketing and tourism, despite its increasing importance as a homestay hub. Understanding how small-scale operators in emerging locations adjust to online platforms is becoming more and more crucial as digital dependence continues to increase in the wake of COVID-19.

Although, West Bengal has experienced growth in ecotourism, with Mirik emerging as a key hill destination, scarce empirical studies till date have specifically examined the use of digital media for homestay publicity in Mirik. This creates a research gap in understanding how local homestay operators in Mirik, many of whom lack formal training in digital platforms for marketing as well as bookings and the challenges they face in doing so may be addressed.

Objectives

- To understand the role of digital media platforms in enhancing the visibility and booking performance of homestay businesses in Mirik, a popular tourist destination in the Northern part of West Bengal, India.
- To identify the various challenges and opportunities involved in homestay tourism and its promotion.
- To suggest suitable recommendations to policy makers and stakeholders.

Methodology

Research Design

A descriptive and exploratory research design was used in this study to evaluate how digital media platforms contribute to the promotion of homestays in Mirik, West Bengal (Saunders *et al.*, 2019). The design was chosen to collect quantitative data as well as contextual insights from homestay operators about their operational challenges, utilization of digital media and publicity tactics. As the main method of gathering data, a structured questionnaire covering demographic information, operational history, digital behavior and impact perceptions was employed. The descriptive method made it possible to summarize important trends and regression analysis was employed to investigate the connections between booking performance and digital practices.

Sample, Sampling Technique and Study Area

The sample consisted of 25 homestay operators currently operating in the Mirik region. Respondents were selected using purposive sampling, targeting active owners who had at least some experience using digital platforms for promotion or booking management. This non-probability sampling method was appropriate for finding individuals with a wealth of information who might offer pertinent insights in line with the study's objectives (Etikan *et al.*, 2016). This sampling method was chosen due to the limited number of homestays in the area and the need to include participants with relevant digital engagement. The inclusion criteria ensured that the study focused on operators who were knowledgeable about digital issues and could offer constructive opinions and valuable insights regarding the research problem.

Mirik, being a highly popular tourist destination, is primarily used by most of the tourists as a day trip destination or stopover while returning from Darjeeling, where tourists prefer more to have activities like boat riding, horse riding, orange garden visits, etc., rather than overnight stays. Due to this reason, Mirik has been selected as the study area to understand the various roles the digital media platforms may play in the wide publicity of the homestays in the area as well as to find out challenges and opportunities involved with it so that the homestay operators may attract more tourists to their homestays.

Data Collection Instrument

A structured questionnaire was developed, consisting of both closed-ended and scaled questions. The questionnaire included the following sections:

- **Demographic Profile** (gender, age, education, income)
- **Operational Profile** (years of operation, capacity, monthly income)
- **Digital Media Usage** (platforms used, frequency of updates)
- **Perceived Impact** (inquiries, bookings, visibility)
- **Customer Engagement** (review practices, digital response behavior)
- **Barriers and Future Preparedness** (skill gaps, training needs)

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using IBM SPSS software. Using descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation), the respondents' digital behavior and demographic traits were compiled. A multiple linear regression analysis was then conducted to examine the relationship between digital practices and booking performance.

The dependent variable was the percentage of bookings made through digital media.

The independent variables are:

- Years of homestay operations,
- Number of digital platforms used (e.g., WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram),
- Frequency of social media updates (1 = Weekly, 2 = Monthly, 3 = Rarely),
- Percentage increase in booking inquiries (over the last two years),
- Importance of online reviews (on a 5-point Likert scale)
- Willingness to hire a digital/marketing expert (on a 5-point Likert scale).

The statistical analysis helped examine how factors such as update frequency, number of platforms used and increase in inquiries affected digital performance.

Role of the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India and Department of Tourism, Government of West Bengal

Role of the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India

The Government of India, Ministry of Tourism (2022), published a report on the National Digital Tourism Mission, which states that the Mission aims to fully leverage digitization in the tourism industry by facilitating the exchange of information and services among national and state tourism organizations, tourism service providers, destinations, products, experiences, and travelers.

