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Tourism Marketing Strategies and Destination Branding in Southern West Bengal: A Comparative Analysis of Kolkata, South 24 Parganas, Bankura and Purulia.

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ABSTRACT

Tourism marketing in emerging regional destinations demands more than generic promotional effort it requires an understanding of the unique competitive landscape, cultural assets, and infrastructure realities of each locale. This paper examines tourism marketing strategies and destination branding across four southern districts of West Bengal, India: Kolkata, South 24 Parganas, Bankura, and Purulia. Drawing on a comprehensive review of secondary data, district-level SWOT analyses, and an empirical tourist survey (n = 600), the study assesses how current marketing strategies perform across the extended 7Ps marketing mix and identifies critical gaps in branding, digital communication, and institutional coordination. Findings reveal that while Kolkata operates as a mature, multi-channel tourism destination, the remaining three districts despite possessing internationally significant cultural and natural assets suffer from weak digital presence, fragmented promotion, and inadequate destination branding. The study proposes a differentiated, district-specific branding framework grounded in each destination's Unique Selling Proposition (USP), and recommends strategic investments in digital transformation, community-based marketing, and cross-district tourism circuits. The research contributes empirically to destination marketing literature in the context of an emerging Indian tourism region and offers practical guidance for tourism planners, destination management organizations (DMOs), and policy-makers.

Keywords: Destination Branding, Tourism Marketing, West Bengal, 7ps Marketing Mix, Digital Tourism, Community-Based Tourism, Swot Analysis

INTRODUCTION

Tourism marketing has evolved from a largely promotional exercise into a sophisticated, strategy-driven discipline that integrates destination branding, consumer insight, digital communication, and sustainable development. As global tourist arrivals surpassed 1.4 billion in 2019 (UNWTO, 2022), destinations at every scale from major metropolitan cities to rural hinterlands have been compelled to develop competitive positioning strategies that communicate authentic value and foster visitor loyalty.

West Bengal, located in eastern India, presents a particularly compelling case for studying regional tourism marketing. Its southern districts Kolkata, South 24 Parganas, Bankura, and Purulia represent an extraordinary diversity of tourism products: urban cultural heritage, UNESCO-listed mangrove ecosystems, living craft traditions, and indigenous tribal performing arts. Yet despite this richness, tourism marketing efforts across these districts are strikingly uneven. Kolkata, as a metropolitan hub, benefits from institutional promotion, digital infrastructure, and global brand recognition. In contrast, Bankura and Purulia home to terracotta temples and the UNESCO-recognized Chhau dance respectively languish in relative promotional obscurity, constrained by weak digital presence, disjointed branding, and insufficient tourism governance (Ghosh & Dey, 2021).

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This paper addresses two interrelated questions: (1) How do current tourism marketing strategies across these four districts compare in terms of effectiveness and strategic coherence? and (2) What destination branding frameworks can reposition under-marketed districts as competitive tourism destinations? The study employs a mixed approach combining district-level SWOT analysis, analysis of the extended 7Ps marketing mix, and findings from a primary tourist survey of 600 respondents to develop evidence-based recommendations.

The study makes three contributions. First, it provides a systematic empirical account of tourism marketing practice across southern West Bengal. Second, it extends destination branding theory by applying it to culturally diverse, low-infrastructure contexts where conventional brand-building tools may be insufficient. Third, it offers a practical outline for policy-makers and tourism planners seeking to leverage regional diversity into competitive tourism circuits.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Destination Branding: Theoretical Foundations

The concept of destination branding emerged prominently in the late 1990s and early 2000s as scholars recognized that places, like products, must manage identity, image, and reputation. According to Pike (2015), destination branding is the collection of marketing initiatives aimed at producing a name, symbol, logo, word mark, or other visual representation that serves to distinguish and identify a place while also expressing the possibility of an unforgettable trip. Kotler, Haider, and Rein (2017) extend this to argue that destinations must align their physical attributes, service quality, emotional appeal, and visitor experiences into a coherent brand equity architecture.

