

# Promoting Rural Tourism through Social-Media and Digital Entrepreneurship: Insights from Homestay Operators of Sikkim

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## Abstract

*In the current digital age, social media can transform small rural businesses into globally visible enterprises. This study explores the adoption, perceived opportunities, and challenges of social media use among rural homestay operators in Sikkim, India. A qualitative research design was employed, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 homestay operators across all districts of Sikkim, and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that social media adoption was highly strategic and uneven, with WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram being the most frequently used platforms. Operators strategically use WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram to promote homestays, build trust, and engage with guests, with video content being the most effective. However, adoption is limited by infrastructural constraints, digital skill gaps, operational time pressures, and exposure to online risks. This study contributes to the understanding of digital entrepreneurship in rural tourism and offers practical guidance for improving small-scale operators' social media adoption. The findings also provide policymakers with evidence for designing targeted interventions for infrastructure development and capacity-building programs.*

*Keywords: social media adoption, rural homestays, opportunities, challenges, tourism promotion*

## Introduction

The tourism industry has witnessed transformative changes with the advent of digital technologies, particularly social media, which have emerged as an important tool for marketing, customer engagement, and destination branding (Leung et al., 2013). Recent evidence suggests that platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok have further accelerated this transformation by enabling real-time interaction, short form video marketing, and widespread user generated content that strongly influences travel decision (Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019; Chen, 2025; Wu et al., 2025). This shift is especially significant for tourism-related businesses, particularly small and medium sized enterprises such as homestays, which often rely heavily on word-of-mouth for success. With the rise of social media platforms, word of mouth now

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spreads more rapidly and reaches a broader audience, significantly shaping the trajectory of consumer decision-making (Leung et al., 2013). Recent studies confirm that social media-driven engagement has become one of the strongest determinants of purchase intention and destination appeal (Aboalghanam et al., 2025; Correia et al., 2025). Social media enhances and expands the market reach beyond traditional viral marketing strategies, facilitating homestay operators to upload images, videos, and customer reviews, which helps promote their property more effectively, communicate directly with potential customers, and engage with existing consumer databases, allowing rural homestay operators to sustain their businesses and improve their competitive advantage, resulting in greater sales and profitability with limited marketing resources (Kapri & Sharma 2024).

Homestays are an evolving alternative concept targeted at visitors seeking immersive experiences focused on authenticity, inclusivity, and host-guest interactions in destinations. Homestays provide an opportunity to explore local culture and lifestyle in a family like atmosphere, allowing visitors to achieve more within a modest budget (Kulshreshtha & Kulshreshtha, 2019). The Ministry of Tourism, has been actively working to position India as a prominent rural tourism destination by promoting local products and tourism activities aimed to strengthen rural economies and create employment opportunities. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, homestays gained significant popularity, as travelers prioritized privacy, sanitation, and social distancing. Further, the demand for homestays increased substantially, with travelers preferring small, locally managed accommodations offering both safety and personalized experiences. This rising preference for homestays has led to a notable expansion of homestay accommodations across India, addressing the needs of tourists seeking alternative lodging options while contributing to rural employment (Kulshreshtha & Kulshreshtha, 2019).

North eastern regions such as Sikkim have emerged as popular destinations, offering not only authentic homestay experiences, but also access to a rich abundance of biological and ecological diversity (Bhan & Singh, 2014). Despite the growing popularity and unique offerings of homestays in Sikkim, many rural operators continue to face challenges in term of branding and marketing. Common issues include limited or inaccurate information available to potential visitors, inadequate representation of facilities, and absence of compelling experiential storytelling. Furthermore, a significant number of rural homestays lack digital marketing strategies, such as functional websites, active social media engagement, and integrated online booking systems, which severely limit their visibility and market reach (Bhutia et al., 2022). These challenges reflect broader national and global findings on the digital divide affecting rural tourism entrepreneurs, who often struggle with digital literacy, connectivity barriers, and limited access to training resources (Cheuk et al., 2018; Fanelli & Fanelli, 2021; Sindakis & Showkat, 2024).

This study aims to understand the perceived opportunities and challenges of adopting social media by rural homestay operators in Sikkim, which can be beneficial to rural homestay operators in identifying gaps in their digital engagement and uncovering ways to enhance their visibility, attract tourists, and empower rural entrepreneurs. Moreover, examining these aspects provides valuable insights for policymakers and tourism stakeholders to pinpoint areas where social media can be strategically utilized to support sustainable tourism development. It also highlights the broader digital adoption issues faced by rural communities and offer a foundation for formulating targeted strategies to bridge this digital divide. Overall, exploring the perceived opportunities and challenges associated with social media adoption among rural homestay operators is essential for strengthening their market presence, promoting sustainable

community-based tourism, and fostering inclusive digital growth in the tourism sector. Therefore, this study aims to achieve the following objectives:

- To understand the adoption and usage of social media among rural homestay operators in Sikkim.
- To understand the perceived opportunities of rural homestay operators to integrate social media to enhance their business performance.
- To explore the challenges faced by rural homestay operators in integrating social media into their businesses.

