

# Taste of the Isles: community engagement and digital innovation in rural food and drink services

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper aims to report on three collaborative digital initiatives co-developed with the Outer Hebrides Tourism Community, reflecting on process, challenges and community impact.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Practice-based development of three digital innovation initiatives, namely, Food with a View, Taste of the Outer Hebrides and Bùth Hebrides, in collaboration with the Outer Hebrides Tourism Community.

**Findings** – The initiatives have improved visibility of service providers, producers and crofters, also have enhanced community engagement, and access to digital markets. Together, these outcomes contribute to economic and social resilience across the isles of the Outer Hebrides.

**Research limitations/implications** – This paper contributes practical results to the extant theoretical understanding of digital innovation of services in rural contexts and community engagement, and shows how community engagement and digital innovation can be adapted to tackle limited digital infrastructure and financial challenges.

**Practical implications** – This paper provides guidance for rural service providers on adopting digital innovation by demonstrating how combining visual storytelling with community co-design can enhance engagement, visibility and inclusion.

**Social implications** – The initiatives show how community engagement can help strengthen rural economies and lead to more participation in digital innovation practices.

**Originality/value** – This paper contributes new insights into the intersection of rural food and drink services, digital innovation and community engagement for sustainable development in the food and drink services.

**Keywords** Community engagement, Digital innovation, Food and drink services, Outer Hebrides, Rural areas, Scotland

**Paper type** Research Paper

## Introduction

The food and drink sector has been recognised in prior research as a dynamic node within broader service and innovation ecosystems (Turčinović *et al.*, 2025), where food is framed as a form of social infrastructure through which communities negotiate inclusion, sustainability and resilience (Bhattacharya *et al.*, 2022). In the Outer Hebrides of Scotland, food and drink services are believed to be a driver of innovation and community engagement



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([visitOuterHebrides.co.uk](http://visitOuterHebrides.co.uk), 2025b). However, the financial fragility of rural areas and limited digital infrastructure could be barriers to long-term economic resilience.

The Outer Hebrides offer a diverse range of food and drink. The surrounding waters provide abundant seafood, notably salmon and shellfish, some of which is processed into smoked products ([VisitOuterHebrides.co.uk](http://VisitOuterHebrides.co.uk), 2022). Stornoway Black Pudding is protected by a Protected Geographical Indication status, safeguarding its traditional manufacture. In drink production, strong markets have been established for gin produced on the islands of Harris, North Uist and Barra ([FoodandDrink.Scot](http://FoodandDrink.Scot), 2025). Tourism brings over 200,000 visitors to the islands annually, supporting an eclectic mix of traditional tearooms, pop-up venues, food trucks, cafes and restaurants ([visitOuterHebrides.co.uk](http://visitOuterHebrides.co.uk), 2025b). Despite hosting a vibrant landscape of producers and tourism services, the area lacks advantages urban centres enjoy. According to prior research, advantages may include access to larger consumer markets, robust transport and logistics networks, readily available skilled labour and stronger digital infrastructure ([Hammer and Frimanslund, 2022](http://Hammer and Frimanslund, 2022)), all of which create efficiencies and growth that can be harder to achieve in rural island settings ([Bravaglieri et al., 2025](http://Bravaglieri et al., 2025)).

However, rural communities can have the capacity to become vibrant centres of innovation based on local heritage and resources ([Bravaglieri et al., 2025](http://Bravaglieri et al., 2025)). Within this context, community interest groups play a vital role in enhancing the islands' appeal as places to live, work and visit. For example, Eat Drink Hebrides is part of the Outer Hebrides Tourism Community (OHTC), established in 2016 to support food and drink services across the Outer Hebrides from Barra to the Butt of Lewis ([visitOuterHebrides.co.uk](http://visitOuterHebrides.co.uk), 2025b). OHTC is a community interest group and the official destination management organisation for the islands. It brings together local food and drink producers, cafes, restaurants, distilleries, crofters and street food businesses from across the Scottish islands. Its role is to help these businesses grow and promote the islands' incredible food and drink ([FoodandDrink.Scot](http://FoodandDrink.Scot), 2025).

In 2020, OHTC (represented by the second author) was paired with an academic partner (the first author) through the *Adopt a Business* initiative, a post-COVID recovery programme led by Interface, VisitScotland, and the Scottish Tourism Alliance (STA). At the same time, the islands were experiencing a rise in food vans, often located in spectacular settings but facing notable gaps in service marketing, which presented both challenges and opportunities for shaping a distinctive "island street food" offer.

While existing literature recognises the role of rural areas in socially and culturally informed innovation ([Bravaglieri et al., 2025](http://Bravaglieri et al., 2025)), much of the research remains centred on urban contexts, often overlooking the infrastructural constraints, limited local knowledge and relational dynamics that shape innovation in rural settings ([Chin et al., 2022](http://Chin et al., 2022)). This collaboration between academia and OHTC sought to address this gap by asking: *How do digital innovation and community engagement interact to strengthen the visibility, inclusivity and adaptive capacity of rural food and drink service ecosystems?*

Drawing on research into digital engagement, customer engagement behaviour and human-technology engagement in service ecosystems (e.g. [Azer and Alexander, 2025](http://Azer and Alexander, 2025); [Azer et al., 2024](http://Azer et al., 2024)), the partnership developed three digital initiatives to empower local food and drink service providers by leveraging digital innovation and community engagement. This paper reports on these successfully implemented digital initiatives, namely, *Food with a View*, *Taste of the Outer Hebrides* and *Bùth Hebrides*, which together illustrate how community engagement and digital innovation intersect to support the sustainable economic and social development of rural service providers. Across the three initiatives, academic and industry partners co-designed each by integrating research insights with community consultations. Their collaboration extended to securing funding, managing design and training activities and ensuring the outcomes were both locally relevant and scalable.

