
THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL AREAS

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ARTICLE INFO

Review Article

Received: 09 November 2024

Accepted: 02 December 2024

doi:10.59267/ekoPolj24041421D

UDC 004.451.6:332.146.2

Keywords:

communication management, rural development, sustainable tourism, digital media, social networks, local community.

JEL: P25, Z32

ABSTRACT

The role of communication management in the development of rural areas is becoming increasingly significant for achieving sustainable social and economic growth in these communities. Effective communication and information management are key factors in connecting local actors, fostering collaboration among organizations, and promoting rural areas as attractive destinations for tourism and investment. Through the analysis of best practice examples, this paper explores the strategies and tools of communication management that contribute to enhancing the quality of life in rural areas. Special emphasis is placed on digital media and social networks as channels for promoting local products and traditions, facilitating easier connections with broader audiences and markets. The aim of the paper is to highlight the importance of a planned and tailored approach to communication that can contribute to the long-term development and sustainability of rural communities.

Introduction

The development of rural areas represents a key aspect of sustainable development for a country, as these communities encompass a significant portion of its territory and natural resources. Although rural areas often face challenges such as a lack of infrastructure, limited economic opportunities, and population migration, communication management can play a crucial role in reversing these trends. Through strategic planning and the

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application of communication tools, it is possible to improve the awareness of the local population, connect them with potential investors and tourists, and enhance collaboration between various sectors.

In the context of rural development, communication management refers to the process of planning and implementing communication strategies aimed at improving the economic and social status of rural communities. These strategies include the use of digital media, social networks, and other channels for promoting local products and cultural resources, which contributes to creating authentic brands for rural destinations and attracting the attention of a wider audience (Mendes & Laureano, 2021).

In modern conditions, where digital platforms have become the dominant means of communication, rural areas have the opportunity to become more accessible and recognizable through innovative communication approaches (Stefanović, et al., 2024). However, to achieve this goal, it is necessary to develop tailored strategies that correspond to the specifics of the local environment. Understanding local traditions, customs, and languages enables the creation of messages that are relevant and appealing to the target audience. It is advisable to use local products and services, which can attract tourists seeking authentic experiences. Promoting local food, crafts, and events can increase interest in rural destinations. Effective strategies may involve utilizing local media, social networks, and other platforms popular in the community (Jovanovic, et al., 2024). Organizing workshops or informational sessions for local producers and tourism workers can help develop the skills necessary for effective communication and product promotion (Cvijanović, et al., 2023; Cicmil et al., 2023). Regularly monitoring the effectiveness of communication strategies and adjusting approaches based on feedback from the community ensures long-term sustainability and relevance.

Effective communication plays a crucial role in the promotion and sale of agricultural products, as well as in the development of rural tourism. In the context of agribusiness, well-designed communication strategies allow producers to successfully present their products and contribute to their competitiveness in the market. Precise audience targeting and authentic stories about production build consumer trust and strengthen brands. On the other hand, communication is equally significant for the development of rural tourism, as it allows for the transmission of the attractiveness of rural areas and the promotion of authentic experiences related to rural life and work. This promotion can attract visitors, support the local economy, and contribute to the sustainable development of rural communities.

Through the analysis of specific examples of good practices, this paper will highlight the most important communication strategies that have enabled the successful transformation of rural areas, as well as the key challenges faced by rural communities in the process of their implementation.

Literature Review

In contemporary society, communication plays a crucial role in the development of all aspects of life, particularly in rural areas. In this context, communication management becomes essential for achieving sustainable development in rural communities. Effective communication enables better connections between local populations and resources, programs, and initiatives that can enhance quality of life. Additionally, communication management contributes to empowering communities by informing and actively involving citizens in decision-making processes.

The role of communication in promoting agricultural products and developing local tourism is becoming increasingly significant with the rise of digitalization and the widespread availability of the internet. The literature review shows that communication strategies, especially digital marketing and social media, play a key role in promoting agricultural products and connecting rural communities with tourists, thereby increasing interest in local products and fostering economic development. With adequate support and a strategic approach, rural tourism can significantly improve the standard of living and economic opportunities in rural areas of Serbia (Dimitrijević, Ristić, Bošković, 2022).