## Review of Literature

### Homestay Tourism in Rural Areas

Governments are now promoting homestays as catalysts for rural tourism development. Consequently, there has been a significant increase in research on the concept of homestay tourism among academics, and the field is experiencing gradual progression (Cakmakoglu Arici & Koc, 2024). Despite major research on the concept of homestays, there is no universal definition. The concept varies across countries, and researchers define and conceptualize it according to their studies. Lynch (2005) defined homestays as a type of lodging arrangement in which visitors and hosts share a common space, the host or family resides on the property, and interactions between the two occur. Dey et al. (2020) defines rural homestay as “alternative accommodation in the form of an opportunity available for tourists visiting rural areas to stay with host families for the purpose of experiencing the local culture, cuisine and activities undertaken by host communities” (p. 643). Homestays as establishments in rural areas complement each other as a source of income for individual operators and community development. Economically, revenues from operating homestays can be used in essential needs such as health-care and education (Shukor et al., 2014). Socially and culturally, homestays foster cultural exchanges and increase the awareness of indigenous lifestyles among visitors. Environmentally, homestays act as significant vehicles for promoting sustainability in key areas such as waste management, energy, and water use (Dahal et al., 2020).

Sikkim is a popular homestay tourism destination that encourages homestays to be ingrained in the fundamental values of Community-Based Ecotourism (CBET), emphasizing on authenticity, educational, and transformative experiences that align with active community participation and promote the sustainable management of destinations (Bhutia et al., 2022). Homestays in Sikkim have provided new avenues for job opportunities and income generation for women and youths (Yadav et al., 2018). Homestay tourism in Sikkim is developing as an important sustainable tourism model that benefits rural communities economically and socially, leverages cultural and natural attractions, and contributes to residents’ quality of life and support for tourism (J. Kumar et al., 2024; Thakur et al., 2024; Wani et al., 2024). The government of Sikkim also supports and provides the required training to homestay operators to improve Sikkim’s homestay ecosystem, visitor experiences, and economic prospects for youth and women through Homestay and Hospitality Sector initiatives under the Sikkim INSPIRES (Sikkim INSPIRES | Tourism, n.d.). This support is timely and relevant, as rural homestays are gaining popularity among tourists because of their distinct charismatic character, and rural residents are motivated to preserve their local way of life and traditions because of the economic benefits they gain (Thakur et al., 2024). Despite growing institutional support and increasing tourist interests, rural homestay operators continue to face a range of operational challenges that

hinder sustainable growth in the sector. Challenges include the lack of a formal management system, marketing and promotional expertise, basic facilities, communication obstacles (Thakur et al., 2024), continuity, short duration of capacity-building programs, gaps in training modules (Bhutia et al., 2022), and insufficient proficiency in using technology (Anuar & Qian, 2024). Taken together, these challenges underscore the need to explore how rural homestay operators perceive and engage with social media, particularly to improve business performance and long-term sustainability.

### Role of Social Media in Tourism and Rural Entrepreneurship

Social media can be defined as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, allowing the creation and exchange of user-generated content” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). Social media enhances tourism marketing by facilitating interactive, information-rich, and visually engaging communication that influences travel decisions. Visuals, including photos and videos, enhance destination marketing by shaping tourists’ perceptions and visit intentions. Videos on YouTube provide comprehensive information, influencing tourists’ decisions through trusted content about destinations (Arora & Lata, 2020). Social media platforms, especially Facebook, are used by Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) to promote destinations through visual content of scenery, culture, and cuisine, increasing engagement and destination appeal (P. Kumar et al., 2022). In recent years, with the evolution of social media ecosystems, influencer marketing and user-generated content (UGC) have become central components of tourism promotion, significantly shaping travelers’ decision-making process (Abad & Borbon, 2021; Dai et al., 2022). Social media platforms serve as the primary ecosystem for influencer to disseminate curated travel content, engage directly with audiences, and respond to queries that build trust and brand affinity (Kapoor et al., 2022; Najar et al., 2024).