## Theoretical background

### Rural areas and services

Rural areas which have been long regarded as peripheral to economic and technological development have recently been viewed as vital places for innovation (Bravaglieri *et al.*, 2025; Labianca and Navarro, 2019). Recent research suggests their strategic potential as key holders of social, cultural and landscape diversity, as well as key producers of food and non-food materials (Schmied, 2022) which may help positioning rural regions not just as recipients, but as drivers of innovation (Bravaglieri *et al.*, 2025). *Innovation* refers to the process of developing and applying new ideas, practices or technologies (Anthony, 2024) which requires investment to improve practices, marketing and distribution. However, a long-term lack of investment in rural infrastructure has constrained such innovation (Saleminck *et al.*, 2017).

Within these contexts, food and drink services have emerged as a promising domain for rural innovation (Taheri *et al.*, 2021). *Service innovation* in this sector can include the creation of new products, sustainable production practices and novel marketing approaches that connect food to culture, heritage and consumer experience (Madanaguli *et al.*, 2021). Rural communities such as the Outer Hebrides face logistical and economic challenges typical of peripheral regions (Saleminck *et al.*, 2017), yet they also possess distinct culinary and cultural traditions that create opportunities for *place-based innovation* (FoodandDrink.Scot, 2025; Storbacka, 2019). Such innovation often extends beyond economic utility: it may be socially and culturally embedded, using food as a vehicle for storytelling, cultural continuity and identity (Madanaguli *et al.*, 2021; Marshall and Murphy, 2017).

Food and drink services also form part of broader rural service ecosystems (Liao *et al.*, 2024), serving economic and social functions simultaneously (Yin *et al.*, 2022). They act as social infrastructures that support community well-being, inclusion and resilience (Balaji *et al.*, 2022). In regions like the Outer Hebrides, food and drink activities sustain traditional livelihoods such as crofting and seafood production (Venugopal *et al.*, 2019), while local food heritage increasingly functions as a cultural asset that supports sustainable tourism (Turčinović *et al.*, 2025; visitOuterHebrides.co.uk, 2025b). These dynamics highlight how food and drink services contribute not only to economic growth but also to community resilience, defined as the capacity of a community to adapt, learn and sustain its core functions (Lang and Barling, 2012).

### Digital innovation in rural food and drinks services

Digital innovation involves the use of digital technologies to create or transform services, interactions, and business models (Cheng *et al.*, 2023). Within service contexts, it enables new forms of customer experience and operational efficiency (Busulwa *et al.*, 2022). In food and drink services, digital innovation can link local heritage with global audiences through online storytelling, digital marketplaces and social media engagement (Madanaguli *et al.*, 2021).

However, in rural settings, digital innovation tends to be incremental and adaptive rather than disruptive (Chin *et al.*, 2022). Limited broadband, digital skills and financial resources mean that innovation focuses on visibility, connectivity and cultural preservation through affordable tools. Platforms such as social media and e-commerce allow rural enterprises to expand their market reach and co-create value with consumers (Chatzipanagiotou *et al.*, 2023). In tourism and hospitality, this has evolved traditional marketing into digital engagement ecosystems (Fauzi *et al.*, 2024), where online interactions enhance efficiency (Ranieri *et al.*, 2024) and customer engagement (Azer *et al.*, 2024).

Nevertheless, existing studies predominantly emphasise urban contexts, overlooking how rural environments (with their interdependence and resource constraints) shape distinctive forms of digital practice (Cheng *et al.*, 2023). In such contexts, digital innovation can function

as a resilience mechanism, enabling communities to maintain authenticity while expanding access to broader markets. It can also reduce geographic isolation by creating spaces for visibility, storytelling and place-based branding at relatively low cost (Chin *et al.*, 2022). While *place-based branding* emphasises strategic positioning and competitive differentiation (Tymoshchuk *et al.*, 2023), *storytelling* focuses on narrative authenticity and meaning-making (Ahmed *et al.*, 2024). When combined, they can strengthen identity-based marketing that resonates with local and external audiences (Wilson, 2022). Digital innovation may amplify this by allowing communities to represent themselves visually and narratively.

According to prior research, visual content provides richer displays of contextual information, revealing sensory and spatial cues that are essential for both customers seeking authentic experiences and for service providers trying to communicate the value of inherently subjective offerings (Ostrom *et al.*, 2021) which is especially powerful in the Outer Hebrides case. In this setting, the visual modality of engagement (VME) becomes particularly significant (Azer *et al.*, 2024) which refers to customers' behavioural expressions using static or dynamic visuals (e.g. images or videos) with a brand or service focus. However, it is unclear how generated visual content should improve inclusion or market access for peripheral actors, thereby contributing to place-based branding and community resilience.

#### *Community engagement in rural food and drinks services*

Community engagement refers to the process through which local actors actively contribute to, shape, and sustain initiatives that generate shared social and economic value (Turčinović *et al.*, 2025). Engagement extends beyond participation, while participation may imply attendance or involvement, engagement involves emotional, cognitive and behavioural investment in co-creation processes (Azer and Alexander, 2018; Brodie *et al.*, 2011). Within service research, engagement is understood as a multi-actor process that supports value co-creation and institutional change (Alexander *et al.*, 2018; Brodie *et al.*, 2019). Engagement is an overarching concept central in service research (e.g. Azer and Alexander, 2025; Brodie *et al.*, 2019; Jaakkola and Alexander, 2024). Prior engagement research has predominantly explored the ways in which customers interact with companies to co-create value and improve business outcomes (e.g. Hollebeek *et al.*, 2024; Pansari and Kumar, 2017). More recently, this view has expanded by framing engagement as a wider phenomenon that reaches beyond the traditional customer-firm dyad, affecting entire ecosystems, influencing institutional structures and contributing to broader societal change (e.g. Azer and Alexander, 2022; Azer *et al.*, 2021; Brodie *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, offering a lens for understanding how societal actors contribute to solutions that extend beyond commercial interests and drive meaningful societal change (Alexander *et al.*, 2025).

