Social Media as a Driver of Online Buying Behaviour among Rural Consumers: A Study of Chandwad and Lasalgaon

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of smartphones, affordable internet services, and digital platforms has transformed consumer behaviour in India. Social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube have moved beyond their traditional role of communication and entertainment and have increasingly become important channels for product discovery, advertising, consumer interaction, and online purchasing. This transformation is particularly significant in rural and semi-urban areas, where consumers are gradually becoming part of the digital marketplace.

The present study, titled "Impact of Social Media on Online Buying Behaviour in Rural India: A Study of Chandwad and Lasalgaon," examines the role of social media in influencing online buying behaviour among consumers in Chandwad and Lasalgaon of Nashik District, Maharashtra. The study focuses on social media usage patterns, preferred platforms, online purchasing behaviour, payment preferences, influence of advertisements and reviews, consumer trust, and barriers to online shopping.

The study adopts a descriptive research design and is based primarily on primary data collected through a structured questionnaire. A survey of 300 respondents was considered for the analysis. Respondents were selected through convenience and purposive sampling. Secondary information was obtained from books, research papers, journals, reports, and online sources relating to social media, digital marketing, consumer behaviour, and rural e-commerce. The collected data were analysed using frequency, percentage analysis, tables, and Tableical representations.

The findings reveal that WhatsApp is the most widely used platform among the respondents, followed by Instagram and YouTube. Approximately 80% of respondents reported purchasing products online during the previous six months. Cash on Delivery (COD) remains the most preferred payment method, although UPI-based payments are increasingly being adopted. Product quality, fake products or misleading advertisements, delivery delays, and trust concerns were identified as major challenges. The study also indicates that social media advertisements, peer recommendations, product reviews, influencer content, and promotional offers contribute significantly to product awareness and purchase intention.

The study concludes that social media is emerging as an important driver of online buying behaviour in rural and semi-urban markets. However, the continued growth of rural e-commerce depends on strengthening consumer trust, improving product authenticity, ensuring reliable delivery, increasing digital payment confidence, and providing digital literacy and awareness in local languages. The findings can be useful for e-commerce companies, local entrepreneurs, marketers, policymakers, and researchers interested in understanding the development of India's rural digital economy.

Keywords: Social Media, Online Buying Behaviour, Rural Consumers, Digital Marketing, WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, Consumer Trust, E-Commerce, Chandwad, Lasalgaon.

1. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of digital technology has significantly changed the way individuals communicate, search for information, evaluate alternatives, and make purchasing decisions. Social media has become one of the most influential components of this transformation. Platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube are no longer restricted to interpersonal communication. They have become important tools for advertising, product promotion, customer engagement, electronic word-of-mouth, and online commerce.

India has experienced rapid growth in internet and smartphone usage over the last decade. Affordable smartphones and comparatively low-cost internet services have made digital platforms accessible to people beyond metropolitan cities. Rural and semi-urban consumers are increasingly using social media to communicate with friends and family, watch entertainment content, search for products, compare prices, read reviews, and interact with sellers.

This development has created new opportunities for rural consumers as well as small businesses. Traditionally, rural consumers depended heavily on local markets and physical stores for their purchases. Consumers had limited access to products available outside their geoTableical area. The expansion of e-commerce and social media has reduced some of these geoTableical limitations. A consumer in a rural area can now view a product available in another city, compare prices, read customer reviews, communicate with sellers, and place an order using a smartphone.

Social media has also changed the promotional environment for small businesses. A local seller can use WhatsApp Business to display products, share catalogues, communicate with customers, and provide order information. Instagram enables entrepreneurs to showcase products through photoTables, Reels, and Stories. Facebook groups and Marketplace provide opportunities for local buying and selling.

However, the adoption of online shopping in rural areas is not without challenges. Rural consumers may continue to have concerns regarding product quality, seller authenticity, online fraud, payment security, delivery reliability, and return policies. Cash on Delivery remains attractive because consumers can pay only after receiving the product. This reflects a transitional stage in rural digital behaviour where consumers appreciate the convenience of online shopping while maintaining caution toward digital transactions.

The present research focuses on Chandwad and Lasalgaon in Nashik District of Maharashtra. Chandwad represents a predominantly rural market with agriculture, small businesses, and traditional commercial activities. Lasalgaon is widely known for its agricultural market, particularly onion trading, and has characteristics of a rural as well as semi-urban economy. Both locations provide an interesting context for examining the changing relationship between social media and online buying behaviour.