Anholt (2010) introduced the concept of competitive identity, arguing that a destination brand is inseparable from its national or regional reputation. Republics like New Zealand and Thailand have successfully leveraged consistent imagery 100% Pure New Zealand' and 'Amazing Thailand' respectively to sustain long-term international market share. Such campaigns succeed because they align brand promise with lived visitor experience, fostering authenticity perceptions that modern travelers actively seek (Urry & Larsen, 2011).

In the Indian context, Sharma and Dey (2021) note that destination branding remains underdeveloped, particularly at the state and district levels. While national-level campaigns like 'Incredible India' have generated international recognition, district-level destinations lack the institutional capacity, visual identity systems, and content marketing infrastructure to build sub-regional brands. This is especially acute in tribal and craft-based destinations where tourism assets are people-embodied rather than monument-based.

The 7Ps Marketing Mix in Tourism

The classical 4Ps marketing mix (Product, Price, Place, Promotion) was extended to 7Ps for service contexts by Booms and Bitner (1981), adding People, Process, and Physical Evidence. In tourism, this framework has proved robust for diagnosing marketing gaps at the destination level. Middleton and Clarke (2012) apply the 7Ps systematically to destination management, finding that tourism marketing failures often lie not in attraction quality but in inadequate process design, poorly trained service personnel, and weak physical evidence signage, cleanliness, visitor infrastructure.

Saxena, Mohan, and Anand (2025) applied the 7Ps framework to heritage tourism in Eastern India, concluding that while product quality at most sites is adequate, 'People' (guide training, community engagement) and 'Physical Evidence' (site maintenance, interpretive displays) are the critical underperforming variables. Their findings align with those of Ray and Das (2011), who found that rural tourism destinations in West Bengal suffer most acutely from process deficiencies and inadequate physical evidence rather than insufficient promotional budgets.

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Digital Transformation and Tourism Marketing

Digital technology has fundamentally restructured the tourism marketing landscape. Statista (2023) reports that over 74% of global travelers rely on digital platforms for trip planning and booking. Social media particularly Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok have emerged as primary influence channels for destination choice, with visual storytelling and peer-generated content outperforming traditional publicity in driving portable inspiration (Yadav, Kumar, & Singh, 2022).

Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) in developed markets have responded by investing in search engine optimization, programmatic advertising, influencer partnerships, and real-time review management. However, rural and emerging destinations in India remain constrained by digital literacy gaps, inadequate connectivity, and low online content volume, all of which reduce search visibility and restrict tourist information access (Banerjee & Bhattacharya, 2022).

Community-Based Tourism and Marketing

A growing strand of literature highlights the role of host communities not merely as service providers but as active marketing agents. Scheyvens (1999) coined the concept of community empowerment in tourism, arguing that destinations achieve authenticity and sustainability only when local residents are meaningfully involved in product design, delivery, and promotion. In eco-sensitive zones like the Sundarbans, Acharya, Sen, and Roy (2022) demonstrate that community-led tourism models where former honey collectors and fisher folk become eco-guides generate higher tourist satisfaction scores than commercially operated alternatives, precisely because they deliver authentic experiential depth.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The research design used in this study is mixed-methods, combining primary quantitative survey research with secondary data analysis. For primary data collection, a descriptive cross-sectional survey approach was employed. The study was carried out in all four of southern West Bengal's districts: Kolkata, South 24.

Sampling and Data Collection

A stratified convenience sample of 600 tourists was surveyed during peak and off-peak tourism seasons (October 2024 to March 2025). Sample allocation was proportionate to district tourism volumes: 200 respondents in Kolkata, 150 in South 24 Parganas, 125 each in Bankura and Purulia. Respondents were approached at major tourist attractions, hotels, and tourism facilities. Questionnaires were administered in English, Bengali, and Hindi based on respondent preference. A pre-test with 30 respondents was conducted to refine the instrument.