In rural contexts such as the Outer Hebrides, engagement is fundamental to community empowerment and sustainable development (Turčinović *et al.*, 2025). It helps overcome isolation by emphasising collaboration and shared ownership of initiatives. Engagement can operate cognitively (through shared understanding of local challenges), emotionally (through attachment to place and culture) and behaviourally (through co-designed food projects or joint campaigns). At the same time, engagement interacts with concepts such as inclusivity and visibility. *Visibility* concerns the extent to which local actors and their work are represented in markets and media spaces (Goransson and Fagerholm, 2018) while *inclusion* refers to equitable access and recognition for all members of the community, including those digitally underrepresented (Bhattacharya *et al.*, 2022). Effective community engagement must therefore balance both, ensuring that digital visibility does not privilege a few while excluding others. For example, the crofters and producers whose work often remains hidden, geographically distant, digitally underrepresented, and disconnected from broader networks.

Moreover, in peripheral settings, access and skills disparities can create digital asymmetries, limiting who engages and whose stories are heard (Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014). For instance, while social media can amplify marketing efforts, its potential remains limited when local actors lack the tools, knowledge or support to use it meaningfully (Bhattacharya *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, addressing these asymmetries through training, inclusion, and reflexive co-design is critical to ensure that digital engagement drives collective rather than individual benefit (Turčinović *et al.*, 2025).

The digital initiatives were developed in response to these challenges, putting the theoretical ideas discussed above into practice. These initiatives bring together digital innovation and community engagement within rural food and drink services, illustrating how their interaction can strengthen the visibility, inclusivity and adaptive capacity of rural food and drink service ecosystems.

## Methods

The project involved the development and implementation of three digital initiatives – *Food with a View*, *Taste of the Outer Hebrides* and *Bùth Hebrides* – in collaboration between academia and the OHTC which began in 2020 as part of a strategic response to the challenges facing the food and drink sector in the Scottish Outer Hebrides (a geographically remote region with a vibrant culinary landscape). The region's producers, crofters and mobile food vendors often faced barriers such as limited digital infrastructure, financial fragility and low visibility in wider markets. In response, OHTC joined forces with academia through the *Adopt a Business* initiative, a post-COVID recovery programme led by Interface, VisitScotland and the STA. The project evolved through several funded phases between 2020 and 2025, with support from the ESRC (ABC (2020/21) & IAA (2021/22) schemes), the University's Chancellor's Fund (2024/25) and Scotland Food & Drink.

Evaluations were made of how these initiatives impacted both the service providers and their customers, drawing on multiple sources of evidence, including digital platform metrics, campaign records, participation trails and OHTC reports. These sources enabled the team to assess patterns of community engagement and the impact of these digital initiatives on the local actors. The user-generated material in this paper was all publicly shared online and was all part of the digital initiatives. While outcomes were influenced by contextual factors such as seasonality, concurrent campaigns and platform dynamics, the observations provide insight into the potential of digital innovation and community engagement to support sustainable development in rural food and drink services. We will discuss the procedures taken while developing the initiatives and the results of each in the following sections.

## Digital innovation initiatives

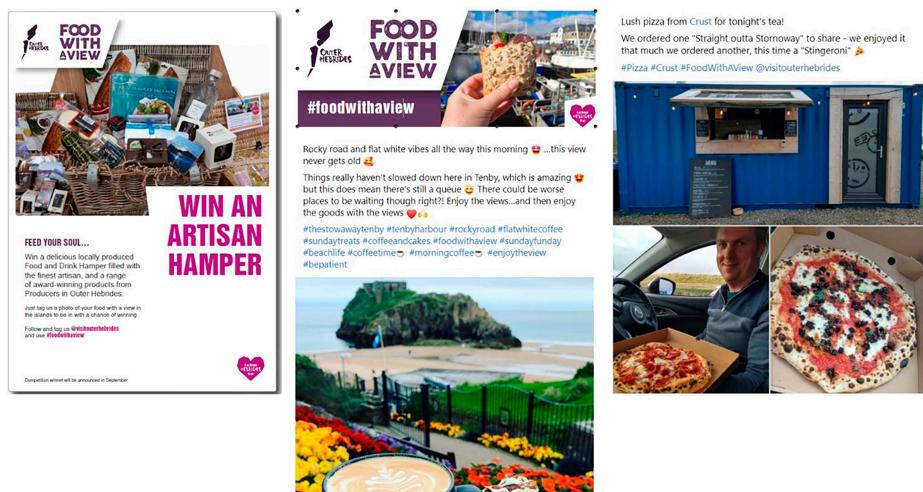
The initial challenge in 2020 focused specifically on street food vans: how to reposition these vans and crofter-run eateries across the isles in a way that meet visitor expectations while aligning with the wider tourism strategy. A visit to the Outer Hebrides by the researcher and meetings with OHTC revealed that the vans lacked marketing practices, making visitors unaware of their offerings or locations. This challenge presented an opportunity to shape a distinctive “island street food” offer. To address this, the researcher suggested that the businesses be brought together under a single umbrella brand, which could be used to promote their offerings and coordinate social media campaigns to raise awareness and extend engagement and reach. The only common feature among the service offerings was their scenic locations and the fact that they all served food; hence the creation of the umbrella brand “Food with a View” which was used to develop complementary online and offline tools to engage both visitors and service providers.