Social media empowers small businesses by providing cost-efficient means for marketing, customer engagement, and brand building (Bhardwaj et al., 2024; Chopra et al., 2024). It is an important marketing and communication tool that enables rural tourism, entrepreneurs, and enterprises such as homestays to promote their unique offerings and engage with potential customers. For instance, studies indicate that the use of social media by small and medium enterprises, such as homestays, can help connect with potential customers without the need for expensive infrastructure (S. Chatterjee & Kumar Kar, 2020). The younger generation, who are usually responsive to visual content, has been influenced by social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook, which have increased awareness and visitor traffic to rural destinations (Bachtar & Bernanthos, 2024). Additionally, social media plays a crucial role in attracting potential visitors to a destination and fostering community engagement, thereby contributing to sustainable economic growth (J. Chatterjee & Dsilva, 2021; Kansra et al., 2024).

Social media also facilitates rich storytelling, allowing tourism operators to communicate the cultural, natural, and experiential value of rural destinations. Research indicates that tourists perceive content shared directly by hosts as more authentic, trustworthy, and relatable (Dong et al., 2023; Wang & Yan, 2022). For small and informal tourism enterprises, including homestays, digital transformation offers both marketing and operational advantages. Studies from India, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Nepal show that micro-entrepreneurs adopt social media primarily because it is perceived as useful, accessible, and compatible with existing business routines (Anuar & Qian, 2024).

While previous studies have examined social media use in tourism marketing, rural entrepreneurship, and homestay development in India and other Asian contexts, limited research has explored how rural homestay operators themselves perceive, adopt, and integrate social media into their day-to-day business practices. Existing studies primarily focus on tourists' digital behaviour, destination branding, or quantitative assessments of marketing outcomes, leaving a gap in understanding the lived experiences, contextual constraints, and practical strategies used by operators in remote areas.

## Research Methodology

This study investigates the adoption, opportunities, and challenges of social media use among rural homestay operators in Sikkim. A qualitative research design was employed to gain operators' perceptions and practices using semi-structured interviews. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it enables an in-depth understanding of complex, context-specific phenomena that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measures. Social media adoption and its related opportunities and challenges are shaped by personal experiences, digital literacy, community dynamics, and local tourism practices; therefore, a qualitative design allowed the researchers to capture nuanced insights and meanings directly from the participants. A purposive sampling strategy was adopted for this study to ensure that only those participants who possessed direct and relevant experience with both homestay operations and social media use were included. Purposive sampling was considered appropriate because the objective of the research was to gain in-depth insights from individuals who were actively involved in rural tourism and digital promotion, rather than to obtain a statistically representative sample. The selection criteria required that participants had been operating their homestays for at least one year and were already using social media platforms for business-related activities. These criteria ensured that the participants were familiar with the operational realities of running a homestay and had adequate exposure to the opportunities and challenges associated with social media adoption. In addition, purposive sampling allowed the researchers to select homestay operators from all districts of Sikkim.

Sikkim has made concerted efforts to leverage its natural beauty, cultural heritage, and commitment to conservation to develop sustainable tourism. The state also stands out for its vibrant culture, traditions, and unique indigenous heritage, making it a remarkable global tourism destination (SBFP & Department of Forest, 2011).

Thirty homestay operators from all the districts of Sikkim, namely Gangtok, Pakyong, Mangon, Gyalshing, Namchi, and Soreng, were chosen to provide a diverse sample that reflected the broader rural tourism landscape of the state. A landlocked Himalayan state in northeastern India, marked as the India's second smallest state by area covering 7,096 sq. km. Sikkim lies between Nepal to the west, the Tibet Autonomous Region of China to the north and east, and Bhutan to the southeast. The state's topography is highly varied, with elevations ranging from low subtropical valleys to high alpine zones. This steep altitudinal gradient gives rise to diverse climates from temperate in the lower hills to frigid and snowbound conditions in the high reaches (Government of Sikkim, 2024).

They were first contacted via phone calls to explain the purpose of the study and to request their participation. Interviews were scheduled at times and locations that were convenient for the operators. The interviews were conducted in Nepali because most of the participants were comfortable. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 30-45 minutes each. The participants were informed that their involvement was voluntary and

that they could skip any questions or end the interview at any time. Verbal consent was obtained from all participants to record the interviews.

