

Youth Engagement and Digital Media in Promoting Rural Cultural Tourism: Evidence from Cibunar Village

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Abstract

Tourism digitalization has become a key strategy in promoting rural destinations, yet many studies have focused more on cultural preservation and community empowerment than on the role of youth and social media. This study explores how young people in Cibunar Village, Garut Regency utilize digital platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube to promote cultural and agro-tourism assets.

Using a qualitative case study, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentation of online content. The findings reveal that youth act as digital ambassadors, transforming cultural traditions into attractive narratives while simultaneously building the village's tourism brand. Their role is supported by collaboration among government, academics, businesses, communities, and media within a locally adapted digital pentahelix framework.

The study concludes that digitalization not only enhances destination visibility but also strengthens local identity and economic opportunities. However, challenges remain, including generational gaps in technology adoption and risks of cultural commodification. This research contributes to rural tourism studies by offering a youth-centered digital promotion model, and provides practical guidance for policymakers, NGOs, and tourism managers in integrating digital media into sustainable rural tourism development.

Keywords: rural tourism, youth, digital promotion, social media, pentahelix

Introduction

The rapid development of digital technology has transformed the way tourism destinations are promoted and consumed. In rural contexts, where limited infrastructure and resources often constrain conventional promotion, digital media provides a cost-effective and far-reaching alternative (Pencarelli, 2020; Toubes et al., 2021). Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have become powerful tools to showcase cultural heritage, local products, and community-based tourism activities to broader audiences (Devylia, 2025; Kasemsarn & Nickpour, 2025).

While cultural-based rural tourism has been widely discussed in academic discourse, most studies tend to focus on cultural preservation, physical infrastructure, or economic impacts (Duxbury et al., 2025; Monika et al., 2024). Relatively few have explored the strategic role of youth engagement and their use of digital media in sustaining and promoting rural cultural tourism. This creates a gap, as young people are not only digital natives but also key actors in ensuring cultural continuity and innovation (Ndlovu et al., 2024; Schilling, 2023).

Cibunar Village, located in Garut Regency, West Java, Indonesia, offers a relevant case. The village is endowed with rich cultural assets such as traditional martial arts (silat buhun), blacksmithing crafts, and harvest rituals yet faces challenges in attracting and retaining visitors in a competitive tourism market. In recent years, local youth have taken the initiative to promote Cibunar through creative content on social media, combining cultural authenticity with modern storytelling. This phenomenon positions Cibunar as an illustrative case to analyze how youth engagement and digital media can revitalize rural cultural tourism.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to explore how digitalization and youth participation drive the revitalization of Cibunar Tourism Village.

Research Design

The case study design was selected to provide an in-depth understanding of the role of social media and young people in promoting rural tourism (Senyao & Ha, 2022).

Research Location

The research was conducted in Cibunar Village, Garut Regency, West Java, which is undergoing transformation into a cultural and agro-based tourism destination while increasingly relying on digital promotion (Sitthikun et al., 2024).

Participants and Sampling

Participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling to represent key stakeholder groups (Leighton et al., 2021), especially:

1. Youth community (digital content creators, local art activists)
2. Village government (tourism officers)
3. Local entrepreneurs (culinary, handicrafts, homestay owners)
4. Community leaders (cultural guardians)

Data Collection

Data were gathered through (Saud et al., 2023; Saydam et al., 2022):

1. In-depth interviews (30–60 minutes each) focusing on experiences in digital promotion and tourism development.
2. Participant observation, particularly in cultural events and youth digital campaigns.
3. Documentation of social media posts, promotional materials, and village reports.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Lochmiller, 2021), involving familiarization, coding, categorization, and theme development. The analysis focused on three dimensions (Naeem et al., 2023):

1. Digital promotion strategies on social media,
2. Youth involvement in tourism branding,
3. The synergy between online promotion and local cultural identity.

Validity of Data

To ensure validity, the study applied triangulation of sources and methods and conducted member checking with selected participants (Donkoh & Mensah, 2023).

