

# Digital Empowerment of Rural Homestays Through WhatsApp: Exploring Sustainable Tourism Development in Uttar Pradesh

Dr. Anandvardhan<sup>1</sup>; Dr. Maneesh Kumar<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of Commerce, Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Gorakhpur University, Gorakhpur, U.P

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of Commerce, Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Gorakhpur University, Gorakhpur, U.P

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**Abstract:** This study has been conducted to explore the potential of WhatsApp marketing for promoting village homestays in Uttar Pradesh and thereby leading to sustainable rural development. By reviewing existing literature and analysing government initiatives, the researcher studies how accessible digital marketing tools can lessen the gap between rural tourism providers and urban travelers. The study examines the effectiveness of WhatsApp Business application's features, visual storytelling, and community-based marketing in augmenting homestay visibility while supporting economic diversification, women empowerment, preservation of culture, and ecological sustainability. Findings are a testimony that strategic implementation of WhatsApp marketing enables rural businesses, specifically the homestay providers, to participate in the tourism economy directly, raise the standard of living, create authentic travel experiences, and ultimately maintain and preserve rich cultural heritage in UP villages. The paper proposes a digital marketing framework for village homestays that aligns with sustainable development goals.

**Keywords:** Rural Tourism, Homestays, Sustainable Tourism, Tourism Promotion.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Our society is undergoing a massive restructuring, and as a result, we are witnessing a deeply ironic paradox. On the one hand, the urban population is increasing exponentially; cities are getting more and more crowded with every passing day, but at the same time, people in these cities are living in chronic loneliness and social isolation, causing mental and psychological problems like depression, anxiety, insomnia and feelings of existential crisis. People looking for a break from the chaotic but dull and boring life of cities have started searching for avenues which are simple, natural and free from chaos and crowds. Villages are the new ones on the list of tourist destinations where people like to go to relax and find peace of mind. Patterns of the tourism industry reveal that people from tier 1 and tier 2 cities have started to visit remote places and villages.

As it is said that real India lives in its villages, people are inclining towards villages to have an experience of the village lifestyle and live the life they have heard about from their ancestors who shifted to cities a few generations ago.

Uttar Pradesh has a very prominent place on the tourist map of India. It has the most fertile land in the world, where many civilisations grew and flourished. UP is very rich from the point of view of cultural tourism, folk music and dance, handicrafts, historical monuments, shrines, etc., which give it immense potential for tourism development. The opening of the Ram Mandir in January 2024 has significantly increased the number of tourists in UP. As per the report of the U.P. tourism department, U.P. recorded a tourist/visitor footfall of more than 48 crore in the year 2023. (*Year-Wise Tourist Statistics | Welcome to U.P. Tourism-Official Website of Department of Tourism, Government of Uttar Pradesh, India, n.d.*)

Limited diversification has been the main drawback of the rural economy; the village economy is basically an agrarian economy, which ultimately depends on the monsoon. Projects like homestays will diversify the economy and reduce the dependence on agriculture. In this mobile phone era, where connectivity is not hindered by geographical boundaries, rural Uttar Pradesh has a golden opportunity for a steady momentum to its economy. The last decade has witnessed an exponential growth in the number of internet

users. After the launch of WhatsApp in 2010, with its widespread adoption and user-friendly interface, it has become very popular even among people with very basic education. After the launch of the WhatsApp Business Application in 2018, WhatsApp has emerged as a business platform; its unique features make it an easy and flawless platform to connect with people and earn a livelihood without the need for any middleman, unlike in agriculture, where a large portion of the income goes into the hands of the middleman.

Homestay owners can promote local experiences over WhatsApp share real-time updates about local festivals, harvest seasons, or cultural events. Promote village walking tours, bullock cart rides, or traditional cooking classes. Coordinate with local artisans to offer craft workshops through WhatsApp bookings. Arrange farm visits, bird watching, or nature walks based on guest interests. Connect guests with local guides or activity providers through WhatsApp introductions

#### ➤ *Statement of the Problem*

- Village homestays have limited digital marketing reach.
- Difficulties in bringing together rural hosts and visitors.
- The necessity for sustainable tourism models in UP.