Role of Department of Tourism, Government of West Bengal

The Department of Tourism, Government of West Bengal, framed the first West Bengal Homestay Tourism Policy in 2017 and revised it again in 2022. One of the objectives of the revised policy is to promote homestay tourism in West Bengal to contribute to employment generation and economic growth, as well as to encourage guest-host interactions.

Information about the publicity and promotion of district-wise registered homestays in West Bengal can be found on the official website of the Department of Tourism, Government of West Bengal.

Results

Tourist Arrivals in Mirik

Table 1: Data on Tourist Arrivals in Mirik

Sl. No.	Year	Domestic Tourist Arrivals	Growth in Domestic Tourist Arrivals	Percentage (%)	Foreign Tourist Arrivals	Growth in Foreign Tourist Arrivals	Percentage (%)
1	2019	8650	---	---	595	---	---
2	2020	2840	-5810	-67.16	275	-320	-53.78
3	2021	5346	2506	88.31	0	-275	-100
4	2022	58487	53141	994.03	1856	1856	---
5	2023 (Till August)	60931	2444	4.18	2336	480	25.87

Source: Department of Tourism, Govt. of West Bengal

Domestic and foreign tourist arrivals in Mirik are shown in Table 1 along with the growth. From the above table it is quite evident that Mirik experienced a high growth of domestic tourist arrivals as compared to foreign tourists for the years 2021, 2022, and 2023 (till August). Domestic tourist inflow has shown a negative growth in the year 2020, which is due to the COVID-19 pandemic period. Although foreign tourist arrivals have negative growth in the years 2020 and 2021 but it has shown positive growth for the years 2022 and 2023 (till August).

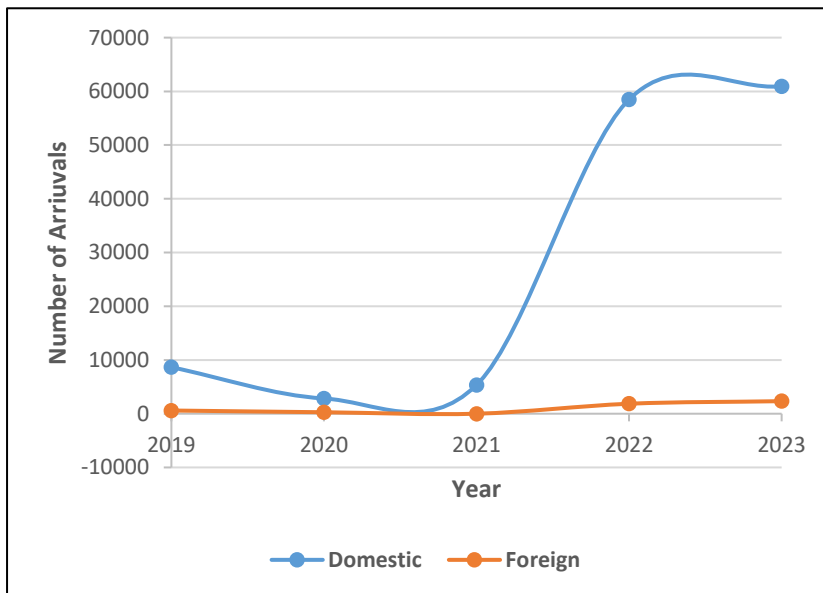


Figure 1: Line Graph showing Tourist Arrivals in Mirik

A graphical representation of the above-mentioned analysis is illustrated in Figure 1.

