Assessing the Scope of Digital Platform in Tourism Recovery: A Study on Women Entrepreneurs Embedding Intangible Cultural Heritage with Tourism Products

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Abstract: Both national and local governments and communities may benefit from preserving their ICH as a tourist attraction. Researchers have a hard time making sense of the influence that ICH data has on the psyches of interacting visitors because of its splintered character. Previous studies have indicated that promoting traditional crafts and craftsmanship as ICH may be beneficial for tourism. The Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) is an asset of cultural variety and a guarantee of sustainable development, as recognized by the Convention for the Protection of the ICH (Marie & Swain, 2021). With the shock and disruption caused by the COVID 19 epidemic, ICH is expected to be the game changer in restorative tourism. Those in the tourist industry were hit the hardest by the pandemic's need for widespread changes in livelihood. As a result of the worldwide transportation shutdown, the travel sector came to a complete halt. In light of this situation, academics and industry professionals have been probing the potential of the digital space to reach out to visitors and help them work around interruptions. Nonetheless, this phenomenon has been rare and directly correlated to levels of digital literacy, internet penetration, device accessibility, and institutional backing. The purpose of this research is to examine how often used internet platforms are by women entrepreneurs that sell items with local ICH to foreign visitors. The SonajhuriHaat in Santiniketan, West Bengal, was selected as the research location.

Design/Methodology/Approach – The research plans to use an ethno-pragmatic methodology (which stands in opposition to the culture-external universalist pragmatics represented by neo-Gricean pragmatics and politeness theory). To learn how customers react to ICH-based tourism goods and how much of impact digital platforms have had on the success of women business owners, a qualitative research was conducted.

Findings - Women business owners in SonajhuriHaat were found to have a modest degree of digital literacy and to use digital platforms to leverage business proposals only occasionally. To develop their company and deal with shocks and interruptions like the COVID 19 epidemic, they think digital platforms may be the most cost-effective method.

Implications - Lengkeek's results were reinforced by the research, which discovered "inheritance representation" and "display of immersion pleasure" whenever visitors engaged with ICH objects in conjunction with their trips (2008). The research reaffirmed the need to allocate resources to digitizing ICH (Logan, Craith, &Kockel, 2015) and creating digital inventories with the goal of boosting ICH knowledge for tourism. Recognizing the role of
women entrepreneurs in the preservation and transmission of ICH and the value co-creation opportunities for tourists, the study calls for a community-based inventorying process of local ICH and capacity building initiatives to support small and micro women entrepreneurs operating in the SonajhuriHaat to use digital platforms.

**Originality/value** – Advanced mixed method research is a recent development in the field of tourist studies. As a result of the method's focus on social interactions, we may learn more about the visitors' mental processes.

**Key words:** digital platform, intangible cultural heritage, women, entrepreneurs, tourism

### Introduction

Economic disruptions affect tourism especially. Tourism has more disorganized small and micro-entrepreneurial businesses than other sectors. These are less resilient and flexible to handle shock expenses and obligations. Given their limited resources and barriers to financing and technical innovation, small entrepreneurial endeavors may sustain a shock for a shorter duration than larger businesses. Tourism has a far greater rate of temporary employment than the rest of the non-financial sector industry, which lowers worker benefits and social security. Finally, tourist services are very interdependent and varied, so a crisis in one sector may devastate the whole tourism value chain. COVID-19 has shown tourism's susceptibility. However, historically, this sector has bounced back to the growth path from disruptions caused by international terrorism (2001), epidemics (SARS and MERS, 2003), economic recession (sub-prime recession, 2009) etc. and on each revival and recovery it embedded operational innovations within its functional domains. COVID-19 pandemic not only challenges the industry to recover and revive sustainably, but also brings perceived uncertainty and risk of traveling. In the context of rural tourism these challenges reach extreme levels based on infrastructural inadequacy (including healthcare infrastructure), information blockages, absence of technological support or underutilization of available technology and social stigmatization. These challenges become more complex with the pandemic-infused hodophobic travelers and xenophobic host-community which are likely to be engaged in a repulsive relationship.