Today, digital marketing is the only strategy that uses traditional means of advertising to attract clients and entice them into the virtual realm. In addition to the classic firm growth techniques of using Internet resources and traditional means of promotion, digital marketing leverages the latest technological advancements that allow you to engage with clients in an effective manner (Stevanović, et al., 2022). When using digital marketing tools, it is important to consider several factors, such as high interactivity, which shows up as immediate and direct feedback to the audience; the ability to measure any user action; and the capacity to customize advertising messages and products for specific target audience segments (Zhang, et al, 2021; Ristić et al., 2023; Dašić, et al., 2023a). Digital marketing has a significant positive impact on the business performance of companies in the agricultural sector of Serbia. The application of digital tools can contribute to increased sales, enhanced brand recognition, and better communication with consumers. Although many companies in this sector have yet to fully exploit the opportunities presented by digital marketing, research shows that companies that have implemented digital strategies report better competitiveness and higher profitability (Mihailović et al., 2024).

According to research by Mendes and Laureana (2021), digital communication strategies, such as social media, allow farmers to reach a wider audience and raise awareness about local products. They emphasize that by utilizing digital platforms, agricultural producers can communicate directly with consumers, sharing stories about the origins of their products, cultivation methods, and the cultural significance these products hold. Such direct communication strengthens consumer trust and encourages the purchase of local products, thereby contributing to the sustainable development of rural communities.

Information technologies have advanced significantly over the last few decades, particularly those that can be applied to every facet of human endeavor (Dašić, et al., 2023b). The use of social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter allows farmers and tourism organizations to effectively disseminate information and visually showcase their products, further motivating consumers (Onitsuka, 2019; Mihailović, Popović, 2021; World Bank Document, 2021). Digital tools facilitate quicker market connections and enable targeted campaigns that enhance the recognition of local products while also creating a sense of authenticity and attachment to local communities.

Through digital communication, rural communities have the opportunity to present not only their products but also the tourism potential of their regions, including traditional agriculture, ethno-homesteads, and local festivals. When local products are promoted as part of the tourism offering, visitors have the chance to experience authentic activities, often involving tastings and workshops (Luković & Nićiforović, 2022). This approach attracts tourists who wish to experience the uniqueness of the region and contributes to economic development through sustainable and responsible consumption.

Effective media engagement can empower local communities, enhance marketing strategies for agricultural products, and increase participation in rural tourism initiatives. Some authors recommend utilizing local media to bridge communication gaps and encourage sustainable development practices (Yu, Appiah, Zulu, Adu-Poku, 2024; Cardey et al., 2024). Additionally, residents of rural areas, by using interactive mapping tools, can contribute to the collection and construction of knowledge about the cultural heritage of their surroundings, highlighting the significance of citizens' roles in communication strategies that promote the preservation and appreciation of cultural resources (Del Espino Hidalgo Rodríguez Díaz, 2023). The focus is on initiatives that enable the transformation of rural villages into sustainable settlements through community empowerment, with particular emphasis on energy transition and technological development. An example of such an approach can be seen in the ALMIA project in Spain, where the local community and experts collaboratively developed networks for energy transition. This project serves as a model for rural revitalization that underscores the importance of communication and collective action in achieving long-term rural development (del Arco et al., 2021).

Some studies explore accessibility issues in rural areas, particularly focusing on how improved transportation solutions can enhance residents' access to essential services and economic opportunities. A multi-layered policy approach is proposed, which includes demand-responsive transport and inclusive management strategies to bridge accessibility gaps in rural regions. Additionally, it emphasizes that communication management in rural settings plays a crucial role in coordinating stakeholders, promoting sustainable mobility solutions, and raising awareness about accessibility policies. Finally, the research indicates that enhancing communication channels between policymakers and local communities improves transportation services, addressing the issue of marginalization in rural areas and fostering sustainable rural development (Vitale Brovarone & Cotella, 2020).

The development of digital communications has significantly transformed the way people in rural areas establish social connections and engage in community life. In contemporary times, social media and digital platforms have become key tools for strengthening social capital, enabling easier information exchange, connectivity, and collaboration among individuals. Social capital, defined as a network of relationships, trust, and mutual support among community members, represents one of the fundamental elements for the advancement of rural communities and the achievement of their economic, social, and cultural goals (Zolak, 2024).

In rural areas, where residents often face challenges like geographic isolation and limited access to resources, digital communication technologies enable the overcoming of these obstacles (Dašić, Živković, Vujić, 2020). Social networks like Facebook, Instagram, and local digital platforms allow communities to quickly and effectively spread information, organize initiatives, share resources, and strengthen a sense of belonging. Digital platforms also provide space for engaging different social groups, including both young and older generations, promoting inclusivity and expanding the range of participants in community activities.