Demographic Profile of Homestay Operators

Table 2: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 25)

Variable	Category / Statistics	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	14	56.0%
	Male	11	44.0%
Age Group (years)	20–29	4	16.0%
	30–39	7	28.0%
	40–49	9	36.0%

	50 and above	5	20.0%
Education Level	Primary	3	12.0%
	Secondary	8	32.0%
	Graduate	11	44.0%
	Postgraduate	3	12.0%
Monthly Income (INR)	Less than ₹10,000	5	20.0%
	₹10,001 – ₹20,000	9	36.0%
	₹20,001 – ₹30,000	7	28.0%
	Above ₹30,000	4	16.0%

Table 2 reveals that female homestay operators (56%) outnumber male operators (44%), indicating a relatively strong representation of women in tourism entrepreneurship in Mirik. Age-wise, most owners fall between 30–49 years (64%), suggesting that mid-career individuals dominate this sector, likely due to accumulated experience and financial stability. Educational attainment is reasonably high, with 88% having at least a secondary-level education and 44% being graduates, which may contribute to their adaptability in using digital tools.

In terms of income, the majority earn ₹10,001–₹30,000 (64%) monthly from their homestay operations, reflecting a modest but stable income stream, which likely supports household needs but may not be sufficient for large-scale investments or expansions. This demographic context is important when evaluating their digital readiness and willingness to invest in online marketing.

Operational Profile

Table 3: Years of Operation of Homestays

Statistic	Value
Mean	6.2 years
Standard Deviation	3.5 years
Range	2 – 12 years

The mean years of operation among the surveyed homestays is 6.2 years (SD = 3.5), with a range from 2 to 12 years, as shown in Table 3.

Table 4: Frequency Distribution by Years of Operation

Years of Operation	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
1–3 years	6	24.0%
4–6 years	8	32.0%
7–9 years	7	28.0%
10–12 years	4	16.0%

The frequency distribution under Table 4 shows that the majority (60%) have been operating for 4 to 9 years, classifying them as mid-stage businesses—experienced enough to understand market demands but still flexible in adopting new tools such as digital media.

Only 16% have operated for over a decade, which implies that homestay tourism is a relatively recent trend in Mirik. The presence of 24% newer homestays (1–3 years) also suggests that the sector is still expanding, possibly due to recent tourism growth and the influence of digital discovery platforms.

Use of Digital Media Platforms

Table 5: Platform Usage for Promotion and Bookings

Digital Platform	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
WhatsApp (for communication)	23	92.0%
Facebook	22	88.0%
Instagram	19	76.0%
Google My Business	16	64.0%
Travel Sites (Airbnb, etc.)	13	52.0%
YouTube	5	20.0%

Digital platform adoption among homestay owners is notably high, particularly for WhatsApp (92%) and Facebook (88%), which are accessible and commonly used for informal business communication and promotion. Platforms like Instagram (76%) and Google My Business (64%) indicate a moderate level of visual and location-based marketing engagement, essential for tourism, as shown in Table 5.

More structured platforms like Airbnb and other travel sites are used by only 52%, and YouTube (20%) is the least used, possibly due to the need for more advanced content creation skills. This indicates that while digital presence is widespread, operators still favor platforms that are simple, free and familiar.

Frequency of Updates on Digital Platforms

Table 6: Frequency of Digital Media Activity

Update Frequency	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Weekly	14	56.0%
Monthly	6	24.0%
Rarely/Sporadic	5	20.0%

Table 6 shows that more than half (56%) of the operators update their digital media weekly, indicating a reasonable level of engagement and consistency in promotion. However, the remaining 44% update less frequently, with 20% rarely using digital media at all. This inconsistency can impact visibility and suggests a need for training in content planning and scheduling tools to improve continuity in outreach.

Impact of Digital Media on Publicity and Bookings

Table 7: Booking and Visibility Impact

Indicator	Value
Reported increased visibility	18 out of 25 (72.0%)
% Bookings from digital media	Mean = 61.4%, SD = 15.7
% Increase in booking inquiries (2 years)	Mean = 37%

Table 7 indicates that the majority of operators (72%) report increased visibility due to digital platforms. Additionally, digital media contributes to an average of 61.4% of bookings (SD = 15.7), underscoring its central role in customer acquisition. A reported mean increase of 37% in inquiries over the past two years further confirms that digital engagement is translating into tangible business growth. This validates digital media as a critical driver of publicity and booking conversions in the homestay sector.