As per the observations of UNWTO (2020a, 2020b), the domestic tourism would initiate the sectoral recovery and the rural tourism sector is most likely to trigger the recovery initiative. Rural destinations are observed to be in high demand (rural visitation has increased to the extent of 29.82% since June, 2021). However, most of the rural destinations suffer from limitations of carrying capacity and compels the visitors to branch-out to micro-interiors where they come closer to the ethnic and indigenous existence of habitats. This intimacy has opened up scope of infusion of ICH in the experiential spectrum of the visitors. Opportunity to interact with local ICH has the potentiality to emerge as an indicator of authentic experience which induces increased share-of-wallet and destination advocacy. However, embedding local ICH with conventional tourism products require adequate awareness and in-depth knowledge of ICH. Community-based inventorying and capacity building exercise may pave ways for the small and micro-entrepreneurs to use ICH as an integral part of tourism products. Disruptions inhibit these enterprises from
using the physical spaces. However, the virtual platforms offer more than potent alternatives for these small and micro-entrepreneurs to showcase the ICH as interactive touch-points to engage visitors with authentic experience and scope to endorse (share-of-wallet and destination advocacy). Several such instances can be cited whereby local rural-entrepreneurs have used the digital platforms to reach out to the visitors (tourists) and ensuring a real-time experience using advanced technologies, namely augmented reality, visual interactivity etc. These entrepreneurs have created simulated environment in which visitors could interact with local ICH to enjoy immersive experience.

Bolpur-Santiniketan, an establishment in the district of Birbhum and in the state of West Bengal, India is a rich hub of ICH, primarily, because of its indigenous spread of habitat. Additionally, it has people who are involved in transgenerational practice of craftworks and folk-art. The Ministry of Culture, Govt. of India has identified state-wise distribution of ICH. West Bengal has been identified to have traditional practices of ‘DeoalChitra & Alpana’, ‘ManosaGaan’, ‘Chaaau Dance’, ‘Durga Puja’, ‘Kushan Gann’ ‘Sowa-Rigpa’ (knowledge of healing science) etc. which are now recognized as ICH. The ‘DeoalChitra & Alpana’, a traditional practice of the Santhals has been used in multiple media and has been a strong presence in the tourism circuit of Bolpur- Santiniketan. Apart from this, dying, stitching, woodwork etc. spins out as tangible tourism products from the local ICH. The folk-songs and folk-dances too form the broader perspective of visitor experience. Tangible cultural outputs form the nucleus of the tourism-offer in Bolpur- Santiniketan. Festivals and fairs (PoushMela and Basontatsav) have primarily showcased these tangible aspects of cultural heritage. However, use of technology and digital tools has remained scarce (Kumar et al., 2021 & Gautam et al., 2022). In fact, barring a few individual attempt the entire SonajhuriHaat does not have a digital identity and the adverse impact of pandemic inflicted disruptions was felt.

Women face additional challenges in entrepreneurship stemming largely from their gender and their care giving role within their family and community. Additional challenges experienced by women entrepreneurs are:

- The biggest problem women business owners have is getting access to funding. Equity investment eligibility restrictions, collateral requirements, credit history proof, required full-time engagement in the firm, and a dearth of accessible microloans all work against it.

- They have a hard time juggling their personal and professional duties. The care they must provide to their offspring, grandkids, parents, and other relatives may hinder the development of their company.

- Because of their lower average salary and greater dependence on government handouts, women have less financial resources with which to invest in their firm.

- Because of sexism, women often aren't treated seriously, even in traditionally male-dominated fields.

- they don't have enough social support where they live.
Women company owners don't have the necessary financial literacy, business planning, regulatory, management, or technological skills.

**Background of the study and literature support**

Despite its implied opportunities and hazards, heritage and tourism are thought to be inextricably linked (Benton, 2010; Boniface and Fowler, 1993; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998; Nuryanti, 1996; Timothy and Boyd, 2003; Waterton et al., 2015; West, 2010). Tourism may help preserve legacy, however commoditizing heritage has hazards (Harrison, 2010; Messenger and Smith, 2010; Nuryanti, 1996) in both physical and intangible assets. "Staged authenticity" (MacCannell, 1999) promotes modernization of antiquity and artifacts, altering their authenticity. Inheritance representation and immersed enjoyment were discovered when visitors engaged with historical objects (Lengkeek, 2008).