Data Analysis

Regression analysis, factor analysis, and descriptive statistics were used to examine quantitative data (SPSS v26). Secondary data sources include the UNWTO Tourism Barometer, West Bengal Tourism Development Corporation (WBTDC) annual reports, SWOT analyses from the PhD study informing this paper, and peer-reviewed literature. District-level marketing mix performance was assessed through a structured evaluative framework based on the 7Ps model.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Comparative SWOT Analysis of the Four Districts

The SWOT analysis below synthesizes district-level strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats across the four study districts, providing a strategic baseline for marketing evaluation.

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Dimension	Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities / Threats
Kolkata	Colonial heritage, UNESCO Durga Puja, strong connectivity, diverse cultural products	Congestion at peak festivals, limited digital storytelling, over-reliance on urban tourists	MICE expansion, creative city branding; Threat: metro competition (Delhi, Mumbai)
South 24 Parganas	Sundarbans UNESCO World Heritage Site, mangrove biodiversity, community-led eco-tourism	Poor last-mile connectivity, climate vulnerability, low international visibility	Eco-lodge development, blue economy; Threat: climate change, competition from Chilika (Odisha)
Bankura	Bishnupur terracotta temples, Baluchari silk, active craft economy	Weak global marketing, no premium accommodation, poor digital storytelling	E-commerce for crafts, global craft fairs; Threat: craft heritage erosion, competition from Pipili and Kutch
Purulia	Chhau dance (UNESCO intangible heritage), tribal festivals, Ayodhya Hills scenery	Inadequate lodging, low tourism brand visibility, fragmented cultural programming	Tribal-adventure tourism packages, digital Chhau archiving; Threat: Jharkhand tribal circuit competition

The matrix reveals structurally different competitive positions. Kolkata operates from a position of relative brand maturity, with globally recognized cultural assets and strong institutional backing. South 24 Parganas benefits from the unrivaled ecological distinctiveness of the Sundarbans, but faces acute infrastructure and climate vulnerability challenges. Bankura and Purulia both possess world-class cultural assets terracotta temples and Chhau dance respectively yet remain trapped by low global marketing penetration and inadequate physical tourism infrastructure.

Marketing Mix Performance Across Districts

Product and Promotion

Kolkata offers a diversified product portfolio encompassing colonial heritage, festival tourism, gastronomy, arts, and MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Events). Its promotional ecosystem is the most developed among the four districts, combining public-private partnerships, digital advertising, and media placements. The West Bengal Tourism Development Corporation (WBTDC) and Kolkata Municipal Corporation run year-round campaigns, and the city's global brand identity as the 'City of Joy' remains a recognized asset.

South 24 Parganas relies on niche-focused, conservation-aligned promotion targeting eco-tourists and wildlife researchers. Promotional strategies emphasize storytelling and experiential marketing centred on the Sundarbans' Royal Bengal Tiger and mangrove ecology. However, pricing transparency for boat safaris and accommodation remains inconsistent, and there is no standardized interpretive service.

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Bankura's promotional activity is concentrated around cultural fairs, terracotta heritage marketing, and craft demonstrations at state-level events. The 'Terracotta Trails' tagline has been used in limited state tourism literature but lacks the consistency and visual identity infrastructure of a developed destination brand. Digital presence is minimal, with few attractions listed on international travel platforms.

Purulia's promotional landscape is the weakest of the four districts. Most homestays, dance troupes, and eco-guides operate through offline or word-of-mouth channels. Despite occasional government-sponsored short films and documentary features, the district lacks a long-term digital marketing strategy. Pilot circuits such as the 'Chhau Tourism Trail' and 'Tribal Culture Trail' are promoted via state tourism websites but have not achieved scale.

People, Process, and Physical Evidence

People and Process emerged from the marketing mix analysis as the most critically underperforming components across the four districts. Kolkata benefits from institutionalized hospitality education the Institute of Hotel Management (IHM-Kolkata) and NSHM School of Tourism produce trained graduates and a professionalized workforce. Heritage walk organizations such as Calcutta Walks and Immersive Trails provide multilingual, culturally immersive guided experiences.