Customer Engagement and Review Management

Table 8: Review and Response Behaviour

Indicator	Value
Respond to reviews/messages	16 operators (64.0%)
Importance of online reviews (1–5)	Mean = 4.32, SD = 0.68

Table 8 shows that most of the respondents (64%) actively respond to reviews and online queries, showing a reasonable degree of customer relationship management via digital platforms. The perceived importance of online reviews is high (mean = 4.32, SD = 0.68), suggesting that operators are aware of the influence of peer reviews on traveler decision-making. However, the remaining 36% who do not engage could miss opportunities to build trust and improve visibility.

Challenges Faced in Using Digital Media

Table 9: Barriers to Digital Promotion

Challenge	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Lack of digital marketing skills	15	60.0%
Poor internet connectivity	12	48.0%
Managing multiple platforms	10	40.0%
Language barriers	7	28.0%
Lack of professional photos	13	52.0%

The primary challenge reported is a lack of digital marketing skills (60%), followed by connectivity issues (48%) and difficulty managing multiple platforms (40%), as per Table 9. These findings highlight a need for both capacity-building programs and infrastructure improvements in Mirik.

Other barriers include language limitations (28%) and a lack of professional photos (52%), which affect the quality of online presence. These challenges collectively suggest that while platform use is high, many operators lack the resources and knowledge to maximize their digital reach.

Future Outlook and Training Interest

Table 10: Future Preparedness

Indicator	Value
Believe digital media is crucial for growth	22 respondents (88.0%)
Interested in digital marketing training	18 respondents (72.0%)
Willingness to hire digital experts (1–5 scale)	Mean = 3.68, SD = 1.02

There is strong optimism among operators, with 88% believing that digital platforms are crucial for future growth. Furthermore, 72% are interested in training programs, reflecting a clear demand for structured skill development as found in Table 10.

The mean willingness to hire digital professionals is 3.68 on a 5-point scale (SD = 1.02), indicating moderate to high openness to outsourcing digital marketing tasks if affordable. This points toward a favorable environment for NGO or government-led digital literacy initiatives and possibly public-private partnerships to support the tourism economy.

Regression Analysis: Predictors of Digital Booking Success

The regression analysis aimed to identify which operational and digital engagement factors significantly predict the percentage of bookings obtained through digital media among homestay operators in Mirik. A Multiple Linear Regression (MLR) model is used to explain the outcome (i.e., bookings through digital platforms) using various independent variables that altogether linearly influence the outcome.

Furthermore, the multiple linear regression model measures the combined impact of various operational and digital engagement factors (e.g., years of operation, platforms used, update frequency, etc.) on booking outcomes. The statistically significant coefficient ($p < 0.05$) suggests that the predictor exerts a meaningful effect on bookings, thereby controlling for other factors in the model. As a result, the model of regression serves as a tool for both prediction and explanation, offering empirical proof of the factors that have a major impact on booking performance.

Regression Equation:

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \beta_4 X_4 + \beta_5 X_5 + \beta_6 X_6$$

In the above equation, Y = Percentage of bookings through digital platforms, β_0 = Intercept (constant term), β_1 to β_6 = Regression coefficients for each corresponding variable, X_1 = Years of operation, X_2 = Number of digital platforms used, X_3 = Frequency of social media updates (1 = Weekly, 2 = Monthly, 3 = Rarely), X_4 = % increase in inquiries, X_5 = Importance of online reviews (1–5 scale), X_6 = Willingness to hire a digital marketing expert (1–5 scale).

Table 11: Regression Coefficients

Variable	Coefficient (B)	p-value	Interpretation
Years of Operation	+0.69	0.36	Not significant
Digital Platforms Used	+4.87	0.02*	More platforms = more bookings
Update Frequency (1 = Weekly)	-5.33	0.04*	More frequent updates = more bookings
Inquiries Increase (%)	+0.82	0.02*	Higher inquiries = higher bookings
Review Importance (1–5 scale)	+3.46	0.10	Positive trend, not significant
Willingness to Hire Expert (1–5 scale)	+1.89	0.25	Not significant

*Significant at $p < 0.05$

The regression model was statistically significant:

- $R^2 = 0.68$, meaning 68% of the variation in digital bookings can be explained by the selected variables.
- $F(6, 18) = 6.41, p < 0.01$, indicating the model is a good fit.