The study attempts to understand whether social media merely creates product awareness or whether it actually influences consumers' purchase decisions. It also examines which platforms are most popular, how much time consumers spend on social media, which payment methods they prefer, and what challenges they experience while purchasing products online.

3. RESEARCH PROBLEM

"To what extent does social media influence the online buying behaviour of consumers in Chandwad and Lasalgaon, and what factors encourage or discourage their online purchasing decisions?"

The study particularly examines the influence of social media advertisements, peer recommendations, reviews, influencer content, trust, payment preferences, and perceived online shopping problems.

4. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1 To identify the most commonly used social media platforms among consumers in Chandwad and Lasalgaon.

2. To examine the influence of social media on online purchase decisions.

3. To understand the online buying behaviour of rural consumers.

4. To identify major barriers to online shopping.

5. Scope of the Study

The study is limited to Chandwad and Lasalgaon in Nashik District, Maharashtra. It focuses on consumers who use social media and are familiar with online shopping. The study examines the use of WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube, with particular emphasis on social media usage, online buying behaviour, product discovery, advertisements, peer reviews, influencer marketing, consumer trust, payment preferences, and problems faced during online shopping. It also examines how social media influences purchase decisions among rural and semi-urban consumers and provides insights useful for understanding the changing digital consumer behaviour in these emerging markets.

6. LITERATURE REVIEW

Social media and consumer behaviour have been widely studied by researchers across marketing, communication, and information technology disciplines.

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) defined social media as internet-based applications that enable the creation and exchange of user-generated content. Their work explains how social media facilitates interaction between individuals and organisations.

Mangold and Faulds (2009) described social media as a hybrid component of the promotional mix because it enables organisations to communicate with consumers while simultaneously allowing consumers to communicate with one another. This two-way communication is particularly important in consumer decision-making.

Kotler and Keller explain consumer behaviour as the process through which individuals select, purchase, use, and dispose of products and services. Digital platforms have changed this process because consumers can access information before visiting a physical store or making a purchase.

Gefen (2002) highlighted the importance of trust in online purchasing. Consumers are more likely to purchase online when they believe that the seller and the transaction process are reliable. This issue is especially relevant in rural markets where consumers may have limited experience with online transactions.

Cheung and Thadani (2012) examined electronic word-of-mouth and found that online opinions and reviews can influence consumer attitudes and purchase decisions. In rural markets, WhatsApp forwards, Facebook groups, and recommendations from friends and family may function as digital forms of word-of-mouth.

Research Gap

Most existing studies focus on urban consumers, national-level internet behaviour, or large e-commerce markets. There is comparatively limited research focusing specifically on smaller rural and semi-urban locations.

Chandwad and Lasalgaon provide an appropriate local context for examining rural digital consumer behaviour. The present study attempts to contribute to this area by examining how social media influences actual online buying behaviour and how trust, payment preferences, product quality, and delivery concerns affect consumers.

7. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

7.1 Research Design

The study uses a **descriptive research design**. The purpose is to describe existing patterns of social media usage and online buying behaviour among consumers in Chandwad and Lasalgaon.

The study does not manipulate variables. Instead, it observes the behaviour, preferences, experiences, and opinions of respondents.

7.2 Sources of Data

Primary Data

Primary data were collected using a structured questionnaire administered through Google Forms. The questionnaire contained questions relating to demoTableic characteristics, social media usage, online shopping, payment methods, and social media influence.

Secondary Data

Secondary information was obtained from:

- Books
- Research journals
- Academic articles
- Reports
- Digital marketing literature
- Relevant websites
- Industry reports

7.3 Sampling

The study focused on respondents from Chandwad and Lasalgaon.

The target sample consisted of **300 respondents**. Convenience and purposive sampling techniques were used because respondents were selected based on availability, willingness to participate, and familiarity with social media and online shopping.

7.4 Research Instrument

A structured questionnaire was used.

7.5 Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed using Microsoft Excel. Frequency and percentage analysis were used to interpret the responses. Tables, bar charts, and pie charts were used for Tableical presentation.

8. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

.1 Age Profile of Respondents

Table 8.1: Age-wise Distribution of Respondents

Age Group	Respondents	Percentage
15–18 Years	10	6.6%
19–22 Years	135	90.0%
23–26 Years	10	6.6%
Above 26 Years	5	3.3%

Interpretation:

The Table indicates that the majority of respondents (**90%**) belong to the 19–22 years age group. This shows that the study is largely represented by young social media users who are more familiar with smartphones, digital platforms, and online shopping. The relatively low participation of older age groups indicates that the findings may reflect youth-oriented digital behaviour more strongly.

8.2 Social Media Platform Usage

Table 8.2: Social Media Platforms Used by Respondents

Platform	Respondents	Percentage
WhatsApp	140	93.3%
Instagram	90	60.0%
YouTube	75	50.0%
Facebook	60	40.0%

Interpretation:

The Table shows that **WhatsApp is the most widely used platform (93.3%)**, followed by Instagram (60%), YouTube (50%), and Facebook (40%). WhatsApp's popularity may be attributed to its simple interface, direct communication, group features, and easy sharing of product information. Instagram is particularly relevant for younger consumers because of Reels, Stories, and visual promotions. YouTube supports product reviews and demonstrations, while Facebook remains useful for community groups and local business promotion.

8.3 Online Purchase Behaviour

Table 8.3: Online Purchase during the Previous Six Months

Online Purchase	Respondents	Percentage
Yes	240	80%
No	60	20%

Interpretation:

The Table indicates that **80% of respondents purchased products online during the previous six months**, while 20% did not. This demonstrates the growing acceptance of online shopping among consumers in Chandwad and Lasalgaon. Convenience, product variety, discounts, availability, and ease of price comparison may encourage consumers to use online shopping platforms. The findings also indicate that rural consumers are increasingly combining traditional physical shopping with digital purchasing.

8.4 Preferred Payment Methods

Table 8.4: Preferred Payment Methods

Payment Method	**Respondents**	**Percentage**
Cash on Delivery	160	53.3%
UPI	80	26.6%
Debit/Credit Card	40	13.3%
Net Banking	20	6.6%

Interpretation:

The Table shows that **Cash on Delivery is the most preferred payment method (53.3%)**, followed by UPI (26.6%), debit/credit cards (13.3%), and net banking (6.6%). The preference for COD indicates that consumers continue to be cautious about making advance payments. However, the adoption of UPI shows that digital payment usage is gradually increasing. Overall, the findings indicate a transition from traditional cash-based transactions toward digital payment methods.

8.5 Problems Faced During Online Shopping

Table 8.5: Problems Experienced by Respondents

Problem	Respondents	Percentage
Poor Product Quality	60	20.0%
Fake Products/Misleading Advertisements	50	16.6%
Other Problems	50	16.6%
Trust Issues	45	15.0%
Late Delivery	40	13.3%
Payment Issues	30	10.0%
No Problems	25	8.3%

Interpretation:

The Table shows that **poor product quality is the major problem**, reported by 20% of respondents. Fake products or misleading advertisements and other problems account for approximately 16.6% each. Trust issues and late delivery are also significant concerns. These findings indicate that product authenticity, quality assurance, reliable delivery, and consumer protection are important for building confidence in rural online shopping.

8.6 Time Spent on Social Media

Table 8.6: Daily Time Spent on Social Media

Time Spent	Respondents	Percentage
Less than 30 Minutes	20	6.6%
30 Minutes–1 Hour	40	13.3%
1–2 Hours	150	50.0%
More than 2 Hours	90	30.0%

Interpretation:

The Table indicates that **50% of respondents spend one to two hours daily on social media**, while 30% spend more than two hours. This shows a high level of social media engagement among respondents. Regular exposure to advertisements, product recommendations, influencer content, and promotional offers creates significant opportunities for businesses to influence consumer awareness and purchase intentions.

9. DISCUSSION OF MAJOR FINDINGS

- WhatsApp is the most widely used social media platform among the respondents and plays an important role in product sharing, customer communication, and online buying.
- Instagram has a strong influence on young consumers through Reels, Stories, product images, and influencer promotions.
- Facebook supports local commerce through community groups, business pages, and Marketplace.
- Consumer trust is a major factor in online purchasing, particularly regarding product quality, seller authenticity, payment security, and delivery reliability.
- Cash on Delivery remains the preferred payment method because many rural consumers are still cautious about online payments.
- Online shopping is increasingly accepted by rural consumers, indicating the growing penetration of e-commerce in Chandwad and Lasalgaon.
- Young consumers, particularly those aged 19–22 years, are the most active digital users and show greater engagement with social media and online shopping.
- Social media advertisements, peer reviews, recommendations, and influencer content significantly

influence product awareness and purchase decisions.