*Initiative 1: Visual engagement and place-based branding – “food with a view”*

*Design and procedures.* The first initiative involved the creation of a region-wide branding concept, *Food with a View*, which captured the unique appeal of food vans located in scenic rural spots. Based on research into visual engagement and place-based branding, the brand was co-developed with the OHTC. In this setting, the VME becomes particularly significant (Azer *et al.*, 2024). Visual content provides richer displays of contextual information, revealing sensory and spatial cues that are essential for both customers seeking authentic experiences and for service providers trying to communicate the value of inherently subjective offerings (Ostrom *et al.*, 2021) which is especially powerful in the Outer Hebrides setting. Therefore, drawing on the Azer *et al.*'s (2024) conceptualisation of VME as customers' behavioural expressions using static or dynamic visuals (e.g. images or videos) with a brand or service focus, the campaign *Food with a View* was developed.

The campaign encouraged customers to photograph their meals with the natural scenic background, tag the service provider along with the hashtag #FoodWithAView, and share their posts on Instagram and Facebook. In addition, to increase reach, we introduced a contest, rewarding the best tagged *Food with a View* photo with a Hebridean Hamper filled with unique local produce from the isles (see Figure 1). The combination of competition and hashtag strategy aimed at increasing engagement and visibility of the service providers and their offerings. This approach aligns with visual engagement theories, which suggest that visuals may not only convey information but could also act as participatory practices of place-branding and customer experience (e.g. Azer *et al.*, 2024; Ordenes *et al.*, 2019).

Alongside the social media campaign, we engaged with a graphic designer to design the *Food with a View* brand logo, selfie boards, signage and collaborative menus to reinforce and unify the brand. Visitors were encouraged by the businesses to use take selfies in front of the food vans, sometimes with local producers using the selfie boards (see Figure 2). The initiative to bring street food vans under a shared brand identity was specifically to increase



**Figure 1.** Examples of #Foodwithaview Campaign

**Source:** Visit Outer Hebrides public social media page, used with permission by Julie Sloan (second author)

collaboration in the service ecosystem by offering a cohesive menu, coordinated signage and mapped routes, practical tools to overcome the spatial fragmentation. Moreover, such collaborative approach was also created to help those with limited marketing or digital skills. They could benefit from collective visibility and branding, therefore, increase reach and attention to their offerings. To increase local knowledge about using social media to market service offering, visual engagement strategies, we held two knowledge-exchange sessions with local service providers and crofters. Importantly, visual engagement provides an effective and accessible means of conveying the narrative of the Outer Hebrides' food identity. Through images, it becomes possible to communicate the region's cultural distinctiveness, local produce and culinary traditions in a manner that feels authentic. Unlike passive forms of digital marketing that rely primarily on static content or textual promotion, visually driven approaches invite interaction, foster a sense of connection and allow audiences to experience the vibrancy and place-based character of the Outer Hebrides' food culture.

*Results and outcomes.* The response was enthusiastic, participants shared images of their plates framed by stunning island views, and some went ever further by posting their service experiences that included moments with friends and family (see Figure 1). The campaign activated both the visitor base and local businesses as co-creators. The reports show that in the first 7 month since the campaign, users and viewers of the Visit Outer Hebrides website massively increased. Table 1 shows that number of users increased from 27,028 to 73,412 in 2021 which was exactly seven months after the campaign was launched in 2021. Similarly, the viewers of that website have increased from 104,339 to 269,480. Moreover, social media reach doubled across platforms – Facebook impressions rose from under 20K to over 40K, and Instagram reached 75K impressions with over 13K campaign tags. The Outer Hebrides also leveraged user-generated content more broadly through SnapSea, a platform sourcing and scheduling visual content. SnapSea had 68 images from the campaign. Using SnapSea, Visit Outer Hebrides expanded its Instagram following by 143%, reaching over 22K



**Figure 2.** Selfie boards and branding – food with a view

**Source:** Pictures taken by Julie Sloan (second author) and used by her permission

**Table 1.** Food with a view – seven months after launch

Months	Jan-21	Feb-21	Mar-21	Apr-21	May-21	Jun-21	Jul-21	Totals
Users	27,028	29,208	36,274	42,675	62,327	68,387	73,412	339,311
Page views	104,339	121,613	159,545	168,803	261,864	283,462	269,480	1,369,106

**Source(s):** Visit Outer Hebrides, used by permission of Julie Sloan (second author)

followers, generating 1.1 million impressions, and a reach of nearly 883K accounts – far exceeding the follower base. By acquiring rights to over 2.1K images and videos, and using approximately 95% UGC in their feed, the campaign maximised reach and engagement, strengthened marketing and showcased the islands' landscapes and culinary experiences.

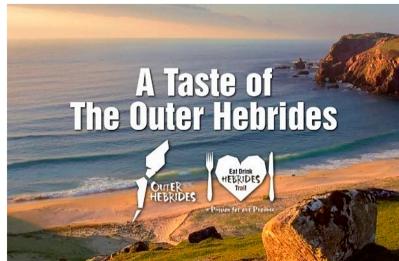
In addition to its measurable digital outcomes, *Food with a View* catalysed long-term growth by attracting new participants. While the Eat Drink Hebrides membership trail had always included restaurants and spirits retailers, the campaign has increased community engagement across the trail and contributed to a rise in overall membership from 50 before the campaign to 80 ([VisitOuterHebrides.co.uk](http://VisitOuterHebrides.co.uk), 2025a). The trail's growing popularity has transformed it into a self-sustaining model; businesses contribute a modest fee to OHTC, which as community interest group, reinvests these funds into community-based initiatives. The campaign also earned industry recognition and was named a finalist in 2022 for a Regional Excellence Award by the Scotland Food and Drink.

#### *Initiative 2: Community engagement and inclusion – “Taste of the Outer Hebrides”*

*Design and procedures.* Building on the success of *Food with a View*, which focused on food and drink services in scenic experiences of the islands, the next initiative – *Taste of the Outer Hebrides* – takes the spotlight to the digitally underrepresented people behind the plate. These are the chefs, crofters and producers whose skills, stories and dedication bring the islands' food and drink to life. As mentioned earlier, the challenge of engagement in rural areas may not only be about access or infrastructure, but also about visibility, representation and inclusion (Turčinović *et al.*, 2025). *Food with a view* initiative addressed the visibility while *Taste of the Outer Hebrides* addressed the inclusivity. Crofters and producers often remain hidden, geographically distant, digitally underrepresented and disconnected from broader networks ([VisitOuterHebrides.co.uk](http://VisitOuterHebrides.co.uk), 2022).