Interpretation

The overall regression model was statistically significant ($F(6,18) = 6.41, p < 0.01$), explaining approximately **68% of the variance** in digital bookings among homestay operators (**Adjusted $R^2 = 0.61$**).

Among the predictors, three variables were found to be statistically significant at the 0.05 level as shown in Table 11:

- **Number of digital platforms used ($B = 4.87, p = 0.020$)**

Homestays using more digital platforms (e.g., WhatsApp, Facebook, Google, Instagram) reported a higher percentage of bookings via digital media. This suggests multi-platform presence is a key driver of digital visibility and conversion.

- **Frequency of updates ($B = -5.33, p = 0.040$)**

Lower scores on the update frequency scale (i.e., more frequent updates) were associated with higher digital bookings, indicating that consistent content management positively influences online engagement and trust.

Initially, the variable 'Update Frequency' appears to have a negative yet significant impact ($B = -5.33, p = 0.04$). The variable was coded in such a way that lower numbers indicate more regular updates (weekly = 1, monthly = 2, quarterly = 3, etc.). Therefore, the negative sign indicates that bookings increase as the value decreases (i.e., the update becomes more frequent, like weekly). In other words, operators who make more frequent updates to their digital platforms typically see an increase in bookings. The assumption that keeping online material current and updated helps to draw in more bookings and sustain engagement is supported by the statistical significance, which verifies that update frequency has a considerable impact on booking performance.

- **Increase in inquiries over 2 years ($B = 0.82, p = 0.020$)**

A higher recent growth in inquiries strongly predicts the current proportion of bookings from digital channels, showing the cumulative effect of sustained online activity.

Although review importance and willingness to hire experts were not statistically significant, they still showed positive trends, suggesting that attitudes toward professionalization may support future digital expansion. Further, there is a positive yet statistically insignificant relationship between the variable "Review Importance" ($B = +3.46, p = 0.10$) and bookings. This means that, although operators that value reviews tend to have slightly higher bookings, the effect is not significant enough to be regarded as statistically reliable. There may be several causes for this lack of importance. Firstly, despite the belief that reviews are important, respondents may not actively monitor or react to reviews in manners that have a direct impact on customer booking behavior. Secondly, the impact of review attitudes may be overshadowed by other factors, such as the frequency of updates or the number of digital platforms used, which may have a stronger and more direct effect. Lastly, the measure of review importance may not transfer into quantifiable booking outcomes because it is subjective and represents perceptions rather than genuine review quality or engagement. In conclusion, although appreciating reviews is a good attitude, it may not by itself ensure higher bookings unless it is combined with active involvement and review management techniques.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the increasing importance of digital media in the promotion and operation of homestays in Mirik, which align with the observations of Anuar and Qian (2024). A majority

of operators, particularly women, rely on platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram for visibility and bookings. Regression analysis showed that multi-platform engagement, frequent content updates and growing online inquiries are significant predictors of higher booking percentages from digital sources for homestays in Mirik, which Mohamad (2024) also found in their study that operators of homestays actively used social media to attract bookings and those with consistent updates of content observed higher interaction and inquiry rates. These results support earlier studies (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Guttentag, 2015; Ahmad *et al.*, 2022) which affirm that digital engagement directly influences customer interest and conversion. The preference for easy-to-use platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook also reflects the operators' comfort with familiar tools rather than more complex systems.

Digital media channels like Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and others are now essential to starting and maintaining interactions with customers. These kinds of platforms are used by owners of homestays to communicate with potential guests prior to, during and post stay in addition to promoting and advertising their properties. This observation supports the outcomes of Hudson *et al.* (2016), who contended that meaningful digital interactions enhance consumer-brand emotional ties, boosting customer referrals and loyalty. Further, digital media interactions, such as replying to inquiries, sharing guest narratives, or reposting user-generated content, may improve visitor satisfaction and foster trust.