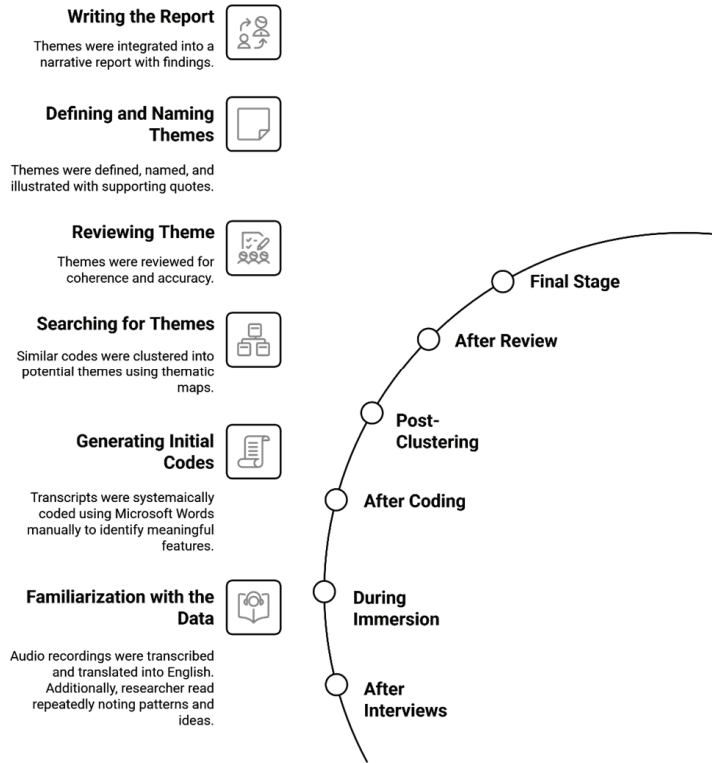


Figure 1. Steps of Thematic Analysis

Source: Adapted from Ahmed et al., 2025; Braun & Clarke, 2006, made with Napkin.ai

All recorded interviews were then translated into English by a language expert to ensure accuracy and to preserve contextual meaning. The translated transcripts were organized into a clean dataset and subsequently analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun & Clarke (2006) six-phase framework. The analysis began with repeated reading of the transcripts to achieve familiarization, followed by systematic coding of meaningful data segments. Coding was conducted manually using structured coding sheets to categorize the content. These codes were then examined and grouped to identify initial themes, which were further reviewed, refined, and clearly defined through an iterative comparison of coded extracts with the broader dataset. Interpretation of the themes involved relating participants' experiences to existing literature on social media use in rural tourism, ensuring that the findings remained grounded in the data while responding to the research objectives. The figure 1. Illustrates the sequential steps undertaken, beginning with familiarization with the translated transcripts, followed by the generation of initial codes, the identification and refinement of themes, and finally the interpretation and presentation of findings.

## Result and Discussion

### Usage of Social Media

#### *Platform Preference & Adaptation*

The selection of a social media platform is a deliberate and strategic decision for homestay operators, tailored to their specific communication needs and target audiences. There is no one-size-fits-all approach; instead, platforms are chosen owing to their distinct advantages. WhatsApp is highly valued among homestay operators, as many perceive it as the most effective platform for immediate and functional communication in daily operations. In contrast, the use of platforms such as Facebook and Instagram tends to be shaped by operators' personal preferences and target guests.

*"Sometimes, at the request of guests, I share pictures of the homestay through WhatsApp, as it resolves queries instantly..... It helps us respond to guest queries instantly, and tourists usually contact us through WhatsApp. Bookings are often made via it, and in some cases, payments are also processed through the platform." (HO2)*

*"Instagram is mostly popular among the younger generation, while my homestay caters to business-class guests, most of whom are older and use Facebook. Therefore, I prefer Facebook over Instagram." (HO5)*

This indicates a clear understanding of the market segmentation. Simultaneously, operators are not afraid of abandoning platforms that yield poor results. Homestay Operator 4 stopped using Facebook because of the high volume of spam inquiries, messages, and calls. These choices align with digital marketing principles that emphasize the importance of audience analysis for effective platform selection (Roslan et al., 2024). Operators' adaptive strategies demonstrate a practical, results-oriented approach to their digital presence, prioritizing platforms that deliver tangible benefits, whether in terms of operational efficiency or reaching the right type of customer.

#### *Content & Marketing Strategies*

Rural homestay operators of Sikkim strategically use content to build an authentic brand identity with an approach rooted in showcasing the unique, experiential value of a rural stay, focusing on the utilization and optimization of locally available resources within the village. Homestay Operator 1 expressed the essence of their village, its natural landscapes, and its organic farming activities on social media platforms. Most homestay operators value video content as a promotional strategy. Homestay Operator 6 emphasized that video content is preferred over images, as they perceive videos to be more authentic and less likely to be manipulated and, in this sense, it helps build greater trust among tourists. Homestay Operator 4 highlighted that they had planned to develop video-based guest reviews on their social media platforms, where guests shared their experiences in their own language, believing that would reach and attract potential visitors. Content strategies are often underpinned by strong ethical considerations and desire for authenticity.