In this light, the second initiative saw the development of *Taste of the Outer Hebrides*, a digital e-book that mapped out the region's crofters, producers, restaurants and chefs, along with their stories and recipes. The e-book emphasises people behind the plate and drink, encouraging deeper emotional connection and promoting sustainability by spotlighting crofters and their honesty boxes (see Figure 3). It offers a visual taste of what there is to discover, for example, restaurants, local produce and people and stories behind a plate or beverage ([VisitOuterHebrides.co.uk](http://VisitOuterHebrides.co.uk), 2022). This initiative reinforced community inclusion while also enhancing the cultural appeal of the region to tourists.

*Taste of the Outer Hebrides* was developed as a richly visually illustrated storytelling e-book showcasing the region's culinary ecosystem, from crofting and seafood harvesting to restaurants, cafes and community shops (Wilson, 2022). It was important that we consider the whole islands businesses to ensure inclusivity. To develop this e-book, we recruited the services of a professional designer to compile and design the eBook. Content was gathered by OHTC directly from chefs, producers, crofters and local business owners, accompanied by visuals that capture both the natural beauty of the islands and the immersive culinary



**Emerging talent**

Not only does the island boast experienced chefs and food and drink producers, the Isle of Lewis is also home to Outer Hebrides UHI where budding head chefs, restaurants and future hospitality workers can study at the Training Restaurant and set out on the path to a future in the tourism and hospitality industry.

**Favourite Recipes**  
From the Kitchen's of Barvas and Brue Community Centre, Lewis

**Nettle Soup**

**Ingredients**

- 2oz butter
- 12oz potatoes peeled and roughly diced
- 1½ pints vegetable stock
- 1oz fake oatmeal
- One leeks
- 10 fluid oz milk
- One nettle tops
- Salt and pepper

**Method**

Melt the butter in a large pan and fry the oatmeal until well browned. Stir in the leeks, nettle tops and potatoes and continue to fry for a few minutes. Stir in the liquid and seasoning. Bring to the boil, then reduce the heat and simmer very gently for about 30 minutes until the vegetables are tender and the oatmeal cooked. Stir frequently during the cooking to ensure that the potato and oatmeal don't burn. Serve or liquidise the soup, adjust seasoning and serve very hot.

**Saus Cudigean Chroig**

**Ingredients**

- Makes 4-5 cutlets
- ½ onion (chopped)
- 200ml cold water
- 200ml milk
- Fish livers
- A knob of butter
- Pinch of sea salt

**Method**

Bring all of the ingredients to the boil, then add the milk. Season with ground black pepper and add the butter. Simmer for a further 10-15 minutes and serve hot. Great for colds and flu.

**A Taste of The Outer Hebrides**

Now you have an idea on what to look out for, start your journey of foodie discovery below by selecting an island and diving into its food and drink scene.

**Lewis**

**Harris**

**Uist**

**Barra**

**Lewis** © Harbour Kitchen

**Harris** © Stornoway Shetland

**Uist** © Longways Lodge

**Barra** © Cafe Kieran

**Figure 3.** Examples from the *Taste of the Outer Hebrides* eBook

**Source:** Visit [OuterHebrides.co.uk](http://OuterHebrides.co.uk), 2022, used with permission of Julie Sloan (second author)

experiences they offer. These design choices were guided by research on visual engagement (Azer *et al.*, 2024). The 17-page e-book contains vivid visuals, personal narratives and traditional recipes to immerse readers in the lived experience of the Outer Hebrides. It specifically focused on the community of crofters, chefs and eatery operators, to enhance their visibility and inclusion.

*Results and outcomes.* *Taste of the Outer Hebrides* operationalises the shift from isolated producers to networked community. It earned widespread acclaim, winning the Scotland Food and Drink Excellence Award in 2023 and a finalist in two Global Culinary Travel Awards the same year – for *Best Use of Technology in Culinary Tourism* and *Best Programme to Promote Culinary Culture*. Beyond accolades, the eBook expanded the partnership ecosystem by attracting new collaborators, including Highlands and Islands

Enterprise, the Edinburgh Food Festival, Taste Harris and the World Food Travel Association.

The e-book launched in October 2022, and engagement grew steadily from the start. Within its first month, it attracted over 3,500 unique views, increasing to around 4,539 by early February 2023 and 6,191 by July 2023. This upward trend continued and has now reached 14,924 views, reflecting sustained interest and strong digital reach since its release. It has been widely recognised for its role in promoting the region's culinary heritage and was even highlighted by the Stornoway Gazette as a central component of the Outer Hebrides' entry for a major culinary award (Wilson, 2025). Importantly, the aim of this initiative was satisfied, crofters were more visible with their diversification and specifically mentioned as evidence in the national and global awards. Finally, users and viewers of the main website of the OHTC, Visit Outer Hebrides, massively increased since the launch of the e-book. Table 2 shows a more than twofold increase in the number of users and viewers from 2022 to the corresponding period in 2023.