Increased community engagement through digital channels contributes to empowering local populations and improving interpersonal relationships, thereby strengthening the overall social capital of the community (Luca, Zbucnea, 2021). Nyasulu and Chawinga (2018) conclude that information and communication technologies (ICT) significantly enhance the provision of healthcare services in rural communities in Malawi, despite challenges like limited infrastructure and internet access. ICT enables faster communication between patients and healthcare workers, easier monitoring of health data, and the spread of information on preventive measures, which contributes to improved health outcomes. The authors recommend greater investments in ICT infrastructure and staff training as key steps for the further development and sustainability of healthcare systems in rural areas.

Finally, some authors (Patil, 2019; Kamarudin et al., 2019) explore the significance of English language proficiency, emphasizing how communication skills impact academic and professional success. Key findings suggest that students from rural areas often face difficulties in acquiring the English language due to a lack of resources and access to quality education. Various measures are proposed to enhance communication skills, including English language courses, the use of digital tools, and interactive learning methods, to empower individuals from rural backgrounds and facilitate their access to the global job market.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs a qualitative research approach to explore the role of communication management in the development of rural areas, with a particular emphasis on the sales and promotion of agricultural products and the development of rural tourism. The qualitative methodology allows for an in-depth analysis of the experiences and

perceptions of local communities, as well as management practices in communication. Focusing on the sales and promotion of agricultural products and rural tourism development creates an opportunity to identify key communication strategies that can enhance the economic and social stability of rural communities.

Effective Communication in the Promotion and Sale of Agricultural Products

Effective communication forms the foundation of successful promotion and sales of agricultural products in today's business environment. The development of technologies and the emergence of new communication channels, particularly through the internet and social media, have enabled agricultural producers to reach a broader audience and connect with consumers in a faster and more direct manner (Lučić, 2022). Through carefully crafted communication strategies, farmers can build brand recognition, increase consumer awareness of their product quality, and gain a competitive edge in the market.

Establishing effective communication in the promotion of agricultural products allows producers not only to increase sales but also to develop long-term relationships with customers, fostering trust and consumer loyalty. By utilizing digital platforms such as social media, blogs, and online marketplaces, farmers can precisely target their desired audience, providing information about the origin of their products, production methods, as well as health and environmental benefits. This information becomes increasingly important in an era where consumers are more conscious about what they consume and where their food comes from. In addition to digital channels, traditional forms of promotion, such as fairs, events, and tastings, continue to play a crucial role in bringing products closer to end consumers.

Authors Mendes and Laureano used a survey methodology involving managers and business owners in the agricultural sector to gain insight into their use and perception of digital marketing. They highlight that digital marketing can play a critical role in enhancing branding, expanding market reach, and increasing revenue in the agriculture sector. The study shows that the most commonly used tools include social media (particularly Facebook and Instagram), search engine optimization (SEO), and e-commerce platforms. These tools enable businesses to interact directly with consumers and provide better opportunities for market analysis and understanding consumer behavior. The benefits of digital marketing application include increased sales, greater product visibility, and improved access to consumer needs information. However, the study points to challenges faced by agribusiness companies in implementing digital strategies. The main obstacles include a lack of digital skills among employees, limited marketing budgets, and, in some cases, resistance to changes in traditional business practices (Mendes, Laureano, 2021).

De Silva's (2020) research identifies several key strategies effective in increasing the visibility and sales of agricultural products, including:

1. Direct Communication with Consumers – Utilizing platforms like Facebook and Instagram to showcase products, inform about seasonal offerings, and maintain direct contact with customers.

2. Use of Visual Content – Posting photos and videos that display the production process, quality, and freshness of products, enhancing transparency and consumer trust.
3. Personalized Interaction – Responding to comments and messages from consumers to build a community connection and foster customer loyalty.
4. Producer Storytelling Campaigns – Emphasizing stories about the farm, tradition, and values of small-scale farmers, which contributes to authenticity and emotional connection between consumers and products.

Social media offers low-cost, high-potential promotion avenues for agricultural products, especially for small-scale producers with limited resources. Through these platforms, farmers can reach targeted consumers directly, bypassing traditional distribution channels.

Alshammari and Kora (2019) conclude that effective communication strategies are key to successful agricultural product marketing. Their literature analysis highlights the importance of targeted communication approaches, such as the use of digital channels (particularly social media), tailoring messages to meet consumer needs, and transparency in presenting product information. These strategies contribute to higher consumer trust and long-term loyalty, which are especially valuable in the competitive agribusiness sector.

The authors recommend several guidelines to enhance communication strategies in agricultural marketing: Customized Digital Presence: Creating specific content for social media, including visual displays and videos, that directly address the needs of target groups; Farmer Communication Training: Providing training for small and medium-sized farmers to use digital tools more effectively for direct communication with customers; Transparency and Authenticity: Highlighting information about the origin, cultivation methods, and quality of products to increase consumer trust; Market Segmentation: Using segmented campaigns directed at specific demographic and geographic segments to increase the likelihood of successful promotional activities.