*"... whatever I post I try to post authentic, realistic and achievable to offer when tourist arrives, so that their expectation would be fulfilled. If we are not able to provide the services... we would get negative feedback, not only for our homestay but for whole village." (HO2)*

*"When uploading videos and pictures on social media, it is important to ensure that the content is shared ethically. This includes avoiding the use of materials uploaded by others without prop-*

*er credit, and refraining from using copyrighted music or other protected content without permission.” (HO1)*

In addition to organic content, some operators have adopted more advanced marketing strategies. These include proactive pre-launch promotions, the use of specific keywords to increase visibility on social media platforms, and targeted paid advertisements to reach specific customer segments. Operators are not just selling accommodations; they are marketing a unique cultural and natural experience, and their content choices reflect this sophisticated understanding.

*“I think social media can be used effectively to maximize bookings and increase the popularity of our homestay. For this, it is important to make use of relevant keywords. Nowadays, most travelers rely on social media and Google to find travel information, and by using appropriate keywords, our homestay can appear in search results when visitors look for local homestays in Sikkim. This can significantly improve our visibility across social media platforms.” (HO3)*

*“In my view, homestay operators should go beyond simply posting pictures on social media and consider investing in advertisements. While maintaining an account provides visibility, its reach is often limited to a relatively small audience. In contrast, targeted advertising enables homestays to connect with potential customers across different locations, thereby expanding their market reach and visibility.” (HO5)*

*“I believe that running ads could help reach a larger, more targeted customer base. Since I don’t run ads, I have fewer followers and connections, and my content mainly circulates within my existing network.” (HO6).*

## Opportunities

### Business Promotion & Visibility

One of the primary opportunities perceived by homestay operators is the ability of social media to enhance visibility and provide market access at minimal cost. For rural homestays, which often struggle with limited linkages to mainstream tourism markets, these platforms act as democratizing factors. Online visibility is not merely a promotional tactic; it is a crucial source of competitive advantage directly correlated with the ability to attract new clients and increase occupancy rates. Social media enables operators to bypass traditional intermediaries such as travel agencies and showcase their unique offerings to a wider audience. Most rural homestay operators in Sikkim view social media as powerful tools for promotion and visibility. Although they continue to rely on diversified channels, including travel agents, local taxi drivers, and Online Travel Aggregators (OTAs) social media remains a central medium for reaching potential guests.

*“Facebook has helped me to reach tourists conveniently. Before that, I used to go to cyber cafes and send pictures of my homestays through mail to different travel agencies and tourists.” (HO1)*

*“If we use social media, it helps us to promote our area in low cost and I feel that in tourism business until and unless we don’t promote or showcase what we offer, it is impossible for tourist to know about the destination or the businesses.” (HO3)*

*“Social media helps us promote our homestay and motivates us to regularly upload related content. It also enables us to connect with a large audience.” (HO6)*

This enhanced visibility is perceived to benefit not only the individual establishment but also the entire community, as homestay operator 1 stated that it allows the growth of not only their private establishment, but the whole village. Similar observations have also been reported in

other studies. (Kapri & Sharma, 2024) found that social media plays a significant role in strengthening brand image and expanding the customer base for rural homestays in Himachal Pradesh, India. Likewise, the findings also align with Anuar & Qian (2024) those that highlight that social media adoption substantially increases visibility and improves interactive communication with guests, thereby broadening market outreach.

### Building Trust & Authenticity

Rural homestay operators in Sikkim view social media as a powerful tool for building trust, which is a critical currency in the hospitality industry. They achieve this by emphasizing authenticity and transparency in their online communications. There is a strong understanding that online representations must align with the reality of guest experiences to manage expectations and secure positive feedback. This commitment to honesty is essential to long-term sustainability. In particular, video content is identified as an effective medium for building confidence.

*"... social media helps guest and host to communicate which leads to the increase of trust between host and guest." (HO2)*

*"I post both photos and videos of my homestay on social media, but I feel that videos work best as they help minimize trust issues among viewers." (HO6)*

Homestay Operator 2 also highlighted that WhatsApp allows instant and direct communication, that fosters trust. WhatsApp allows conversations between the host and guest to be saved, providing both sides with transparency and reassurance.

*"... communicating via WhatsApp, it keeps a record of communication (things being said) between host and guest." (HO2)*

These insights are consistent with recent research that emphasizes the interdependence of authenticity, trust, and digital affordances in rural tourism contexts. Dong et al. (2023) demonstrated that the perceived authenticity of destinations on social media is reinforced when endorsers present content consistent with cultural identity, thereby fostering visitor trust. Similarly, it has been established that the quality of tourism information shared on social media directly enhances trust, which mediates the relationship between self-congruity and travel intentions (Wang & Yan, 2022).