Result and Discussion

Youth as the Driving Force of Digital Promotion

The study found that youth play a central role in bridging the gap between traditional cultural assets and modern digital platforms (Gulnora, 2024; Poddar, 2024). As shown in Table 1, most informants involved in digital activities are under 35 years old, familiar with Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. Their creativity allows Cibunar to reach wider audiences while still highlighting authentic village life. This aligns with previous research emphasizing youth-led innovation in rural branding (Putra & Yuniarti, 2021).

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Informants

Code	Age	Gender	Role in Village	Description
Y1	22	M	Youth (Content Creator)	Active on Instagram & TikTok for Cibunar branding
Y2	25	F	Youth (Community Activist)	Organizes digital campaigns for cultural events
G1	47	M	Village Officer	Responsible for tourism and digital promotion
B1	32	F	Entrepreneur	Runs homestay & promotes via social media
M1	29	M	Local Media	Admin of Facebook page & YouTube channel

Source: Fieldwork data, processed by authors (2025).

Dominant Types of Digital Content

The digital promotion of Cibunar revolves around three main content categories: cultural performances, agro-based activities, and local culinary (see Table 2).

1. Cultural performances, such as pencak silat and hadroh, are highly visual and receive strong engagement on TikTok.
2. Agro-based activities like rice planting or bamboo conservation appeal to eco-conscious tourists.
3. Local culinary, particularly rengginang and bangkerok ketan, combines nostalgia and marketability.

This diversification of content supports the sustainability of promotion and reduces dependence on single attractions.

Table 2. Types of Digital Content Produced by Youth

Platform	Content Type	Example Activities	Purpose
Instagram	Photo stories, reels	Culinary promotion, bamboo crafts	Attracting domestic tourists
TikTok	Short videos	Silat buhun, traditional farming	Viral promotion & youth engagement
YouTube	Vlogs & mini-docs	Ruwat bumi ritual, local storytelling	Cultural education & documentation
Facebook	Event posters, live streaming	Festival, community events	Local networking & awareness

Source: Fieldwork observation and interviews, processed by authors (2025).

Challenges and Adaptive Strategies

Despite the enthusiasm, several challenges persist (see Table 3).

1. Limited digital skills among elders restrict intergenerational involvement. Youth responded by initiating peer-to-peer training and documenting oral histories.
2. Resource constraints limit production quality, but collaborations with universities and small businesses provide alternative solutions.
3. Balancing authenticity and commercialization remains a sensitive issue, addressed by emphasizing storytelling rather than purely entertainment-oriented content.

These findings resonate with studies by Nugroho et al. (2022), which highlight that rural digital tourism must manage tensions between tradition and modernization.

Table 3. Challenges and Strategies in Digitalizing Village Tourism Promotion

Challenge	Description	Strategy Implemented
Limited Digital Skills	Many villagers, especially older generations, lack ability to use social media effectively.	Youth-led training sessions and peer-to-peer mentoring.
Resource Constraints	Limited budget for equipment (camera, internet, editing software).	Collaboration with local businesses & universities for sponsorship and training.
Content Sustainability	Inconsistent posting and limited creative ideas over time.	Creating a content calendar and rotating youth teams for regular updates.
Balancing Authenticity & Market Appeal	Risk of over-commercializing cultural traditions.	Emphasizing storytelling and involving elders to maintain cultural integrity.
Low Visibility Beyond Local Level	Content mostly reached only local audiences.	Leveraging hashtags, cross-platform sharing, and influencer collaboration.

Source: Literature review (compiled by authors, 2025).

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Towards a Community-Centered Digital Pentahelix

The Cibunar case demonstrates a localized pentahelix adaptation where community and youth remain the gravitational center, supported by:

- Government, through regulatory support and event facilitation.
- Academics, by offering training and validation.
- Business actors, in marketing local products.
- Media, especially social media, amplifying visibility.

Rather than a top-down approach, this configuration shows that digitalization in rural tourism thrives when initiated from below and reinforced by external actors.

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