In South 24 Parganas, tourism is community-dependent: former honey collectors and fishermen now serve as eco-guides, and women's self-help groups (SHGs) in the Gosaba and Satjelia clusters manage homestays and organize cultural evenings. While this model delivers authentic experiences, it suffers from the absence of formal hospitality training, digital literacy, and safety certification. Most bookings are intermediated through Kolkata-based operators, limiting direct community revenue.

Bankura's cultural tourism ecosystem is sustained by terracotta artisans, Baluchari weavers, and folk musicians who serve as living embodiments of the tourism product. NGO-led programs such as the Rural Craft and Cultural Hub (RCCH), supported by UNESCO and Banglanatak.com, have provided market linkage training and basic hospitality workshops. However, the demographic skew of artisans toward older populations, combined with youth out-migration, presents an existential human resource challenge.

In Purulia, tourism is inseparably tied to tribal communities Chhau dancers, mask-makers of Charida village, eco-guides in Ayodhya Hills. Despite pilot training programs in basic English and eco-guiding, most community members lack internet access, marketing tools, or financial capital for accommodation improvement. Without standardized wage structures or institutional protections, tribal performers remain vulnerable to underpayment by intermediaries.

Destination Image and Tourist Perceptions

The primary survey (n = 600) reveals that tourist perceptions of destination image differ significantly across districts. Kolkata scores the highest overall image rating (Mean = 4.18 on a 5-point Likert scale), reflecting superior infrastructure, brand awareness, and product diversity. South 24 Parganas, Bankura, and Purulia receive positive but comparatively lower image scores, primarily attributed to limited accessibility, infrastructure deficiencies, and low awareness among non-regional tourists.

Critically, each district is perceived as possessing a distinct identity: cultural vibrancy for Kolkata, wildlife for South 24 Parganas, heritage architecture for Bankura, and tribal authenticity for Purulia. This finding suggests strong latent positioning potential each destination has a differentiated identity anchor but this potential is undermined by the absence of coherent brand communication systems to translate identity into market traction.

Tourist motivations were dominated by cultural exploration (Mean pull factor = 4.38), natural scenery (Mean = 4.31), and affordability (Mean = 4.04). Factor analysis of motivation items yielded three dimensions: Cultural-Educational, Escape and Relaxation, and Social Bonding. These dimensions align well with the cultural-heritage products of all four districts, confirming strategic alignment between tourist demand and destination supply provided the supply is communicated effectively.

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Promotional Channel Effectiveness

Word-of-mouth emerged as the most widely used information source among tourists (64.5%) and the most influential (32.7%). Travel websites and blogs (52.6%), social media (48.2%), and online reviews (46.1%) collectively dominate digital pre-trip planning. By contrast, official tourism websites are consulted by only 21.3% of respondents, indicating significant underperformance of government-managed promotional platforms.

The dominance of word-of-mouth and peer review platforms carries important strategic implications. For Bankura and Purulia where direct tourist volumes remain low word-of-mouth referral networks are limited, creating a self-reinforcing visibility deficit. Investment in proactive digital content creation, influencer partnerships, and review management is therefore especially urgent for these districts.

DISCUSSION

A Differentiated Destination Branding Framework

The findings argue strongly for a differentiated branding model rather than the current 'Experience Bengal' umbrella strategy, which tends to dilute the individual character of each district. Building on each district's Unique Selling Proposition (USP), the following brand identities are proposed:

- Kolkata: 'Gateway to Eastern India' emphasizing intellectual, colonial, and festival tourism, and positioning the city as a MICE destination and cultural capital comparable to Kyoto or Prague.
- South 24 Parganas: 'Eco-Conscious Mangrove Escape targeting global responsible tourism markets and wildlife enthusiasts through conservation-led storytelling and sustainable experience design.
- Bankura: 'Terracotta Heritage Heartland appealing to art lovers, cultural explorers, and craft enthusiasts, with e-commerce integration to extend artisan market reach globally.
- Purulia: 'Tribal and Masked Dance Destination targeting anthropological, adventure, and cultural immersion seekers through a digital-first branding strategy anchored in the global recognition of Chhau dance.