### Direct Communication & Relationship Building

For many operators, the perceived opportunities of rural homestay operators in Sikkim include the use of social media as a vital platform for building and maintaining relationships. It provides a direct and continuous line of communication that fosters a sense of connection and trust with both past and potential guests. Operators use these platforms to engage with past guests and interact with them, helping build long-term relationships. This direct interaction is seen as a key element in establishing long term relationship. According to Homestay operator 6, building a good relationship with guests often leads to the exchange of phone numbers and social media accounts, enabling continued communication. This highlights how rural homestay operators use social media as a tool for managing relationships that merge professional and personal interactions.

*"... social media has still allowed us to engage with our guests and interact with them, helping to build long-term relationships..... communication over the phone call can be limited. Most of the time, we interact through social media platforms." (HO6)*

*“... sharing videos of guests participating in activities can generate interest among potential visitors and help us build strong, long-term relationship with those who have already stayed with us.” (HO7)*

This approach reflects how operators perceive social media as a means of building trust, encouraging loyalty, and sustaining engagement, all of which directly contribute to business resilience and community-level promotions. This finding aligns with the principles of relationship marketing, which emphasize that customer loyalty and long-term interaction are crucial for small enterprises competing in dynamic markets (Guha et al., 2018). Prior research further highlights that SMEs in the hospitality sector actively use social media to manage customer relationships and reputation, while fostering cooperation and loyalty (Siti-Nabiha, Nordin, and Poh 2021; Sedalo, Boateng, and Kosiba 2022).

## Challenges

### Infrastructural Barriers

Despite the eagerness to embrace digital tools, operators are frequently hamstrung by inadequate local infrastructure, turning the promise of digital connectivity into a daily struggle. Poor Internet services and unreliable electricity are the most cited challenges, acting as a significant brake on marketing efforts and operational efficiency. Homestay Operator 1 notes that even the best available network has issues, and that problems with the electricity supply prevent him from making and uploading videos. The situation is dire in some areas where power outages can last for an entire week.

*“A major issue in our village is power supply, sometimes power outage can last for an entire week and because of that we can’t use electronic devices...” (HO3)*

This is not a minor inconvenience but a critical business failure point that leads to direct financial loss, especially as tourist needs evolve. The inability to conduct pre-booking video calls or provide stable Wi-Fi for ‘workation’ guests is a major concern.

*“We also face network problems... many guests come for workations and require reliable internet facilities. However, because of network issues, their stays are often shortened for example, some plan to stay for a month but leave within a week.” (HO7)*

*“Only Jio performs well in our village, but sometimes it too has network issues, additionally there is issues of electricity supply...” (HO1)*

Limited bandwidth and unstable connections often disrupt content-sharing, particularly during peak hours. However, operators can adapt by rescheduling digital activities to maintain visibility. This demonstrates resilience and digital improvisation, as homestay owners adjust their practices to overcome infrastructural constraints and remain competitive.

*“Sometimes I face problems to upload videos in social media due to internet issues in day hours. So, I post most of my long video after 10:00 PM at night.” (HO6)*

These findings are consistent with extensive research on the challenges of rural development, where the ‘digital divide’ is defined not only by access to devices but also by the quality and reliability of the underlying infrastructure (Vimalkumar et al., 2021). The high demand for connectivity has driven some operators to make significant personal investments, such as Homestay Operator 2, who paid a large sum to lay 8 km of cable for Wi-Fi, which was justified by subsequent bookings from remote workers.

*"In my homestay I have installed wi-fi via cable, and was connected from around 8 km. it cost me a lot, but I got my expenses back because after COVID, most of the guests who opted for work from home, stayed at my homestays." (HO2)*

### Digital Skill Divide

The interviews revealed a clear digital skill divide among homestay operators, which directly influences how effectively they engage with and benefit from social media platforms. This divide spans from highly skilled and digitally confident operators to those who are hesitant, less experienced, or dependent on others.

At one end of the spectrum are digitally native or professionally experienced operators. For example, Homestay Operator 3 demonstrates the advanced use of social media, posting three to four times daily, employing relevant keywords to improve visibility, and even suggesting structured training on listing homestays in OTAs and maximizing social media efficiency.

*"I usually upload 3 to 4 posts in a day to maintain consistency of my social media platform and sometime I face time related constrain to meet my daily target post."*

*"It is important to make use of relevant keywords. Nowadays, most travelers rely on social media and Google to find travel information, and by using appropriate keywords, our homestay can appear in search results when visitors look for local homestays in Sikkim. This can significantly improve our visibility across social media platforms."*

*"... I feel that there is need for training for all the rural homestay operators and it should be organized in GPU level for around 10 days in which courses like how to list their homestays in OTAs, how to maintain their social media platforms to maximize the efficiency should be introduced."*

Similarly, Homestay Operator 5, who had prior IT-based professional experience, independently managed his social media presence, ran paid advertisements on Facebook, and strategically used different platforms, focusing on those most relevant to his target audience. These operators treat social media as a professional tool, and invest consistent time and effort.

