

Leveraging Traditional Knowledge and Digital Transformation for Youth Empowerment

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Abstract: Tripura, a north - eastern state of India, is a reservoir of traditional knowledge, primarily influenced by its indigenous communities and diverse cultures. In today's digital age, there's a growing urgency to merge these traditions with modern online tools. This research delves into how Tripura's traditional handloom products are marketed through digital platforms. Using case studies, we gain insights from local entrepreneurs in handloom sector. Initial findings indicate a strong inclination, particularly among the youth, to utilize digital platforms like Facebook and Instagram for expanding their businesses. However, for this fusion of tradition with technology to succeed, there's a clear need for better digital literacy and infrastructure support. This research highlights the pressing need to provide adequate digital literacy and infrastructural support to these entrepreneurs. The harmonization of Tripura's rich traditions with the boundless potential of digital tools can usher in an era of sustainable growth and global recognition for the state. As the world shrinks into a global village, there's an unparalleled opportunity for Tripura to showcase its heritage on the world stage, provided the steps taken are strategic, supportive, and sensitive to its core values.

Keywords: digital transformation, traditional knowledge, handloom, online business, youth empowerment

1. Introduction

Tripura, a northeastern state of India, is a reservoir of traditional knowledge, primarily influenced by its indigenous communities and diverse cultures. It is known for its pristine landscapes, tribal dance forms, intricate bamboo handicrafts, vibrant handlooms unique to each communities and centuries - old traditions, the state has always been a repository of knowledge and creativity.

In today's digital world, Tripura has a unique chance to blend its age - old traditions with new online tools and ideas. The growing digital footprint stands as a testament to the potential convergence of tradition and modernity. With the global market evolving through technological advancements, there's a budding opportunity for the state to integrate its indigenous offerings into this expansive digital realm.

The surge in online business platforms in recent years has redefined the entrepreneurial landscape. Facilitated by technological evolution, these platforms offer a myriad of opportunities for marketing and selling goods on a global scale. The capacity of the internet to economically store vast amounts of data empowers even small to medium - sized enterprises, enabling them to harness customer insights and refine their offerings [1].

The democratization of the online business ecosystem has witnessed individuals, irrespective of their backgrounds, evolve into global entities. Many run their ventures either individually or with small, close - knit teams, thus reducing hierarchical barriers. However, success in this space hinges on various factors ranging from product quality, market demand, to effective customer interaction. The dawn of the digital era has notably extended work flexibility, breaking traditional boundaries. Entrepreneurs, often multi - tasking across roles, find this newfound flexibility beneficial,

adapting to longer, more fluid workdays and the possibility of remote work [2].

With the rapid digital transformation, global markets and industries are undergoing restructuring, challenging conventional economic theories [3]. This shift, while making certain traditional practices redundant, also unveils unprecedented opportunities. The initial days of the internet, during the late 1990s, saw only a select few recognizing its revolutionary potential [4]. Today, the rise of terms like "Web 2.0" and the proliferation of social media platforms emphasize the significant shifts in both business operations and marketing strategies.

The challenges posed by the pandemic further expedited digital adoption, sparking an entrepreneurial spirit within many. Numerous individuals in Tripura channeled their passions into viable online ventures, especially harnessing the power of platforms like Facebook and Instagram. This research delves into the symbiotic relationship between Tripura's traditional knowledge and the ongoing digital transformation. It aims to elucidate how these two seemingly disparate realms can collaboratively work towards youth empowerment in the region, offering insights into both the promising opportunities and the challenges encountered by young pioneers

2. Literature Review

Warlina et al. (2019) in their study titled "Designing websites for online business in the agricultural sector" discuss the transformative role of the internet and e - commerce in reshaping the supply and demand dynamics for agricultural goods in developing nations. Key players, particularly from industrial and agricultural sectors in countries such as India, Brazil, Indonesia, and South Africa, have increasingly adopted the internet and digital platforms.

Volume 13 Issue 2, February 2024

Fully Refereed | Open Access | Double Blind Peer Reviewed Journal

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The authors emphasize consumer preferences for affordability, accessibility, prompt delivery, and superior post-purchase support, all of which drive the need for well-designed websites to expedite sales. The visual appeal of these websites becomes paramount, given that they serve as the primary touchpoint for online consumers and can significantly impact their purchasing decisions [5].