Each brand identity requires a supporting infrastructure: district-level visual identity kits (logos, color systems, iconography), multilingual content banks, local festival marketing calendars, and proactive social media management. Crucially, branding effectiveness depends on aligning promotional promises with visitor experience a challenge that requires simultaneous investment in service quality and physical evidence.

Cross-District Tourism Circuits as a Strategic Integration Tool

One of the most viable strategies for amplifying marketing ROI across the region is the creation of multi-thematic cross-district tourism circuits. A Kolkata–Bishnupur–Ayodhya Hills loop can unify three complementary experiences urban heritage, terracotta architecture, and tribal adventure—under a coherent travel narrative. A 'Delta to Dynasty' trail linking Sundarbans eco-tourism, Bishnupur's temple heritage, and Kolkata's colonial urbanism offers similar integrative potential, leveraging Kolkata's established gateway role to channel tourist flows into less-visited districts.

The Indian government's Swadesh Darshan and PRASHAD schemes provide infrastructure support for such circuits, but the challenge lies in narrative cohesion, private sector investment, and last-mile transport connectivity. District Tourism Management Authorities (DTMAs) with cross-district coordination mandates, supported by dedicated PPP (public-private partnership) frameworks, are essential institutional prerequisites.

Digital Transformation as a Marketing Equalizer

For districts like Bankura, Purulia, and South 24 Parganas, which lack the marketing budgets and institutional capacity of major urban destinations, digital transformation represents the most cost-effective pathway to

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enhanced visibility. Geotagged tourism apps, 360-degree virtual tours of Bishnupur temples or Charida mask village, mobile storytelling archives of Baluchari weaving techniques, and e-commerce platforms for artisan products can collectively elevate regional outreach at a fraction of traditional advertising costs (Yadav et al., 2022).

Google Arts & Culture partnerships, custom heritage applications, and social media influencer collaborations particularly with travel content creators targeting niche audiences in Europe and North America can reach the cultural-heritage tourist segments most likely to travel to Bankura and Purulia. The Net Promoter Score of +32 recorded in the tourist satisfaction survey indicates healthy advocacy potential: strategies that convert satisfied visitors into active digital ambassadors can generate organic promotional content at scale.

CONCLUSION

This paper has demonstrated that southern West Bengal possesses the raw material for competitive regional tourism: globally recognized cultural heritage, a UNESCO World Heritage natural site, living craft traditions, and distinctive tribal performing arts. The critical constraint is not the quality of the tourism product but the inadequacy of its marketing.

The study identified three interlocking failures in the current marketing system: (1) the absence of differentiated, district-level branding strategies that translate each destination's USP into compelling market positioning; (2) weak digital infrastructure and content creation capacity, particularly in Bankura and Purulia; and (3) fragmented institutional governance, with insufficient coordination between district tourism agencies, cultural affairs departments, and environmental bodies.

Addressing these failures requires a dual-track strategy: short-term investments in digital content creation, influencer marketing, and official website optimization; and longer-term institutional development through the establishment of District Tourism Management Authorities, community marketing cooperatives, and structured PPP frameworks. The differentiated branding framework proposed in this paper—grounded in each district's proven USP and supported by cross-district circuit development provides a practical roadmap for transforming southern West Bengal from a regionally known tourism zone into a globally competitive, culturally rich destination.

Future research should examine the economic multiplier effects of cross-district circuit tourism, assess the effectiveness of specific digital marketing interventions in low-infrastructure rural tourism contexts, and explore the role of diaspora communities as international marketing ambassadors for Bengal's cultural destinations.

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