On the other hand, operators acknowledge their limitations or engage at a very basic level. Some homestay operators have only recently started using Facebook and Instagram to learn through YouTube tutorials. They admitted that they are still experimenting with these platforms. Some reflected that posting content without ads admitting that reach was restricted.

*'I have learned to use social media from YouTube and created dashboard for homestay to promote it in my free time.' (HO1)*

*'I believe that running ads could help reach a larger, more targeted customer base. Since I don't run ads, I have fewer followers and connections, and my content mainly circulates within my existing network.' (HO6)*

Between these two poles lie operators relying on intergenerational knowledge transfer or selectively engagement with social media. Some delegate social media management to family members, acknowledging their expertise.

*'My daughter knows lots about social media and recent trends, she knows what kind of photos, videos would attract tourists.' (HO2)*

This finding resonates with, Carlisle & Dijkmans (n.d.) who identifies a similar divide in the wider tourism industry, where operators with advanced digital skills are able to maximize social media, online marketing, and review management, while others lag behind due to limited capabilities.

## Operational & Personal Constraints

Beyond infrastructural and skill-based challenges, operators face significant practical constraints rooted in the reality of running a small, often family operated business. The lack of time is a critical barrier. Many operators juggle their homestays with other primary occupations, most notably farming, which leaves very little time to create content and manage a consistent online presence. This reality shapes their perceptions of the importance of social media.

*'We can't use social media daylong, because we have other works to do as well... we are farming family, we usually have busy schedule. So, I don't feel compulsion or important that I should upload contents regularly in social media.'* (HO4)

The scarcity of time has financial implications. Operators could hire external help, such as content creators who approach them for collaborations, which comes at a price, making it an unviable option for many. This demonstrates that even when operators have the desire and skills to use social media, the day-to-day operational realities of their businesses can prevent them from implementing their digital marketing strategies effectively.

## Online Risks & Negative Experiences

Although social media offers opportunities, it also exposes operators to a range of online risks and negative experiences that can be both financially and emotionally taxing. A major threat is outright fraud, with one operator highlighting a serious issue where certain individuals create fake accounts of legitimate homestays by using their photos and videos and scam tourists to make booking payments. This can severely damage the reputation of an entire area, not just of a single business.

On a daily basis, operators must contend with less malicious but frustrating interactions. One participant abandoned Facebook because of the high volume of spam inquiries, messages, and calls.

*'I experience spamming practices in social media, they only inquire, bargain rates, and basically ghost after certain time.'* (HO4)

For small rural operators lacking dedicated customer service teams or IT security departments, these risks are particularly acute. It forces them to spend precious time vetting inquiries and leave them vulnerable to scams that can undermine the trust they work hard to build through their authentic online presence.

## Conclusion and Discussion

Social media has become a crucial tool for communication, marketing, and customer engagement, offering individuals and businesses a fast, low-cost way to reach wider audiences and stay connected to market trends. Against this growing importance, this article examined how rural homestay owners in Sikkim use social media through qualitative research design. The study has shown that social media adoption is neither uniform nor incidental; rather, it is a strategic, selective, and contextually embedded practice shaped by operators' market positioning, resource constraints, and lived experiences of running homestays in remote Himalayan settings.

Empirically, few interrelated insights have emerged. First, social media use among rural homestays in Sikkim is highly platform-specific and purpose-driven. WhatsApp, Facebook, and Ins-

stagram are not treated as generic tools but are differentiated on the basis of audience profile, communication immediacy, and perceived effectiveness. Operators gravitate towards WhatsApp for real-time coordination and transaction-related communication, while Facebook and Instagram are used more for destination storytelling, visibility, and brand-building. This aligns with broader tourism literature that positions social media as a core for information search, destination image formation, and engagement (Afifi et al., 2025; Leung et al., 2013).

The findings highlight authenticity, ethical content creation, and relational trust as central logics guiding digital engagement. Operators consciously avoid over-promising, curate content that reflects “what can actually be delivered,” and increasingly privilege video content, which they perceive as more credible and less susceptible to manipulation. This ethos resonates with evidence that perceived authenticity and information quality on social media strengthen trust and shape travel intentions (Dong et al., 2023; Hussain et al., 2023; Wang & Yan, 2022), but the present study nuances these insights by showing how authenticity is actively produced and protected by rural hosts themselves, rather than merely interpreted by tourists.