Sheehan et al. (2011), in their book "Small Business Smarts: Building Buzz with Social Media" emphasizes the significance of social media for small businesses, highlighting its role in branding and broadening customer reach. The authors point out the transformative effect of platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram on communication dynamics between individuals and businesses. The small businesses are leveraging these platforms to not only strengthen relationships with their audience but also facilitate interactions among them. The authors further suggest integrating various social media platforms for maximizing outreach and efficient time use. As such platforms enable businesses to globalize their reach, share insights about products, and discover novel marketing strategies, thereby cultivating a reciprocal promotional environment [6].

Belew (2014) in "The Art Of Social Selling: Finding and Engaging Customers on Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Other Social Networks" highlights that visual content such as photos, videos, and graphics are highly effective in social media marketing as they increase the likelihood of a message being seen, understood, and shared. They offer a quick and succinct way to tell a story and appeal to different learning styles [7].

Tsai (2013) in her book "The Small Business Online Marketing Handbook: Converting Online Conversations to Offline Sales" characterizes the modern social economy as a goldmine for small enterprises, paving the way for them to expand rapidly and cement a lasting online reputation. The author points out the growing trend of digitally adept consumers turning to mobile gadgets for shopping, with a strong inclination for peer recommendations. The power of socially networked consumers lies in their eagerness to vouch for and promote businesses they patronize. Thus, it's crucial for enterprises to harness this advocacy potential. Cultivating genuine bonds with these consumers can lead them to champion the business, celebrating its triumphs as if they were their own [8].

Micek et al. (2006) in their book "Secrets Of Online Persuasion: Captivating the hearts, minds and pocketbooks of thousands using blogs, podcasts and other new media marketing tools" delve into the transformative roles individuals assume in the rapidly evolving new media landscape. They posit that success in the New Media Marketplace belongs to those with a comprehensive grasp of its workings and the capability to engage, innovate, and add value. The authors believe that small businesses inherently possess an edge over large corporations in this realm due to their agility. Central to succeeding in this space, they argue, is an adaptable mindset that mirrors fluidity. Crucially, the content generated must resonate with both human audiences and digital algorithms like search engine bots. Building trust

and fostering personal connections are paramount, leading to brand loyalty and word-of-mouth promotion. Notably, the authors emphasize that today's consumers prioritize personal connections over product loyalty. Such deep-rooted connections, they contend, not only retain customers but can transform casual buyers into brand advocates. This powerful bond, the authors argue, is something large-scale mass marketing strategies often struggle to replicate [9].

Sardjono et al. (2021) in their article "Global issues: Utilization of e-commerce and increased use of mobile commerce applications as a result of the covid-19 pandemic" highlights the pronounced surge in e-commerce and mobile commerce usage during the Covid-19 outbreak. While the pandemic brought about its fair share of adversities, it also paved the way for novel opportunities, innovations, and challenges, especially in the context of the fourth industrial revolution. According to the authors, the rapid technological evolution has seamlessly integrated the internet and technology into virtually all business operations, from strategy formulation to product transactions. They also emphasize the convenience and efficiency of mobile commerce, noting its ability to provide consumers with quick product comparisons across categories and brands. This not only streamlines the shopping process but also enhances the overall customer experience, making transactions smooth and hassle-free [10].

Humbe and Bhalerao (2018), in their article "Social Media - A tool for empowering women working in handloom industry" delved into the impact of social media on women engaged in the handloom sector in Aurangabad city. They concluded that social media offers various advantages to women in the handloom industry, significantly influencing the sales of their products [11].

Humbe, V. R. (2014), in her article "Role of Social Media in Marketing of Handloom Products" emphasized on the importance of marketing as an essential tool to boost sales. The author highlights that social media is a valuable marketing tool as it can expand its reach to a larger audience in lesser time and money as compared to the traditional marketing platforms. The author concludes by suggesting that the Government of India should extend help by creating awareness and promote handloom industries for using social media as a crucial marketing tool in promoting the handloom products [12].

3. Objectives

- To assess the benefits of merging traditional handloom with digital tools for youth empowerment.
- To identify the challenges young entrepreneurs in Tripura encounter while launching and sustaining their online ventures.

4. Methodology

This research adopts a descriptive and qualitative method to investigate the intertwining of traditional sectors with digital platforms in Tripura. The primary data was collected using in-depth interviews with semi-structured questionnaires. Using a case study approach, this research gave a deep

insight based on real - life examples. Twelve budding entrepreneurs, actively utilizing digital platforms to sell traditional handloom products, were purposively chosen for the case study. The study aimed to explore the challenges and advantages of using digital platforms for handloom product sales. Secondary data was collected through books, journals and other publications.