Moreover, homestay operators who are actively involved with their online clientele noticed higher occupancy, which suggests the use of digital channels to engage customers leads to quantifiable commercial results. The observation made by Malthouse *et al.* (2013) that regular digital engagement increases conversions and retention rates is supported by this. This phenomenon is particularly true for experience-based industries like travel and hospitality.

Due to their relative seclusion, homestay owners in Mirik have limited or no access to skilled support services such as digital marketing specialists and content producers. As a result, most operators' visibility is limited and they primarily depend on personal networks. For instance, hosts who are not familiar with optimization strategies and are using high-quality photographs, managing review responses, or regularly updating calendar availability often do worse than smarter rivals (Leung *et al.*, 2013).

Although operators acknowledged the value of online reviews and showed interest in hiring digital experts, these factors were not statistically significant predictors in the model. This may suggest a possible gap between awareness and actual implementation capacity, often constrained by skills or resources.

Overall, the results indicate that homestay operators are digitally active but may lack the professional support or strategic skills needed to maximize their reach and profitability.

Limitations

This paper has certain limitations, such as the analysis being based on 25 homestay operators, which limits the generalizability of the findings. The data relied on self-reported estimates (e.g., percentage of bookings from digital media), which may involve response bias or estimation errors. The study is specific to Mirik and may not reflect conditions in other rural or semi-urban destinations. The study did not account for other digital marketing factors such as paid promotions, website use, or Search Engine Optimization (SEO) strategies. The study reflects a single point in time and does not capture seasonal variations or long-term digital trends.

Further studies on digital media engagement among homestay operators across various tourist destinations in the state of West Bengal may reveal significant results regarding the digital engagement behavior of both tourists and homestay operators, which may help in increasing occupancy and improving tourists' experience as well as scheme formulation on digital marketing for homestay operators.

Conclusion

This paper explored the role of digital media platforms in enhancing the visibility and booking performance of homestay businesses in Mirik, West Bengal. Through the analysis of data collected from 25 homestay operators, it was found that digital engagement, particularly through widely used platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram plays a significant role in increasing customer reach and conversion. The results of descriptive and regression analyses revealed that homestay operators who frequently update their digital content, use multiple platforms and experience a rise in online inquiries are more likely to receive a higher percentage of their bookings through digital channels. This underscores the importance of consistent and multi-platform digital presence in the success of small-scale tourism enterprises.

Despite their awareness of the benefits, many operators face challenges such as limited digital marketing skills, lack of professional content and poor internet connectivity. While a majority of respondents showed willingness to adopt digital strategies and expressed interest in training, the gap between knowledge and implementation remains a key concern. The findings highlight the need for targeted digital literacy programs, improved infrastructure, and policy-level support to empower homestay owners, especially women, to fully leverage the potential of digital media. Future research with larger sample sizes and comparative studies across different regions could provide deeper insights into the digital transformation of rural tourism.

In conclusion, digital media platforms are not only essential tools for visibility but also act as catalysts for the sustainable growth of homestays in emerging rural destinations like Mirik.

Recommendation

Based on the findings, certain recommendations are made by the researcher – (a) **Training Programs:** Training in digital marketing with an emphasis on platform administration, content production and analytics should be offered by regional tourism offices. (b) **Affordable Digital Support:** Better web content can be produced by homestay operators with the aid of cluster-based support networks or shared services (such as photographers and digital consultants). (c) **Infrastructure Improvement:** Efforts to improve internet connectivity in rural areas of Mirik will enhance the effectiveness of digital promotion. (d) **Policy Incentives:** Government schemes might offer financial aid or other rewards to homestays who use validated digital resources and procedures. Policy makers and training organizations should prioritize digital literacy and multi-channel strategies to enhance the competitiveness of local homestay operators. (e) **Ongoing Monitoring:** Future studies should track changes over time and assess how digital adoption evolves with new technologies and customer behavior.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no competing interests.