#### ➤ *Research Objectives*

- To evaluate WhatsApp marketing effectiveness for village homestays.
- To assess the impact of promotional activities on WhatsApp on rural tourism.
- To develop a replicable marketing framework for the homestay business.
- To identify the relationship between digital marketing and sustainable rural development.
- To discover the challenges and opportunities in implementing these strategies.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

(Mukhopadhyay & Babu, n.d.) In their study surveyed 180 homestay owners and 540 guests from six Indian states (Maharashtra, Himachal Pradesh, Kerala, Rajasthan, Sikkim, and Goa) to investigate the revolutionary effects of digital platforms on the homestay industry in India. Key findings show that 67% of homestays switched from offline to online operations, with over 90% reporting increased outreach and 79% reporting higher revenues. However, there are still issues with quality control and high commission rates from online travel agencies (15–30%). To increase exposure while shielding operators from monopolistic OTA activities, the authors suggest setting up a centralised technology-driven registration system, offering policy assistance like domestic electricity prices for homestays, and developing a specific government homestay platform.

(Singh et al., 2020) Using the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) framework, this study investigates how rural

homestay entrepreneurs in Kullu District, Himachal Pradesh, embrace and use digital marketing tools. Key findings show that social media platforms and online booking portals, especially Goibibo (30%), are the most popular digital marketing tools. Additionally, 87.7% of respondents said that digital marketing greatly improves business development. According to the survey, in order to draw in new guests, homestay hosts should put more effort into keeping their websites up to date, responding to evaluations from previous guests, and using social media to post blogs, vlogs, and live tales.

(Hu & Zhang, 2024) In order to address the difficulties in creating efficient B&B marketing strategies to aid in rural tourism, the paper looks at marketing methods for rural homestays in ethnic communities through IoT integration. It concludes that IoT-enabled smart tourism greatly improves personalised experiences through recommendation systems, and that government-supported ethnic village homestays outperform private establishments due to lower costs and better supplier relationships.

(Chatterjee et al., 2024) The research on homestays and rural tourism in India examined 31 articles to see their effect on local economies, cultures, and ecosystems. According to the study, homestays preserve local customs and offer sustainable substitutes for traditional lodging while creating jobs and transferring urban resources to rural communities, acting as economic multipliers. According to the study, genuine cultural interaction and environmental preservation through rural tourism successfully stop rural-urban migration. The authors suggest creating thorough policies for sustainable tourism, strengthening media marketing, building stakeholder cooperation, expanding infrastructure while preserving environmental integrity, and offering occupational training in rural areas.

(Murniati et al., 2023) examined the digital divide in Community-Based Tourism (CBT) homestay operators in rural Malaysia and their restricted use of social media marketing tools. Due to a number of factors, including an ageing population (60+ years old), youth migration to urban areas, inadequate internet infrastructure, language barrier and an excessive reliance on government agencies and travel agents, the findings show that eight out of nine operators still use traditional marketing methods. According to the study's findings, immediate, focused training initiatives are necessary to close the digital divide, raise awareness and proficiency in digital marketing, and boost the rural homestay industry's sustainability and competitiveness internationally in Malaysia.

#### ➤ *Research Gap*

For the sake of identifying the gap in the earlier research work, researchers have gone through several papers related to rural tourism and homestay business published in various national and international journals. They also studied various reports published by governments from time to time. After a thorough study of the subject matter, researchers found that there are very limited studies on WhatsApp marketing for rural homestays. Especially, what triggered the researchers to

conduct this research was the lack of Uttar Pradesh-specific research in this domain.

### ➤ *Theoretical Framework*

#### • *The Digital Revolution in Rural Tourism*

Digital platforms have totally transformed the rural tourism industry. It symbolises a paradigm shift towards inclusive growth rather than just technological advancement. Village homestays, once reliant on word-of-mouth recommendations and local networks, can now reach global audiences with targeted WhatsApp marketing. This democratisation of marketing tools enables rural entrepreneurs to compete in the tourism marketplace without significant capital investment.