5. Results and Discussion

In the changing landscape of the global market, the potential of combining time - honoured traditions with digital innovations offers unprecedented opportunities. This study delve into the transformative journey of twelve entrepreneurs who have successfully utilizing the digital platform in marketing Tripura's handloom heritage. None of the respondents were handloom weavers themselves but their ventures act as a bridge, connecting the timeless art of weaving with the demands and opportunities of contemporary markets.

Based on the case study interviews, several potentials of using digital platforms and tools to promote, market, or sell traditional handloom products have emerged. They are as follows:

- **Access to broader customer base:** Firstly, all respondents expressed that digital platforms have opened up vast opportunities to showcase traditional handloom products to a larger audience. Such platforms ensure that these products gain recognition far beyond their local communities, even capturing the attention of global consumers. Given this context, its crucial to motivate local weavers to utilize these digital tools, which can help them tap into far - reaching markets and present their handloom products to people worldwide. Secondly, the study highlights that integrating traditional handloom with modern design elements results in products that are both unique and versatile. This modern twist not only appeals to the younger generation looking for unique fashion pieces, but also expands the product variety to include items such as bedspreads and cushion covers. Such a diverse product range can attract a broader spectrum of customers, boosting sales potential.

- **Direct Engagement & Enhanced Feedback:** Digital platforms, notably social media sites like Instagram, pave the way for direct and intimate communication with consumers. Tools such as Direct Messaging enable in - depth, tailored interactions, empowering entrepreneurs with insights into customer preferences and desires. This hands - on engagement allows businesses to gather immediate feedback, fostering an environment of ongoing refinement in both product quality and overall service.

- **Adaptable Operations & Business Hours:** Being online, digital platforms offer entrepreneurs the advantage of not being tied down to traditional business hours. They can cater to customers from different time zones and operate around the clock. This adaptability lets artisans and entrepreneurs manage their time effectively, juggling work and personal commitments. Furthermore, they can serve customers during peak demand periods, no matter where they are located globally.

- **Cost - Efficiency and Environmental Benefits:** Embracing digital marketing through platforms like social media and online advertising is notably more budget - friendly compared to traditional platforms. Additionally, by focusing online, businesses can skip the expenses tied to maintaining a physical storefront, including rent, utilities, and in - store advertising. Moreover, an online platform allows more precise inventory management, ensuring that products aren't overproduced or wasted. This not only conserves resources but also supports a more sustainable, eco - friendly business approach.

- **Data Collection and Analysis:** It is found that digital platforms such as Instagram provides digital tools that enables online businesses to gather valuable data about their customer preferences, behaviour, and buying patterns. This information can guide product development, pricing strategies, and promotional campaigns.

- **Collaboration Opportunities:** Another very important benefits of digital platforms is that it can also help the entrepreneurs to collaborate with influencers, bloggers, or other brands for promotional activities, reaching new audiences and potential customers.

- **Learning and Skill Development:** The respondents also stated that digital platforms did not only help them in their business operations but also act as a learning tools. As one can observe fellow entrepreneurs' journeys and gain insights from their experiences, and enhance their own skills and knowledge.

- **Supporting Local Economy:** Using digital platforms to promote traditional handloom ensures that the local economy benefits. Everything from material sourcing to final production can be localized, leading to job creation and the preservation of indigenous art forms.

- **Preservation and Promotion of Heritage:** When traditional handloom products are put up in the digital platform for sale it presents a unique opportunity to document, preserve, and spread awareness about the cultural significance of these artisanal crafts. This effort ensures that these crafts are not only valued but also sustained by upcoming generations. Digital platforms also acts as a tool for storytelling which helps communicate the rich history and craftsmanship behind traditional handloom products, thereby adding value and fostering a deeper connection with consumers.

Some of the challenges faced by young entrepreneurs in Tripura when launching and sustaining their online business:

- **Financial Constraints:** Despite online business being more budget - friendly compared to traditional platforms, the recurring challenge all respondents faced was financial limitations. This challenge extends from the inception phase to the ongoing operational stage of their ventures. The need for monetary support is evident, emphasizing the significance of accessible financial resources or governmental subsidies for start - ups in traditional sectors.