*Initiative 3: E-commerce and long-term digitisation – “Bùth Hebrides”*

*Design and procedures.* Building on *Taste of the Outer Hebrides*, which highlighted the chefs, crofters and producers behind the islands' food and drink, the *Bùth Hebrides* initiative shifts focus to the places where service offerings meet the public. In 2024–2025, the project scaled its ambition with the launch of *Bùth Hebrides* – the region's first integrated digital marketplace for local produce and services ([visitOuterHebrides.co.uk](http://visitOuterHebrides.co.uk), 2024). The term *Bùth* – Gaelic for “market” – evokes both tradition and locality. It embeds the digital initiative in the cultural and linguistic heritage of the Outer Hebrides while signalling a contemporary platform for products and services (see Figure 4). This initiative sought to overcome structural barriers to market access while building long-term digital sustainability. The importance of this initiative was emphasised by the local producers and residents in a community consultation session held by the OHTC. The project was further underpinned by research into human–machine engagement (HME, Azer and Alexander, 2025) to ensure that the resulting digital solutions were informed by both community priorities and contemporary academic insights. The HME research highlights the importance of explainability and transparency in balancing social dynamics with technological innovation to ensure that the platform is intuitive, secure and firmly grounded in user trust.

Beyond commerce, *Bùth Hebrides* became a hub for collaboration, connecting producers, visitors and residents. The design of the platform was developed to specifically showcase island businesses that are members in the Eat and Drink Hebrides Trail, such as SkyDancer Coffee in South Uist, Stag Bakeries in Lewis and The Hebridean Mustard Company in Harris, highlighting the innovative ways island entrepreneurs navigate logistical and economic challenges (Sheldon, 2025). SkyDancer Coffee, for example, balances

**Table 2.** Taste of the Outer Hebrides – nine months after launch

Months	Jan-22	Feb-22	Mar-22	Apr-22	May-22	Jun-22	Jul-22	Totals
Users	59,301	50,887	52,962	63,857	73,754	62,254	60,422	423,437
Page views	231,348	184,493	185,632	239,177	265,925	222,588	223,405	1,552,568
	<i>Jan-23</i>	<i>Feb-23</i>	<i>Mar-23</i>	<i>Apr-23</i>	<i>May-23</i>	<i>Jun-23</i>	<i>Jul-23</i>	
Users	62,206	45,627	48,609	55,574	62,998	61,433	65,240	401,687
Page views	244,834	170,766	184,451	208,546	223,583	217,947	235,709	1,485,836

**Source(s):** Visit Outer Hebrides, used by permission of Julie Sloan (second author)

**Figure 4.** Examples from the Bùth Hebrides Online Marketplace

Source: Visit [OuterHebrides.co.uk](https://OuterHebrides.co.uk), 2024, used with permission of Julie Sloan (second author)

environmental sustainability with specialty roasting in gale-force winds, while Stag Bakeries contends with complex supply chains and high transportation costs to reach over 1,000 retail outlets in the UK. Similarly, The Hebridean Mustard Company demonstrates creativity in sourcing and resilience in facing infrastructural limitations like transport and post office closures. Bùth Hebrides aimed at providing a digital window that maximises exposure, builds community resilience and supports practical business needs that extend beyond physical tourism or retail (FoodandDrink.Scot, 2025). Moreover, the design of the platform purposively links each listing to producers' own websites, to offer a seamless path for exploration and enhances reach, inclusion, visibility and economic opportunity. This flexible design also allows replication in other rural regions, positioning Bùth Hebrides as a model for digitally driven community engagement.

*Results and outcomes.* The Bùth was launched in November 2024 and since then it has shown great impact on the participating businesses. Table 3 shows an increase in the number of the Bùth users since its launch to date from 108 to 616 user, the content page impression for each business, making in total 22,232 impressions and the clicks to each business website from the Bùth with a total of 650 clicks. The Bùth has been live for just a year, and engagement figures continue to rise steadily. Building on this success, the project is now evolving into Bùth for Trade – a trade-facing extension of the platform scheduled for launch at the end of 2025. Supported by Scotland Food and Drink, this new initiative will offer a professionally designed digital resource aimed at raising the profile of Outer Hebrides producers among trade buyers across the UK and beyond ([visitOuterHebrides.co.uk](http://visitOuterHebrides.co.uk), 2025b). This progression demonstrates strong confidence from funders in the professionalism and tangible impact of previous initiatives deliverables. Indeed, the proven success of Bùth Hebrides has directly enabled further investment, with Bùth for Trade as an additional promotional tool for local businesses. Furthermore, Bùth Hebrides and its trade extension show how HME (Azer and Alexander, 2025) can inform creation of an integrated ecosystem enabling producers to engage collaboratively with each other, visitors and trade partners while overcoming geographic and infrastructural constraints (FoodandDrink.Scot, 2025). Finally, *Bùth Hebrides, along with Food with a View and Taste of the Outer Hebrides*, won an Excellence Award in Culinary Preservation and Promotion from the *Global Culinary Travel Awards* in 2025 showing industrial recognition to the digital initiatives and their impact on the rural services sector.

**Table 3.** Bùth Hebrides – year after launch

Businesses	Bùth Hebrides content page impression	Click throughs to business website from Bùth Hebrides	
		Total Clicks	Total users
Bùth Bharraigh – 531091	1,496	113	108
Charles MacLeod Butchers	1,091	61	53
Flavour Restaurant	929	21	21
HAAR: The New Hebridean Kitchen	801	0	0
Hebridean Charcuterie	958	30	30
Hebridean Tea Store	69	1	1
Isle of Barra Distillery	952	15	15
Isle of Harris Distillery	1,497	32	33
Isle of Lewis Gin Limited	1,497	43	39
Lochmaddy Bay Prawns	1,496	65	63
Machair Water	1,091	23	22
North Uist Distillery	1,112	23	23
Salar Smokehouse	1,496	60	57
SkyDancer Coffee Roasters	606	6	6
South Uist Distillers	661	4	4
Stag Bakeries Ltd	259	7	7
Stornoway Distillers	1,091	13	13
The Good Food Boutique	1,045	33	29
The Hebridean Mustard Company	1,497	42	32
The Lews Distillery	1,497	18	18
Uig Lodge Smoked Salmon	1,091	42	42
<i>Totals</i>	22,232	652	616

**Source(s):** Visit Outer Hebrides, used by permission of Julie Sloan (second author)

## Discussion

The success of the three initiatives lies in its approach to digital innovation by capitalising on community engagement. *Food with a View* doubled social media engagement and turned that engagement into real change. More service providers joined the Eat Drink Hebrides membership trail which operates on a reasonable fee reinvested into the community. The *Taste of the Outer Hebrides* e-book greatly increased visibility and inclusion for crofters who were previously out of touch with the tourism economy. It gained national attention and won the Excellence award in 2023. The most transformative part was *Bùth Hebrides*, it reduced food miles, improved efficiency and created a lasting digital presence for small producers. [Table 4](#) and [Figure 5](#) offer figures of the reach and engagement increase represented by increased number of users and views of the main website of the OHTC which hosts the initiatives.