The beauty of WhatsApp marketing lies in its simplicity and accessibility. In contrast to complex digital marketing platforms that necessitate technical expertise, WhatsApp enables village hosts to communicate directly with potential visitors using familiar message formats. This direct communication channel builds trust and personal connections- two essential elements in the hospitality industry. Homestay owners can coordinate with local artisans, farmers, and cultural groups to offer integrated packages. Guests can book pottery workshops, organic farming experiences, or traditional cooking classes through WhatsApp conversations.

The Digital India programme's focus on improving digital infrastructure in rural areas directly supports WhatsApp marketing effectiveness. In September 2024, UP had 131.57 million internet subscribers, out of which around half, i.e 64.64 million, were from rural areas. (*Telecom Regulatory Authority of India, 2025*). Improved internet connectivity and smartphone penetration enable more sophisticated digital marketing strategies and better guest communication. WhatsApp has become synonymous with messaging. India has the highest number of WhatsApp users. More than 85 crore internet subscribers in India are using WhatsApp, which makes WhatsApp a very powerful medium for connecting with people. (*WhatsApp Users by Country 2025, n.d.*)

#### • *Government Initiatives Supporting Rural Tourism Development*

The central as well as state government, in coordination with the Ministry of Culture, is working towards the development of rural tourism in the state. The main objective of the government is to preserve our rich culture and traditions. The Indian government's Swadesh Darshan Scheme, launched in 2014-15 by the Ministry of Tourism and Culture, focuses on the integrated development of theme-based tourism circuits. By bringing more tourists to rural regions, circuits like the Ramayana Circuit and Buddhist Circuit in Uttar Pradesh directly help local homestays. (*Swadesh Darshan Scheme | Ministry of Tourism | Government of India, n.d.*)

By offering direct booking channels, WhatsApp marketing enables homestays to take advantage of this

heightened interest. The Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual Heritage Augmentation Drive (*PRASHAD SCHEME, n.d.*) enhances infrastructure around religious sites, many located in rural areas. Village homestays near these sites benefit from improved connectivity and facilities, while WhatsApp marketing helps them reach pilgrims seeking authentic spiritual experiences.

To give pilgrims additional lodging options, the Uttar Pradesh government has authorised a new Bed and Breakfast and Homestay Policy for 2025. This program seeks to provide more authentic and reasonably priced lodging options throughout the state for tourists, especially those on religious pilgrimages (Somya Agarwal, 2025). Homestays can use WhatsApp to promote craft workshops, artisan interactions, and shopping experiences, creating additional revenue streams for local communities.

### ➤ *WhatsApp Marketing Strategies for Homestays in Villages*

- **Community-Based WhatsApp Groups:** WhatsApp allows us to create location-specific groups that bring together homestay owners, local guides, artisans, and service providers in a locality. The community feature of WhatsApp can club different groups (up to 50), where the group activities can be controlled by respective group administrators and the whole community may be regulated by another administrator simultaneously. Community messages can be sent to all the groups simultaneously, and messages intended for a particular group can be disseminated to that group only without letting the other groups know about it. These collaborative networks enable resource sharing, joint marketing initiatives, and coordinated service delivery. For instance, a WhatsApp community covering the Naimisharanya circuit can collectively promote religious tourism while individual homestays highlight their unique offerings.
- **Profile and Setup Optimisation:** Users can create a professional WhatsApp Business profile with homestay name, location, contact details, and website link. One can upload a high-quality profile picture featuring the homestay or local landmark, write compelling business description highlighting unique village experiences. Set up business hours and quick reply messages for common inquiries. Enable location sharing to help guests find the homestay easily. Set up welcome messages for new contacts with basic information and the booking process. Create quick replies for frequently asked questions (rates, amenities, directions etc).
- **Visual Storytelling through Multimedia:** WhatsApp enables homestay owners to share captivating videos and photos of historic architecture, local cuisine, daily lives, cultural performances and festivals. High-quality photographs and video tours of properties offer immersive previews that foster emotional connections with potential visitors. These efforts influence booking choices.
- **Location sharing:** WhatsApp provides the facility of sharing our live and current locations. It is highly helpful for the drifters and explorers who avoid tourist places, search for offbeat experiences and like to blend with locals. With the facility of sharing location, homestay

owners can send the exact location of the stay to their customers, which helps the customers to reach the place hassle-free.