Lastly, the study underscores that intra-community differences are compounded by infrastructural deficits such as unstable electricity, poor network quality, and unreliable bandwidth, alongside time constraints associated with agriculture and other livelihood activities. These findings are consistent with research on the multi-level digital divide and barriers to technology adoption in rural small and medium enterprises (Cheuk et al., 2018; Fanelli & Fanelli, 2021; Sindakis & Showkat, 2024; Vimalkumar et al., 2021), but add a tourism-specific lens by showing how such divides directly shape visibility, guest retention, and the viability of “workation” markets.

Taken together, these results make several contributions to theory. First, they advance the literature on digital entrepreneurship in rural tourism by demonstrating that social media adoption is best understood as a contextual negotiation between technological affordances and structural constraints, rather than as a linear diffusion of innovation. In contrast to studies that focus primarily on the demand side of tourists’ digital behavior, destination branding, or influencer effects, this study centers the voices of rural hosts and shows how authenticity, community representation, and ethical considerations are embedded in their digital strategies.

## Implications

### Theoretical Implications

This research contributes to the literature on digital entrepreneurship and rural tourism by highlighting the nuanced ways rural actors navigate social media adoption. Previous studies have focused on how social media content influences tourist awareness and decision making (Hussain et al., 2024), the impact of online channels (including social media) on homestay bookings in rural contexts, (Kapri & Sharma, 2024) and the role of social networks in how homestay hosts operate and promote homestays (Gyamtsho et al., 2025). This study emphasizes authenticity, ethical content creation, and relational trust as the critical dimensions of digital engagement in rural hospitality contexts. Additionally, the findings underscore that digital adoption is not merely a function of individual agency but is deeply mediated by infrastructural, socio-economic, and operational conditions, advancing the understanding of the contextual embeddedness of technology adoption in rural enterprises.

## Practical Implications

Homestay operators should not view social media as a channel to communicate; they should strategically leverage digital platforms by tailoring platform use to target demographics, emphasizing video content for trust, optimizing keywords, and considering paid promotion to significantly enhance visibility and customer engagement. The study also demonstrates the value of collaborative strategies, such as knowledge sharing among operators or community-based content initiatives, to overcome individual skill and resource limitations. Moreover, operators should adopt proactive online risk management practices to safeguard their reputation and trust.

## Policy Implications

Policymakers and tourism development agencies must adopt a multi-layered approach to support rural homestay. The 2022 National Strategy for Promotion of Rural Homestays recognises digital technologies and platforms for rural tourism as one of the five key strategic pillars for developing rural tourism across India (Ministry of Tourism, 2022). Under this strategy, the Ministry aims to provide necessary financial, technical and marketing support to rural homestays to foster entrepreneurial opportunities, sustainable livelihoods, and inclusive community-based tourism. At the state level, Sikkim under the state tourism policy, 2018 homestay and community-based tourism are explicitly highlighted as key components of inclusive tourism strategy (Government of Sikkim, 2018). Beyond regulatory and infrastructural support, the state has also invested in capacity-building: under the Sikkim INSPIRES (Integrated Service Provision and Innovation for Reviving Economies) providing workshops and training to upgrade hospitality standards and equip local homestay owners with necessary skills (Government of Sikkim, 2024). Further, Yakten village in Pakyong district has been officially declared India's first Digital Nomad village, transforming it into a fully digital-ready rural destination by ensuring high-speed internet, stable power supply, co-working homestays, and integrated hospitality services, all while leveraging traditional hospitality and community-based living (The Hindu, 2025).

Building on these policy precedents, further action by government and tourism development agencies could deepen and operationalize support for rural homestays through a coordinated, multi-pronged strategy. Further, facilitating community-level digital cooperatives or shared online platforms that provide collective marketing, booking, payment, and support services will help reduce individual costs and shield smaller operators from fraud or market volatility.

## Limitations & Future Research Directions

Although this study offers critical insights, it is not without limitations. First, the research focuses exclusively on rural homestays in Sikkim with a small sample size, limiting its generalizability to urban contexts. Second, the qualitative approach, while providing depth, does not quantify the relative impact of different social media strategies on business performance. Future research could address these limitations and further advance knowledge by using quantitative research design with theories such as the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT). The study could also explore comparative studies across regions or contexts to assess regional variations in digital adoption and strategy effectiveness. Employing mixed-methods or longitudinal designs to quantify the

impact of social media practices on business performance over time can be helpful in understanding the effectiveness of social media usage in the homestay sector.

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### Declaration

**Conflict of Interest Declaration:** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest. **Informed Consent Declaration:** This study complied with standard ethical practices in qualitative research. The participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study, their voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any stage. Verbal/written informed consent was obtained from all interviewed homestay operators. No information was disclosed in this study.

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