Acknowledgement

The author is thankful to the journal's editorial board, the reviewers of this article, his wife and daughter, and the academic fraternity of the Department of Tourism Management, The University of Burdwan, West Bengal, India, for the success of this article.

References

- Ahmad, F., Mustafa, K., Hamid, S. A. R., Khawaja, K. F., Zada, S., Jamil, S., & Anwer, N. (2022). Online customer experience leads to loyalty via customer engagement: Moderating role of value co-creation. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 897851. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.897851>
- Afren, S. (2024). The role of digital marketing promoting tourism business. A study of use of the social media in prompting travel. *World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews*, 21(01), 272-287. <https://doi.org/10.30574/wjarr.2024.21.1.2668>

- Anuar, F. I., & Qian, W. (2024). Use and adoption of website and social media marketing: Insights from homestay business owners. *Information Management and Business Review*, 16(3), 574-583. [https://doi.org/10.22610/imbr.v16i3\(i\).4010](https://doi.org/10.22610/imbr.v16i3(i).4010)
- Banerjee, S., & Chua, A. Y. (2016). In search of patterns among travellers' hotel ratings in TripAdvisor. *Tourism management*, 53, 125-131. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2015.09.020>
- Chatterjee, J., & Dsilva, N. R. (2021). A study on the role of social media in promoting sustainable tourism in the states of Assam and Odisha. *Tourism Critiques: Practice and Theory*, 2(1), 74-90. <https://doi.org/10.1108/TRC-09-2020-0017>
- Dar, A., Iqbal, D., & Bhat, S. (2024). Motivations and satisfaction of tourists staying in homestays across Kashmir Valley. *European Journal of Tourism, Hospitality and Recreation*, 14(1), 153-164. <https://doi.org/10.2478/ejthr-2024-0011>
- Etikan, I., Musa, S. A., & Alkassim, R. S. (2016). Comparison of convenience sampling and purposive sampling. *American Journal of Theoretical and Applied Statistics*, 5(1), 1-4. <https://doi.org/10.11648/j.ajtas.20160501.11>
- Febdilan, F. K., Hali, M. S., & Lantang, A. G. (2024). Marketing Strategy Through Digital Marketing Efforts to Increase Occupancy in Homestay in Kuta Lombok. *International Journal of Economics Development Research*, 5(1), 855-870. <https://doi.org/10.37385/ijedr.v5i4.6455>
- Guttentag, D. (2015). Airbnb: disruptive innovation and the rise of an informal tourism accommodation sector. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 18(12), 1192-1217. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2013.827159>
- Government of India, Ministry of Tourism. (2022). *Report on National Digital Tourism Mission*. https://tourism.gov.in/sites/default/files/2022-09/National%20Digital%20Tourism%20Mission_2022.pdf
- Government of West Bengal, Tourism Department. (2017, October 30). *West Bengal Homestay Tourism Policy-2017*. *The Kolkata Gazette, Extraordinary*. <https://www.wbtourism.gov.in/home-stay>
- Hudson, S., & Thal, K. (2013). The impact of social media on the consumer decision process: Implications for tourism marketing. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 30(1-2), 156-160. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10548408.2013.751276>
- Hudson, S., Huang, L., Roth, M. S., & Madden, T. J. (2016). The influence of social media interactions on consumer–brand relationships: A three-country study of brand perceptions and marketing behaviors. *International journal of research in marketing*, 33(1), 27-41. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijresmar.2015.06.004>
- Kaplan, A. M., & Haenlein, M. (2012). Social media: back to the roots and back to the future. *Journal of Systems and Information Technology*, 14(2), 101-104. <https://doi.org/10.1108/13287261211232126>
- Kolb, B. (2017). *Tourism marketing for cities and towns: Using social media and branding to attract tourists*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315543413>
- Kapri, S. S., & Sharma, A. (2024). Digital marketing impact on rural Homestay booking and role of destination image. *Anatolia*, 35(4), 764-776. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13032917.2024.2319075>
- Lama, D., & Singh, A. K. (2024). Understanding Homstays Success in Rural Dajeeing: A Comparative Study Between Lepchajagat and Sittong in Darjeeling Using Garrett Ranking. *Library of Progress-Library Science, Information Technology & Computer*, 44(3). 19980-19985. <https://doi.org/10.48165/bapas.2024.44.2.1>
- Leung, D., Law, R., Van Hoof, H., & Buhalis, D. (2013). Social media in tourism and hospitality: A literature review. *Journal of travel & tourism marketing*, 30(1-2), 3-22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10548408.2013.750919>
- Liu, D., Wang, Y., & Wang, Y. (2022). Research on Marketing Innovation of Homestay After Joining the Platform. *BCP Business & Management*, 22, 130-136. <https://doi.org/10.54691/bcpbm.v22i.1219>
- Lian, J. (2023). Research on tourism marketing strategy innovation in new media era. *Frontiers in Business, Economics and Management*, 8(1), 103-106. <https://doi.org/10.54097/fbem.v8i1.5957>
- Malthouse, E. C., Haenlein, M., Skiera, B., Wege, E., & Zhang, M. (2013). Managing customer relationships in the social media era: Introducing the social CRM house. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 27(4), 270-280. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intmar.2013.09.008>
- Munar, A. M., & Jacobsen, J. K. S. (2014). Motivations for sharing tourism experiences through social media. *Tourism Management*, 43, 46-54. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2014.01.012>