- **Contact Sharing:** WhatsApp allows us to smoothly share contacts with anyone on WhatsApp. People engaged in the hospitality business can use this feature to share the contact numbers of local guides, artisans and experience providers.
- **Digital Payment:** WhatsApp is a complete package in itself; it also provides payment facilities to users. One can scan a QR code or just select the contact they wants to pay, and with just a click, the remittance is done. It will prove highly suitable for smaller payments to experience providers, local transport, and local vendors.

Apart from the above uses homestay owners can leverage whatsapp as a channel of marketing communication in many ways. WhatsApp can be used as a tool for Customer Relationship Management. Homestay hosts can classify their contacts into broadcast lists based on criteria like purpose, budget, length of stay, or interests. This focused strategy increases engagement rates and conversion possibilities by ensuring that relevant content reaches the right people. These channels can be used to efficiently communicate special events, holiday celebrations, and seasonal promotions. One can create WhatsApp groups for repeat visitors and travel enthusiasts and offer exclusive discounts to loyal customers through personal messages. Homestay owners can build community networks with travel agents, tour operators and other local homestay owners for cross-referrals. Collaborate with village tourism committees for joint marketing efforts, partner with local taxi drivers, guides, and vendors for comprehensive service offerings most importantly establish connections with travel bloggers and social media influencers.

### III. DISCUSSION

#### ➤ *Sustainable Development Through Rural Tourism*

- **Economic Empowerment:** WhatsApp marketing allows rural people to directly benefit from tourism. The rural tourism industry can now operate without middlemen. While local service providers profit from the increased demand, homestay owners maintain higher profit margins. This direct economic impact reduces urban migration and improves household income.
- **Women's Participation and Leadership:** Since women are managing a large number of village homestays, WhatsApp marketing is particularly empowering female entrepreneurs. The platform's user friendliness and home-based operation model allow women to manage tourism businesses and still take care of their families while fulfilling traditional family responsibilities. This participation enhances women's economic independence and social status within communities.
- **Cultural Preservation and Pride** WhatsApp marketing encourages villagers to document and share their cultural heritage, traditions, and local knowledge. This process not only attracts tourists but also instils pride in local culture among younger generations. Traditional crafts, folk songs,

regional cuisines, and ancestral practices get relevance and economic value.

- **Environmental Conservation** Sustainable tourism promotion emphasises environmental stewardship. Homestays highlight eco-friendly practices, organic farming, and natural conservation efforts. Guests attracted through these platforms often seek authentic, low-impact travel experiences that support environmental preservation.
- **Infrastructure Development** Successful homestay businesses generate demand for improved infrastructure, including better roads, reliable electricity, clean water supply, and waste management systems. Government and private investment in these areas benefits entire communities, not just tourism operators.
- **Skill Development and Capacity Building** Marketing over digital platforms requires digital literacy, hospitality skills, and business management capabilities. Training programmes addressing these needs create human capital that benefits communities beyond tourism. Young people acquire marketable skills that provide alternatives to agricultural dependence.
- **Healthcare and Education Access:** Increased incomes from tourism enable families to invest in healthcare and education. Children from homestay-operating families often have better educational opportunities, while communities can support improved healthcare facilities and services.
- **Market Access for Local Products:** Tourists staying in village homestays become customers for local products, including handicrafts, organic produce, and traditional foods. WhatsApp facilitates these transactions and helps establish ongoing customer relationships that extend beyond the tourism visit.

#### ➤ *Challenges and Solutions*

- **Digital Literacy Gaps** Effective WhatsApp marketing is hampered by rural people's low levels of digital literacy. Peer-to-peer learning networks, community training programs, and streamlined marketing templates that lower technological complexity are examples of solution approaches.
- **Ecological challenges** like severe noise pollution due to traffic, land pollution caused by waste generated by overcrowding. Promoting electric vehicles for local conveyance, setting up water treatment plants near rivers, partnering with NGOs for awareness campaigns against pollution can help mitigate ecological degradation.
- **Language Barriers** Multilingualism is necessary to communicate with a variety of visitor populations. English-speaking kids can help with international guest communication while learning hospitality skills through language partnerships that communities can establish.
- **Quality Standardization** Coordination and the creation of standards are necessary to maintain uniform service quality throughout village homestays. WhatsApp groups can help with group quality improvement projects, peer review, and the sharing of best practices.