Fountas and Koundouras (2020) conclude in their research that adopting information and communication technologies (ICT) among farmers in Greece positively impacts productivity, efficiency, and the sustainability of agricultural practices. The study shows that ICT enables better resource management, quicker data-driven decision-making, and improved control over work processes. However, the authors note certain obstacles, including limited digital literacy, high implementation costs, and restricted internet access in rural areas.

In the work by Kinnunen and Pärssinen (2022), it is emphasized that the most commonly used social media platforms in Finland's agricultural sector are Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, each utilized in unique ways to promote agricultural products and connect with consumers:

1. Facebook – Farmers use Facebook to share stories about farm work, seasonal activities, and content that showcases the authentic rural lifestyle. The platform allows for direct interaction with consumers through comments and messages, fostering a sense of community and loyalty. Facebook groups also serve as gathering spots for local product enthusiasts, where farmers can introduce new products and receive feedback.
2. Instagram – This visually oriented network is used to display high-quality photos and short videos of products, enhancing brand promotion. Farmers often share behind-the-scenes content, like production process photos or daily work snapshots, which engages consumers and builds transparency.
3. YouTube – Employed for educational videos and family farm stories, often in vlog format. Longer videos allow farmers to explain production processes from cultivation to packaging, adding brand value and increasing consumer trust. YouTube channels may also include product usage guides, recipes, or stories about sustainable practices.

In conclusion, the authors assert that the combination of these networks contributes to creating a strong digital presence, enabling farmers to actively manage their brand image, increase sales, and establish long-term relationships with customers.

The introduction of social media and influencers as promotional tools has significantly transformed the way agricultural products are marketed and reach consumers in Croatia. Agriculture is a crucial segment of the economy, and the influence of social media influencers is becoming increasingly significant. Through authentic content and direct communication with followers, influencers can create recognition and trust in domestic products. Given the specific needs and interests of consumers in Croatia, involving influencers in promoting agricultural products offers targeted advertising opportunities that not only enhance product visibility but also encourage local consumption and raise awareness of the quality of domestic production. Researching the impact of influencers in this context can contribute to understanding best practices and strategies that producers can implement to effectively penetrate the market, relying on the credibility and consistency of digital marketing on social media (Mandušić, Katalinić, Blašković, 2023).

Effective Communication in Rural Tourism Development

The development of rural tourism is becoming increasingly important as a means of improving the economic position of rural communities, preserving cultural heritage (Dašić, 2022), and promoting natural resources. In this process, effective communication plays a crucial role by connecting potential tourists with rural destinations and raising awareness of the unique experiences that rural areas offer. Through clear and targeted communication strategies, rural communities can attract a larger number of visitors, promote local products and services, and build a recognizable image.

Today, welcoming guests in rural areas has become the norm and even a sign of smart management. It is not uncommon for businesses that were once exclusively agricultural to realize that tourism generates a higher net income than agriculture. Accommodation on farms is often not inexpensive; basic national and even international hotel chains typically cover only the lower segment of the market.

In the modern age, digital platforms such as social media, websites, and travel blogs have become powerful tools for promoting rural tourism. Through these channels, information about natural beauty, cultural events, traditional customs, and accommodation capacities in rural areas (Mihic et al., 2023; Pavlović et al., 2023) can quickly and effectively reach a wide audience. Additionally, direct communication with visitors allows rural destinations to better understand their needs and expectations, contributing to the enhancement of tourism offerings and strengthening the local economy.

The work of González and Vázquez (2019) explores the role of communication strategies in promoting tourism in rural areas. The authors analyze how various communication approaches, including digital media and personalized promotional campaigns, can enhance the attractiveness of rural destinations for tourists. Key findings indicate that effective communication can significantly improve the visibility of rural tourist destinations and encourage sustainable tourism growth by connecting with the specific interests and needs of target tourist groups. Other tourism scholars, such as Doležal and Šauer (2020), assert that effective communication is crucial for the development of rural tourism, as demonstrated by the example of the Czech Republic. They conclude that clear and strategically driven communication among local tourist organizations, residents, and visitors contributes to increased visitation and economic opportunities in rural areas. Through case studies, the authors illustrate that transparent communication is vital for building trust and a positive image of the destination. The paper emphasizes the need for further investments in communication strategies to better inform potential tourists and enhance collaboration among all stakeholders in the rural tourism sector.