- Mohamad, N. (2024). Social media marketing adoption: Is it important for homestay operators in Malaysia?. *Social and Management Research Journal (SMRJ)*, 21(2), 65-78. <https://ir.uitm.edu.my/id/eprint/107294>
- Pantelidis, I. S. (2010). Electronic meal experience: A content analysis of online restaurant comments. *Cornell Hospitality Quarterly*, 51(4), 483-491. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1938965510378574>
- Patwal, A. S., Rana, V., & Pathak, V. K. (2023). Predictors influencing the choice of lodging option: A systematic literature review of homestays. *Journal of Tourism and Services*, 14(26), 263-284. <https://doi.org/10.29036/jots.v14i26.536>
- Ramlan, N. L., Asrul, S. A., Abdul Rasool, M. S., & Abu Karim, R. (2023). The Relationships between Social Media Adoption and Homestay Performance in Malaysia. *Information Management and Business Review*, 15(4), 603-609. [https://doi.org/10.22610/imbr.v15i4\(SI\).3641](https://doi.org/10.22610/imbr.v15i4(SI).3641)
- Sharma, J. (2016). Digital India and its Impact on the Society. *International Journal of Research in Humanities & Soc. Sciences*, 4(4), 64-70. https://www.raijmr.com/ijrhrs/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/IJRHS_2016_vol04_issue_04_11.pdf
- Saunders, M., Lewis, P., & Thornhill, A. (2019). *Research methods for business students* (8th ed.). Pearson Education Limited.
- Sutheeshna, B. S., & Mukhopadhyay, D. (2020). The digital platforms and homestay business: A study in Indian context. *International Journal of Tourism and Travel*, 13(1), 1-9. <http://www.publishingindia.com/ijtt/4/the-digital-platforms-and-homestay-business-a-study-in-indian-context/30957/56492/>
- Sari, N., Mahrinasari, M. S., & Erlina, E. (2023). Digital content marketing influences people to visit tourist destinations. *International Journal of Advances in Social Sciences and Humanities*, 2(3), 212-221. <https://doi.org/10.56225/ijassh.v2i3.244>
- Van Nuenen, T., & Scarles, C. (2021). Advancements in technology and digital media in tourism. *Tourist Studies*, 21(1), 119-132. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468797621990410>
- Xiang, Z., & Gretzel, U. (2010). Role of social media in online travel information search. *Tourism Management*, 31(2), 179-188. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2009.02.016>
- Zeng, B., & Gerritsen, R. (2014). What do we know about social media in tourism? A review. *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 10, 27-36. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2014.01.001>