- **Challenges in scaling:** Digital platforms enable a wider reach, but they also bring challenges in meeting increased demand, especially for products like handloom, which require time - intensive, manual processes. The respondents highlighted the difficulties in scaling up and managing mass production while ensuring that the handloom products remained genuine and of high quality.
- **Localized customer base despite digital presence:** One of the paradoxes of using digital platforms was that, even though they enable global reach, the entrepreneurs found their customer base remained predominantly Tripura - oriented. This suggests that while digital platforms provide the tools for a broader audience, there's a need for targeted strategies to effectively expand the customer base.
- **Consistent vendors and authenticity:** Maintaining the authenticity of the handloom products while sourcing consistent and quality vendors was a challenge. The respondents expressed that they face hurdle in finding consistent vendors, especially those providing handmade Tripuri textiles. Digital platforms could potentially be further harnessed for networking and establishing robust vendor relationships.
- **Price Sensitivity:** The entrepreneurs cited challenges in product pricing. Meeting customer demands amidst price sensitivities requires a delicate balance between quality and affordability.
- **Marketing Challenges:** Utilizing effective marketing strategies within Tripura's context appeared to be a predominant issue among entrepreneurs. Although platforms like Instagram provided an initial foothold, expanding and diversifying promotional efforts remained daunting. This is indicative of the need for more localized marketing strategies and training.
- **Operational Challenges:** Entrepreneurs frequently took a hands - on approach, overseeing all aspects of their businesses. This approach, though commendable, presents sustainability issues. Managing every aspect single - handedly can become increasingly exhaustive and stifle business growth.
- **Organizational Challenges:** Most of the respondents stated that time management and organization were initial hurdles, particularly in juggling multiple tasks such as customer queries and actual production. Therefore, as businesses grow, they will need to establish robust organizational structures to streamline processes and maintain efficiency.
- **Logistical Issues:** There was a notable dependence on personal connections, such as friends and family, to manage key business operations. Although turning to these personal networks may be feasible at the onset, it raises concerns about sustainable growth and consistent reliability. Moreover, budding entrepreneurs found themselves navigating a complex web of logistical challenges, from order management and vendor coordination to grappling with storage solutions and deciphering shipping and customs protocols.
- **Regional Limitations:** Tripura's infrastructural development lag compared to more urbanized areas impacted business processes. Delays and inefficiencies in local systems underscore the need for improved infrastructure and services to bolster entrepreneurial ventures in the region.
- **Product Differentiation:** Standing out in an increasingly crowded online marketplace emerged as a concern for most of the respondents. Therefore, differentiating products and ensuring quality are paramount in retaining customer trust. This challenge stresses the importance of innovative strategies and perhaps local collaborations to maintain distinctiveness and quality.
- **Educational Gaps:** Our findings highlighted a significant gap in the entrepreneur's initial knowledge about initiating an online business. One respondent emphasized her initial lack of expertise in starting an online business. To bridge this knowledge gap, she frequently sought guidance from local entrepreneurs who ventured into business during the COVID - 19 pandemic and collaborated with group order managers handling international items. This reliance accentuates the current educational system's inadequacies in equipping young entrepreneurs with the necessary skills and knowledge for modern business endeavors.

6. Conclusion

Online business often demand less capital, and with strategic planning and effective marketing, they offer the potential for significant returns on a minimal investment. The youth, being at the forefront of this digital age, have used these tools not just as a medium for economic upliftment but also as a channel to preserve and promote the rich heritage of Tripura. And, simultaneously providing employment opportunities to local weavers.

However, this journey of digital transformation is not without its challenges. In Tripura, budding entrepreneurs confront a diverse set of challenges as they venture into the realm of online business. Financial assistance from the government is crucial to kickstart as well as sustain their online business venture as the young entrepreneurs often struggle with not having enough money to start and run their businesses. . There is also a need for creating awareness of the use of digital platforms for marketing among the handloom weavers as it is observed that the local weavers are not aware of the benefits and the process of using digital platforms and tools for marketing their handloom products. Moreover, even the budding online business owners feel they didn't learn enough about starting a business in school, making their journey even harder. Therefore, for online businesses to truly flourish in Tripura, there is a pressing need to enhance digital literacy among the local populace and bolster the existing digital infrastructure. This will not only empower entrepreneurs but also ensure a wider customer base that is digitally equipped and enthusiastic about local online ventures. With the right support, resources, and strategies, the future of online handloom businesses in Tripura looks promising, offering both economic growth and cultural preservation. .

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