Engaging local communities in the planning and implementation of tourism projects is a key aspect of sustainable tourism, which can significantly contribute to the economic, social, and environmental stability of these communities. Involving local residents not only allows for a better understanding of their needs and expectations but also strengthens their sense of belonging and responsibility toward tourism resources. Active participation of local communities can help create more authentic and sustainable tourism offerings that reflect the cultural values and traditions of the area. Additionally, collaboration with local stakeholders can help reduce conflicts of interest and increase support for tourism projects, resulting in more positive experiences for both tourists and hosts. In light of these benefits, it is essential to develop strategies that empower local communities and include them in all phases of tourism planning. This is supported by the research of Demirović Bajrami et al. (2020), which suggests the importance of engaging local communities in the planning and implementation of tourism projects. They recommend developing programs to increase awareness and education on sustainable tourism, as well as strategies to enhance social cohesion within

the community. One of the main factors influencing support for sustainable tourism is social cohesion within the community. Residents who are closer to one another and have stronger social ties are more likely to support sustainable initiatives. Economic feasibility and expectations of financial benefits from tourism are also significant factors. Residents who believe tourism will bring economic benefits are more inclined to support it. Rural tourism can be a major factor in economic revitalization, but its success depends on the community's ability to effectively communicate its resources and attractions (Morrison, 2018). Educational level and awareness of sustainable development directly influence attitudes toward tourism. Residents with higher education and greater environmental knowledge showed stronger support. Active participation of local residents in planning and decision-making processes increases their support for sustainable tourism. When they feel included, they are more likely to view tourism as a positive factor for their community. In Ireland, local communities have implemented communication strategies that utilize digital platforms to promote their tourism offerings. These initiatives have enabled direct interaction with tourists, as well as transparent sharing of information about local events and attractions. For example, by using social media, local producers and hospitality providers have created unique campaigns that attracted visitors, contributing to the growth of rural tourism. This strategy increased tourist traffic in some areas by more than 20% in a single season. In Italy, the "Sustainable Tourism" initiative is focused on promoting rural areas through communication strategies that highlight local stories, traditions, and culture. Using social media and video content, local communities launched a campaign centered on authenticity and visitor experiences. This strategy resulted in a 25% increase in visits to certain rural areas, as well as a heightened interest in local products (Fountas & Koundouras, 2020).

Some authors (Ritchie & Crouch, 2017) believe that destination marketing organizations play a central role in creating and promoting the image of rural areas. They are responsible for developing marketing strategies and communicating with tourists, which includes using various channels such as social media, the internet, and traditional media. These agencies must work closely with local communities and entrepreneurs to create authentic tourism products. Involving local residents in tourism promotion can enhance visitor experiences and empower the community.

Collaborative tourism planning is an increasingly important approach in the development and management of tourism destinations, emphasizing cooperation among all relevant stakeholders, including local communities, governments, the private sector, and non-governmental organizations. This approach allows for the creation of synergy between different interests and needs, ensuring sustainable tourism development that considers ecological, social, and economic aspects. Given the complexity and dynamism of the tourism sector, collaborative planning not only aids in identifying and addressing challenges but also in developing shared visions and strategies that can contribute to the long-term sustainability of destinations. The inclusion of diverse perspectives enriches the decision-making process, strengthens mutual trust among stakeholders, and fosters

innovation. In this sense, the significance of collaborative planning lies in its ability to transform the tourism sector into a more inclusive and responsive system that leverages local resources and potentials while meeting visitor needs (Bramwell & Lane, 2016).

Conclusion

Effective communication strategies are of great importance for promoting agricultural products and developing rural tourism. By using digital tools and social networks, agricultural producers and tourism organizations can increase the visibility of their products and offers, encourage sustainable development, and improve the economic status of rural communities.

The use of social media and information technology can significantly enhance sales and consumer engagement, creating long-term value for local communities and farmers. Digitalization holds the potential to improve rural development but also to deepen existing inequalities in access to information and communication technologies (ICT). The adoption and utilization of ICT in rural areas are often limited, which slows down economic and social development in these regions. Factors such as infrastructure, education level, and economic conditions contribute to the disparity between urban and rural communities. Several studies call for policies to reduce these inequalities through improved ICT access, education, and support for adopting digital technologies in rural areas, which would enable more equitable development in the digital age (Salemink, Strijker, Bosworth, 2017).

One of the main factors supporting sustainable rural tourism development is social cohesion within the community. Residents who are closer to one another and have stronger social bonds are more inclined to support certain initiatives. Additionally, collaborative planning and effective communication play a crucial role in the sustainable tourism development of rural communities.

Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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