### Theoretical implications

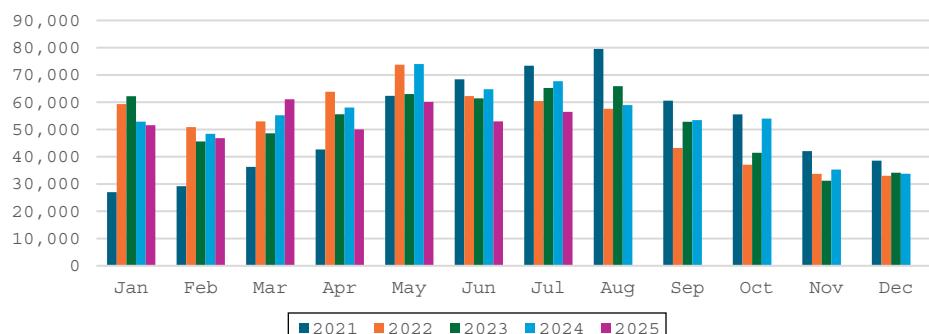
This paper offers insights into understanding customer engagement behaviour in rural contexts. While existing research of engagement often focus on voluntary contributions in digital platforms (e.g. [Blasco-Arcas et al., 2020](#); [Rasoolimanesh et al., 2019](#)), the developed digital initiatives expands the concept to include visual modality of engagement and community-led interactions ([Azer et al., 2024](#)). Furthermore, this paper shows human-machine engagement not as an isolated dyad but as socio-technical ([Azer and Alexander, 2025](#)) where visuals and local narratives reshape how engagement with technology is manifested and sustained. This reframing extends beyond consumption-related engagement (e.g. [Pansari and Kumar, 2017](#)) and practically shows that the engagement concept can offer a lens for understanding how societal actors contribute to solutions that may drive meaningful societal change ([Alexander et al., 2025](#)).

This paper improves our understanding of the role of community engagement in rural areas which has been viewed in prior research as limited in innovation due to infrastructure issues, geographic isolation and unequal access to digital tools ([Bravaglieri et al., 2025](#)). The initiatives, however, show that even with limited infrastructure and resources, community engagement in rural areas can be a driver of innovation. For example, *Food with a View* demonstrates how visual engagement and place-based branding can extend market reach and

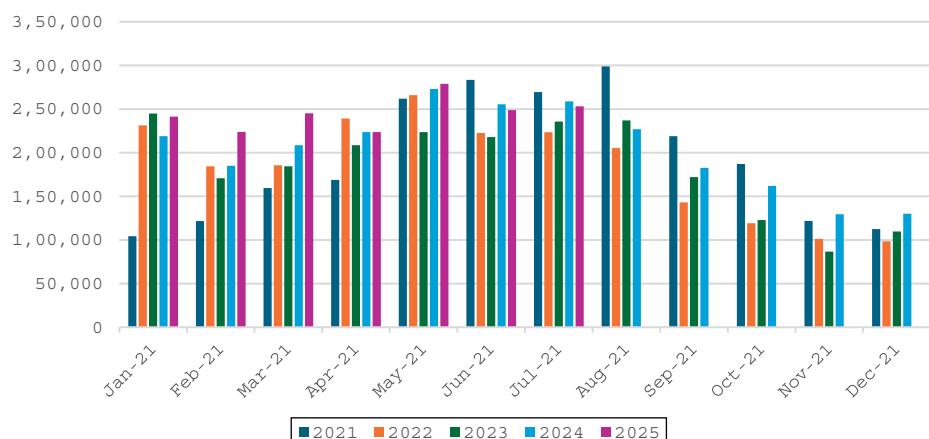
**Table 4.** Start of the digital initiatives in 2021 till 2025 – comparison for seven months/year

Months	Jan-21	Feb-21	Mar-21	Apr-21	May-21	Jun-21	Jul-21	Totals
Users	27,028	29,208	36,274	42,675	62,327	68,387	73,412	339,311
Page views	104,339	121,613	159,545	168,803	261,864	283,462	269,480	1,369,106
	<i>Jan-22</i>	<i>Feb-22</i>	<i>Mar-22</i>	<i>Apr-22</i>	<i>May-22</i>	<i>Jun-22</i>	<i>Jul-22</i>	
Users	59,301	50,887	52,962	63,857	73,754	62,254	60,422	423,437
Page views	231,348	184,493	185,632	239,177	265,925	222,588	223,405	1,552,568
	<i>Jan-23</i>	<i>Feb-23</i>	<i>Mar-23</i>	<i>Apr-23</i>	<i>May-23</i>	<i>Jun-23</i>	<i>Jul-23</i>	
Users	62,206	45,627	48,609	55,574	62,998	61,433	65,240	401,687
Page views	244,834	170,766	184,451	208,546	223,583	217,947	235,709	1,485,836
	<i>Jan-24</i>	<i>Feb-24</i>	<i>Mar-24</i>	<i>Apr-24</i>	<i>May-24</i>	<i>Jun-24</i>	<i>Jul-24</i>	
Users	52,881	48,415	55,216	58,064	74,000	64,748	67,693	421,017
Views	219,003	184,994	208,588	223,558	272,968	255,458	258,905	1,623,474
	<i>Jan-25</i>	<i>Feb-25</i>	<i>Mar-25</i>	<i>Apr-25</i>	<i>May-25</i>	<i>Jun-25</i>	<i>Jul-25</i>	
Users	51,563	46,813	61,093	50,059	60,110	52,976	56,451	379,065
Views	241,384	223,739	245,147	223,620	278,962	248,788	253,149	1,714,789