As an asset of cultural variety and a guarantee of sustainable development, the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) acknowledges its importance. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development's 17 Sustainable Development Goals address the three dimensions of sustainable development-economic, social, and environmental- through highly interdependent spheres of action that inform development pathways at all levels and respect the three fundamental principles of human rights, equality, and sustainability. ICH may contribute to sustainable development in all three dimensions and to peace and security, which are necessary for it. It also helps indigenous people survive. Local knowledge, skills, and traditions, passed down through generations, support many individuals. Their livelihood and identity come from this lifestyle. Subsistence methods protect the community from local poverty. ICH may also produce money and good jobs for a wide spectrum of people, including the poor and disadvantaged. For example, traditional handicraft is typically a primary source of cash or barter income for marginalized groups, communities, and people. Craftspeople and their families, as well as those who transport and sell craft goods or acquire or produce raw materials, benefit from it. These actions create good work. Though ICH has been recognized as vital assets for human civilization, but its preservation and cultivation have frequently been ignored (Kurin, 2004; Su et al., 2019) owing to lack of knowledge, recognition of its ethno-cultural and socio-economic implications, and availability of funds. Heritage conservation may be funded through ICH tourist growth, according to academics. ICH monuments and antiquities, particularly intangible tourism goods with rich local and national characteristics, have drawn more visitors.

One of the best instruments for preserving and transmitting Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) is the inventory. Communities may better understand, recognize, and define their rich past via it. The systematization of this traditional knowledge may help pass it on to the next generation, and the created knowledge raises awareness of the community's intangible legacy. For these reasons, the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage requires the creation of ICH inventories. The inventory procedure collects and organizes...
information, but it doesn't ensure intangible cultural heritage protection. Assure ICH carriers that they are the protagonists of ICH protection. In other words, community engagement is required for an inventory to enhance ICH protection. The bearers or practitioners' active engagement allows partnerships for protecting, strengthening community identity, and contributing to community governance and sustainable development. A good inventory is essential for planning and executing living heritage protection activities for the reasons stated.

Decoding and data distribution are done digitally by ICH. Reactive, interactive, performative, multimedia, networking, volatile signals, and modularity are afforded by data transmission from analog to digital (Ryan, 2004). Digitization benefits ICH promotion and ICH-saturated tourist offerings. Digitization of ICH helps preserve historical and scientific resources and promotes tourism (DigiCULT, 2003). Heritage digitization should optimize the influence of tourism's primary ICH component. Cameron and Kenderdine, 2007; Cipolla, Castro, Nicol, Kratky, and Cipolla-Ficarra, 2011; Kalay, Kvan, and Affleck, 2008; Labadi and Long, 2010; Logan, Craith, and Kockel, 2015; Rusalić, 2009; Stanco, Battiato, and Gallo, 2011; Bapat et al., 2021 Digital inventories are advised for ICH tourist promotion. Smart mobile devices (cell phones, tablets) and wearables (smart watches) may spread digital ICH inventory in real time and induce sensory authenticity. Smart tourism can turn data (ICH inventory and related tourist goods) into an enhanced experience even in disruptive environments (Gretzel, Reino, Kopera, and Koo, 2015). Technology that includes ubiquitous wireless connection and enables meaningful experiences via co-creation underpins smart tourist experiences. Both tourists and hosts may use social media to provide information and promote tourism items. Rural and unconventional tourism have begun integrating digital supplemental resources, such as text, music, video, graphics, or georeferenced, to improve users' view of their surroundings (Economou, 2015) and strengthen host community identity awareness. Thus, smart or connected tourist goods that aggregate data and synchronize in real time provide novel functions like co-creation and customisation of tourism experiences (Neuhofer et al., 2015). Smart technology's rising usage in daily life makes it a suitable instrument for integrating local ICH and tourism.