- **Economic Barriers:** Investment requirements for digital marketing. Digitally illiterate people are technology averse, they are highly concerned about return on investment. For this, some NGOs can take the responsibility for their technical education and help them create their profiles.
- **Cultural and Social Factors :** it has also been observed when tourism activities initially start at a place many people don't like it. It is because they are afraid from the probable ill effects on their culture and society because of outsiders. People sometimes resist tourism to preserve local traditions.

#### ➤ *Findings and Interventions*

The integration of WhatsApp marketing with village homestay promotion represents a scalable model for rural development. Success requires coordinated efforts involving government support, community participation, and private sector partnerships. Recommendations include establishing regional coordination centres, developing standardised training modules, and creating financing mechanisms for infrastructure improvements.

Technology adoption should be gradual and culturally sensitive, respecting traditional values while embracing beneficial innovations. The goal is not to transform rural areas into urban replicas but to enhance existing strengths through digital connectivity and market access. If given proper attention and care, WhatsApp marketing has the potential to boost rural tourism and ultimately raise the standard of living in the villages of Uttar Pradesh.

To accomplish the purpose of promoting rural homestays in Uttar Pradesh the state needs to run Capacity building programs and provide a proper support mechanisms to help rural people set up their homestay business. As this is a totally new concept for rural people traditionally involve in agriculture and cattle farming government shall adopt public-private partnerships models to help in rural upliftment and specifically increasing women's participation in the economy.

The idea of promoting rural homestays well aligns with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, commonly known as SDGs. Responsible and consciously formed tourism policies in rural areas go hand in hand with the SDGs, like.

- **SDG 8:** highlights the necessity of environmentally sustainable economic growth that benefits all. Enhancing resource efficiency, separating economic expansion from environmental deterioration, and assisting micro, small, and medium-sized businesses are further objectives.
- **SDG 11:** The goals of SDG11 include making sure that everyone has access to safe and affordable housing, promoting inclusive urbanisation, preserving natural and cultural assets, lowering the environmental impact of cities, and increasing disaster resilience.
- **SDG 17:** This target acknowledges that governments, the commercial sector, and civil society must work together globally to achieve the SDGs. It focuses on bolstering

implementation strategies, such as trade, capacity building, technology transfer, finance, and institutional coherence.

## IV. CONCLUSION

WhatsApp marketing for village homestays in Uttar Pradesh offers a transformative approach to rural tourism development. By leveraging simple, accessible technology, rural communities can participate directly in the tourism economy while preserving their cultural heritage and natural environment. Government initiatives provide the foundation, but community-driven marketing efforts through platforms like WhatsApp ensure sustainable, inclusive growth.

The path forward requires recognising that sustainable rural development is not just about economic growth but about empowering communities to control their development trajectory. WhatsApp marketing places this control directly in the hands of village entrepreneurs, creating opportunities for authentic, meaningful tourism experiences that benefit visitors and hosts alike.

Through strategic implementation of WhatsApp marketing strategies, supported by government initiatives and community commitment, village homestays can become catalysts for comprehensive rural transformation. The result is not just improved living standards but the creation of resilient, self-reliant communities that thrive while maintaining their unique identity and cultural values.

"How can we succeed while making sure everyone wins?" is a powerful question that rural tourism businesses are essentially asking themselves when they adopt the Triple Bottom Line approach. These progressive business owners are creating something far more significant than merely making quick cash; they are creating companies that genuinely care about their communities, preserve the stunning locations they call home, and still make a healthy profit.

Contemplate it as ethical travel. The three main pillars of the Triple Bottom Line are known as the "3 P's": profit, planet, and people. Together, they lay the groundwork for tourism that endures because each one is equally significant.

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