**Source(s):** Visit Outer Hebrides, used by permission of Julie Sloan (second author)



Website Views



**Figure 5.** Engagement since the start of the digital initiatives – 2021–2025  
 Source: Visit Outer Hebrides, used by permission of Julie Sloan (second author)

increase co-creation between visitors and local service providers. *Taste of the Outer Hebrides* shifted the focus to the people behind the products, highlighting crofters, producers and chefs, thereby promoting their inclusivity and visibility. Finally, *Bùth Hebrides* operationalised a fully integrated digital marketplace, connecting producers, residents and trade partners, facilitating ecosystem-level collaboration and providing a sustainable pathway for economic growth and cultural preservation. This broadens traditional community engagement findings, which have mostly focused on online brand communities (Do and Bowden, 2023; Kumar *et al.*, 2025), urban innovation (Anthony, 2024) and challenges in health, education and society (Eden *et al.*, 2024; Michael *et al.*, 2023). In these digital initiatives, we see community engagement as more complex, allowing local people to create value, maintain control over their cultural heritage and build resilience against geographical challenges. Moreover, unlike prior research which has seen digital innovation

as a tool only for market growth, this paper shows that digital innovation could be embedded in cultural heritage, using visual storytelling and community engagement.

The paper also offers new insights about innovation in rural services, beyond the usual emphasis on new technology or economic results (Cheng *et al.*, 2023). Here, innovation demonstrates through tangible practices that enhance visibility, inclusion, community engagement and cultural heritage. Therefore, unlike prior views, we show that innovation in rural services is as much social and cultural as it is technological, the capacity to innovate dwells in the community and its practices, therefore, contributes to ongoing discussions in service research, rural studies and innovation (e.g. Alexander *et al.*, 2025; Hammer and Frimanslund, 2022; Madanaguli *et al.*, 2021; Wirtz *et al.*, 2023).

### *Practical implications*

This paper highlights the importance of documenting community-driven impacts. This is especially relevant in rural regions, where traditional measures may overlook social and cultural aspects. Looking ahead, several recommendations for management and policy arise.

*For food and drink service providers in rural areas.* Service providers are recommended to invest in accessible, low-cost digital tools that fit their needs and context (e.g. simple website builders, social media platforms and e-commerce plugins) to help overcome geographic isolation and expand visibility beyond local markets. Moreover, collaborative branding initiatives, like *Food with a View*, can help small service providers gain visibility and recognition in the market. Small service providers can join forces under a shared brand or campaign to improve discoverability and increase collaboration within the local service ecosystem. In addition, it is recommended that service provider use visual storytelling to showcase place and heritage. Focusing on visual engagement, as seen in both *Food with a View* and *Taste of the Outer Hebrides*, can communicate the unique value of local products and experiences. High-quality images, videos, or e-books can also highlight the natural landscapes, culinary traditions and people behind the products, increasing customer engagement and building brand authenticity.

Importantly, it is recommended to highlight people behind the products or services as in specifically rural contexts, it increases local knowledge and enhances the sense of belonging to the community among those providers. Furthermore, rural service providers could try to benefit from participating in digital marketplaces. Digital platforms can overcome structural barriers to market access, connect producers with visitors and trade partners, therefore, enhance long-term community and economic resilience. Finally, without knowledge exchange and support, the digital innovation is incomplete. It is recommended that service providers acknowledge the possible lack of digital and marketing knowledge among the community. Therefore, workshops or guidance on digital technologies/tools could be useful to build capacity, reduce digital skill gaps and strengthen ecosystem-level collaboration.

*For regional policymakers and support organisations.* Support efforts are recommended to focus on creating interoperable, community-owned digital systems. This is to enable rural producers and service providers to connect and market their offerings. Moreover, investing in digital literacy training is recommended. Facilitating the availability of workshops on social media marketing and content creation or providing mentorship on using digital platforms may help service providers in rural areas to manage their online presence effectively. Finally, policymakers may recognise the social dynamics of rural communities and support collaborative governance models that could encourage inclusion, local ownership and ongoing involvement in digital innovation.

*Limitations and future research recommendations*

This practice-led paper discussed the development and outcomes of three digital initiatives in the Outer Hebrides, providing valuable practical insight into the intersection of digital innovation and community engagement in rural food and drink services. However, limitations should be acknowledged. First, the evidence relies on available digital metrics, participation records and OHTC reports, which may not capture offline or long-term effects. Future research could adopt comparative or longitudinal designs, incorporate multiple rural contexts and systematically evaluate the relative contribution of digital interventions to service ecosystem outcomes. Second, the selection of initiatives was purposeful targeting specific challenges the OHTC faces, which may introduce selection bias. Future research could examine a broader range of digital innovation and community engagement initiatives across multiple rural regions, comparing different approaches and contexts to assess the generalisability of observed patterns and identify which strategies are most effective under varying conditions. Third, while increases in reach, engagement and membership were compared to the same periods in previous years, other contextual factors (e.g. seasonal variations, concurrent campaigns or broader tourism dynamics) may also have contributed to the observed changes. Future research may apply quantitative methods to infer causality, while operationalising visibility, inclusivity and community engagement. Also, qualitative insights could further explore stakeholder experiences and the dynamics of digital co-creation in peripheral regions.

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