Specifically, this research aims to:

(i) to evaluate the state of things online for the women-led businesses in SonajhuriHaat (Fig.1) in Santiniketan, West Bengal.

(ii) to evaluate how visitors and locals feel about the genuineness of the tour-experience provided by ICH integration with tourist items shown by women business owners at the SonajhuriHaat in Santiniketan, West Bengal.

**Methodology**

The qualitative method was used for this cross-sectional investigation. Responses were gathered through a combination of scheduled interviews and focus groups, with questions focusing on

(i) the small and women micro-entrepreneurs working in the
SonajhuriHaat and their supply-chain mechanism, and

(ii) the identification of local ICH and the way they are assimilated by women entrepreneurs.

(iii) awareness and perception of local ICHs,

(iv) their experience interacting with local ICHs,

(v) their intention to advocate and endorsement behavior on remote (digital) platforms, and

(vi) the level of awareness of the host community regarding the use of local ICHs in marketing tourism products in SonajhuriHaat and the placement of the same on digital platforms. Prior to its usage in the next stage of the research, qualitative content validity must be established via an appropriate content validation method.

A system of random sampling was used. There are a total of 213 female entrepreneurs operating out of the SonajhuriHaat. Calculations indicated a sample size of 138 (95% CI, 50% population proportion, 5% error margin). Women business owners were alphabetized, and then allocated numbers at random. Those who were the focus of the study provided the primary data. Six Focus Group Interviews (FGIs) and three semi-structured interviews were done using standard procedures. Both moving and static photographs were taken. In addition to primary sources, such as books, websites, and social media were scoured for secondary data.
Data Analysis and findings

The data sets were modified for use in the respective application environments. Coding was done on the interview transcripts. Code categories were created using the axial codings, and those were utilized to generate the theme patterns. Morgan and Hoffman's methodology was used to create the coding scheme (2018). In order to see how different keywords function together, we utilized VOS viewer. Digital platforms (Fig. 2) and travelers' hands-on participation were at the heart of the two networks (Fig.3).

We found women entrepreneurial ventures with assorted product lines, such as, traditional kantha stitch sarees, khadi and handloom products, wooden and bamboo crafts, handmade and oxidized jewelries, batik printed dress materials and wall decors, hand-painted craft works and dress materials, terracotta products, paper-pulp products, stone curving and cane works.

The average tourist footfall was found to be 89 per venture outlet per day with high traffic during the winter and spring (Holi) seasons and moderate to low during the Puja and summer season respectively. The income and profit generation is extremely polarized with identified high earners (monthly average sale of Rs. 150,743.00 and average profit of Rs. 35,391) and low earners ((monthly average sale of Rs. 5678.00 and average profit of Rs. 1,009). Out of 138 respondents 16% (23) women entrepreneurs are in this business for more than 15 years, 49% (68) are doing business for more than 10 years but less than 15 years, 7% (9) are operating for more than 5 years but less than 10 years and 28% (38)
women entrepreneurs are in their early years of operation, i.e., less than 5 years. Out of the 138 respondents 62% (86) confirmed that they use smart phones and are aware of internet and social media. Only 8.6% (12) of the respondents used Whatsapp to communicate with their customers. No evidence was found with regard to the usage of social media platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram for business purpose, neither we could identify any website (standalone or pooled) for conducting the business. 66% (91) of women entrepreneurs believe that social media and websites could be effective in reaching out to the remote customers and would have increased their revenue and profit potential. However, 34% (47) of the women entrepreneur do not have any idea about the impact of social media on business propositions. They also do not have adequate information about the use of internet technology in expanding business. While given the example of the Natungram Doll Village of East Burdwan and their digital initiative, namely, www.banglanatok.com to link with customers from a wide geographical area, the women entrepreneurs of SonajhuriHaat were found to be oblivious. Almost all women entrepreneurs confirmed that they are blessed with tourist advocacy and word-of-mouth has been the major way of entrepreneurial promotion.