10. MAJOR FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The major findings can be summarized as follows:

- WhatsApp is the most widely used social media platform among the respondents, with approximately 93% usage.
- Instagram is an important platform among younger consumers, particularly for visual product discovery and promotional content.
- Approximately 80% of respondents purchased products online during the previous six months.
- Cash on Delivery is the most preferred payment method, accounting for approximately 53.3% of respondents.
- UPI adoption is increasing, with approximately 26.6% of respondents preferring UPI-based payments.
- Poor product quality is a major problem faced by online shoppers, reported by approximately 20% of respondents.
- Trust and product authenticity remain important barriers to online purchasing among rural consumers.
- Late delivery is another significant concern affecting the online shopping experience.
- Most respondents spend one to two hours per day on social media, while a considerable proportion spend more than two hours.

11. CONCLUSION

The present study demonstrates that social media is playing an increasingly important role in shaping rural consumer behaviour. The growth of smartphones, affordable internet, social media platforms, and e-commerce has provided rural consumers with greater access to products and information. Consumers can now discover products, compare prices, read reviews, communicate with sellers, and purchase products online. WhatsApp emerged as the most widely used platform because of its convenience, direct communication, and familiarity. Instagram is becoming influential among younger consumers through visual content, Reels, and influencer marketing, while Facebook supports local communities and businesses. However, social media influence does not always lead directly to purchase, as consumer trust remains an important factor. Consumers expect product quality, seller authenticity, secure payments, reliable delivery, and easy return facilities. The strong preference for Cash on Delivery indicates that rural consumers remain cautious about advance online payments. At the same time, increasing UPI adoption shows a gradual shift towards digital payment methods. Peer recommendations, customer reviews, and social media content also play an important role in building consumer confidence. Thus, social media has become an important part of the rural buying decision process by creating awareness, interest, and trust. The study concludes that rural e-commerce has significant growth potential. However, businesses need to focus on product authenticity, customer service, delivery efficiency, payment security, and digital awareness to build long-term consumer confidence.

12. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Businesses should use Marathi and other local-language content in advertisements, product descriptions, videos, captions, and voice messages to improve consumer understanding and trust.
- Small and local businesses should adopt WhatsApp Business and product catalogues for displaying products, communicating with customers, confirming orders, and providing delivery updates.
- E-commerce companies should strengthen consumer trust by providing verified seller information, genuine customer reviews, product ratings, transparent pricing, secure payment options, and clear return policies.
- Businesses should encourage digital payment adoption by providing suitable UPI discounts or incentives while creating awareness about safe digital transactions.
- E-commerce companies should improve last-mile delivery services by partnering with local delivery agents and providing reliable tracking and timely delivery.
- Social media platforms and sellers should reduce fake and misleading advertisements through stronger seller verification and transparent product information.
- Educational institutions, banks, businesses, and government agencies should conduct digital literacy programmes to educate consumers about safe online shopping, digital payments, fraud prevention, and online reviews.
- Rural entrepreneurs should use social media as a low-cost marketing tool and develop skills in digital marketing, product presentation, customer communication, and online payment systems.
- Businesses should use local influencers and trusted community personalities responsibly to promote products through genuine and transparent recommendations.

17. CONCLUSION

The digital transformation of rural India is creating consumers who combine traditional buying habits with modern digital tools. Consumers in Chandwad and Lasalgaon increasingly use social media for communication, entertainment, product discovery, information search, and online purchasing. WhatsApp has emerged as an important platform for communication, product sharing, and trust-based commerce, while Instagram has become a major visual influence platform, particularly among younger consumers. Facebook continues to support community-based marketing and local commerce. The finding that approximately 80% of respondents have purchased products online indicates the growing adoption of e-commerce beyond metropolitan markets. However, the continued preference for Cash on Delivery reflects cautious digital adoption. Poor product quality, fake products, misleading advertisements, trust concerns, delivery delays, and payment-related issues remain major challenges. Therefore, rural e-commerce requires more than technological connectivity; it requires **trust, quality, security, accessibility, affordability, and reliable delivery**. Social media provides rural entrepreneurs with an affordable marketing channel and consumers with greater product choice and information. With improved digital literacy, secure payment systems, authentic products, and efficient delivery networks, social media-driven e-commerce can significantly contribute to the development of rural markets and the broader digital economy of India.

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