While asked about the tourists’ inquisitiveness and curiosity regarding the local cultural heritage which are either associated or translated into tourism products, 28% (38) of the women entrepreneurs confirmed that the tourists are interested to know about the traditional culture & its evolution and how the indigenous people are involved in the same. The tourists also expressed their willingness to visit the workshops and the manufacturing floors to get a first-hand experience of the culture-to-product creation process. 33% (46) of the women entrepreneurs confirmed that there has been a growing trend of tourists opting to stay close to the indigenous community and be a part of their daily life. The choice of accommodation is evidence to this observation as the tourists are opting for rural homestays and remote resorts closer to indigenous belts.

The women entrepreneurs expressed their anguish and their helplessness during the COVID-19 pandemic times which brought their business almost to a standstill due to tourist immobility. In the lockdown phases the relatively small-scale women entrepreneurs were compelled to opt for different livelihoods to support their families. 67% (93) of the women entrepreneurs observed that post-pandemic tourist inflow has been exponential and that the tourists were preferring to stay away from the crowd and congestion. 22% (31) women entrepreneurs were found to believe that pandemic has brought the tourists closer to nature and indigenous culture to get rid of the claustrophobic experience and concrete entrapment, the women entrepreneurs of SonajhuriHaat were found to believe that ICH-based tourism could be a potent business recovery option.

To show codes, such as important subjects, in two situations, we used the Two-Case Model. Each example may output code frequencies and incorporate notes. The two-case methodology allowed us to link women entrepreneurs' ICH goods with visitors' real experiences. The interface of these two variables clarified the cognitive demand and
possible behavioral alignment of the tourists. The Two-Case model (Fig.4) also confirmed the possible antecedent effect of authentic experience on word-of-mouth. The ICH integration bases used by the women entrepreneurs of the SonajhuriHaat were also clarified as we observe artisan branding (majority of the ventures are named after the founder owner), cultural embedding, cultural sensitivity and storytelling were used to pitch their ventures to the tourists.

![Fig.4: Two-Case Model to relate ICH embedded tourism products marketed by women entrepreneurs and the level of authentic experience of tourists](image)

**Conclusion**

This research is especially important in light of the recent COVID-19 outbreak, which has caused significant delays in travel. Evidence abounds from post-pandemic travel throughout the world that travelers are seeking out rural regions in order to connect with the places' rich cultural history and traditions. There seems to be a metacognitive component that extends beyond the just entertaining and into the realms of spiritual restitution. The 'new-normal' in tourism may be the visit to sites with spiritual and intangible cultural importance. Tourists from urban areas are increasingly drawn to remote, natural areas that provide a variety of exciting experiences. As a result of these disturbances, virtual tourism is becoming more popular in several sites. The survey found that the women company owners at SonajhuriHaat had a decent understanding of digital platforms, but no real attempt has been made to utilize them to grow their businesses and attract more customers. In terms of advertising ICH and ICH-embedded tourist
goods, they are also losing out on the audio-visual and multimodal impact of these channels.

The study's results corroborated the hypothesis of "staged authenticity," proposed by MacCannell (1999) to describe the presentation of culture, ethnicity, and legacy for tourist consumption; staged authenticity promotes the modernization of antiquity and artifacts, undermining their authenticity. Lengkeek's results were reinforced by the study's findings of "inheritance representation" and "display of immersion enjoyment" whenever visitors engaged with ICH objects in conjunction with their trips (2008). The research reaffirmed the need to allocate resources to digitizing ICH (Logan, Craith, & Kockel, 2015) and creating digital inventories with the goal of boosting ICH knowledge for tourism.

Small and micro women entrepreneurs in the SonajhuriHaat are encouraged to take use of digital platforms, and the report suggests a community-based inventorying process of local ICH and activities to improve capacity in this area. The research acknowledges the contributions of female business owners to the maintenance and dissemination of ICH, as well as the possibilities for value co-creation between locals and visitors. Policymakers will benefit from knowing how prepared small and micro women entrepreneurs working in the SonajhuriHaat are to use technology in order to improve tourist services on virtual platforms. Small and microbusinesses that adopt digital practices will be better equipped to weather unstable markets and jumpstart the economic recovery process (Bhalerao et al., 2022; Hasana & Swain, 2022).

Reference


