

A Qualitative Synthesis of Social Media Marketing in India: Practical Implications for Technology, Localization, and Governance

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Abstract

Social media marketing (SMM) has become an integral part of the business strategy for Indian companies of all sizes and industries. The Indian digital landscape is a unique one, with a huge population, multilingualism, high smartphone penetration, and low-cost mobile data, which has resulted in one of the most dynamic and complex social media environments in the world. This paper is a qualitative synthesis of peer-reviewed research, industry reports, and Indian brand case studies published from 2009 to 2025, to understand the current situation of SMM in India, emerging technological and cultural trends and implications for practitioners and policymakers. The main research question for this study is: How to effectively leverage social media platforms, both globally and regionally, incorporate emerging technologies, adapt content for linguistic and cultural diversity, and incorporate ethical governance into marketing strategies for Indian businesses? Using thematic synthesis and cross-case analysis, the study concludes that the Indian SMM is in a state of multi-platform complexity, rapid growth of vernacular and video content, and integration of commerce. The future of Indian SMM is also expected to be driven by hyper-personalisation, through the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI), immersive experiences in Augmented and Virtual reality (AR/VR), and a governance imperative focused on transparency and data ethics.

Keywords: Social Media Marketing, Artificial Intelligence, Augmented and Virtual Reality, Influencer Marketing, Ethical Branding, Vernacular Content

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1. Introduction

Social media has revolutionised the way organisations communicate, interact with customers and make money, and is now spreading across the world. This change has been more pronounced in India, where structural factors specific to the subcontinent have played a significant role in driving it. With the introduction of Reliance Jio in 2016, the availability of cheap mobile data enabled the internet to reach hundreds of millions of Indians, turning them into active digital citizens in a short span of time (Kumar & Singh, 2021). This growth produced a social media environment of unprecedented size and variety, from urban professionals to rural farmers, English speakers to digital natives who speak vernacular languages, from big multinational companies to single-person micro-enterprises.

For Indian businesses, social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp are essential tools for communication, customer acquisition, and community engagement (Gupta, 2022; Kamath & Alur, 2024). In addition to these global giants, there are also indigenous apps like ShareChat and Moj that cater to the growing user base of vernacular internet users, who prefer to use the internet in their regional languages like Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Marathi, and Bengali instead of English (Mehta, 2023). In the case of global and regional platforms operating in the same national market, a portfolio approach to platform strategy is required that is not sufficiently covered by most of the SMM frameworks in the West. In this context, the current paper reviews the literature and case studies to explore the strategic challenges Indian businesses face in this complexity.

The paper is organized as follows: firstly, an introduction setting the context of the problem; second section reviews the literature that summarizes the previous studies and sets the research objectives; thirdly, the current status and future of Indian SMM; fourthly, detailed case studies; fifthly, strategic implications; sixthly, key tensions; and seventhly, a conclusion that provides actionable recommendations.

2. Literature Review

The academic basis of social media marketing is based on a collection of foundational conceptual studies that laid the groundwork for the theoretical language of social media and its marketing implications. Mangold and Faulds (2009) redefined social media as a hybrid component of the promotion mix, one that both extends the reach of marketer-generated messages and allows for consumer-generated dialogue that is not under the organization's control. This dual nature sets social media apart from all previous media and requires a qualitatively different managerial approach: marketers are no longer able to broadcast their messages to a passive audience, but have to participate in the continuous social conversation, guide and influence it. Kietzmann et al. (2011) built on this concept by creating a honeycomb model that identifies seven functional building blocks of social media: identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation and groups, which define what users can do on a platform and thus what strategic priorities marketers should pursue on that platform. This was followed by a typology of social media forms by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) that serves as a foundation for aligning brand communication goals with platform features: collaborative projects, blogs, content communities, social networking sites, virtual game worlds, and virtual social worlds.

The application of AI and data analysis in marketing has been a major focus of recent research. Appel et al. (2020) suggested that AI would allow for hyper-personalisation at population level by means of dynamic creative optimisation, predictive audience modelling, and conversational AI systems, which would change the economics of personalised communication. Effective personalisation was once an expensive proposition, with large creative teams and customer service teams required, but with AI, the marginal cost of personalisation is near to zero, enabling even smaller, less resourced businesses to provide individually tailored content experiences. In addition to the personalisation capabilities of AI, there has been growing research on the infrastructural and network effects of social media platforms. For instance, Aral et al. (2013) developed a research framework for the role of social media in business transformation, and identified the feedback loops between social influence, information diffusion, and consumer decision making that are now algorithmically engineered by social media platforms. Overall, these studies suggest that organisations are most likely to derive

strategic value from social media when they think of it as a data infrastructure that is part of business strategy, not just a tool for creative communication.

With the increasing regulatory and consumer oversight of social media practices, the ethical aspects of social media marketing have received considerable academic interest. In multicultural and multilingual markets like India, where the diversity of the user base raises the risk of targeted manipulation and the difficulty of implementing universal standards, Kapoor et al. (2022) identified a variety of ethical issues, including privacy violations, the amplification of misinformation, opaque disclosures of influencers, and discriminatory micro-targeting. Their analysis reveals that ethical governance of social media marketing is not only a legal compliance issue, but also a strategic capability that can impact on brand equity, consumer trust and commercial viability. Such concerns are consistent with the claim of Mangold and Faulds (2009) that consumer-generated content can spread both positive and negative information about brands quickly and widely, making failures in governance and brand management far more damaging than in the era of one-way mass media.

Existing studies have highlighted the unique features and challenges of the Indian social media marketing landscape. For instance, Kamath and Alur (2024) noted that the Indian SMM has evolved from its infancy of brand experimentation in the early 2010s to a more advanced and multi-platform practice in the 2020s, highlighting the increasing sophistication of Indian marketers in managing their platforms' portfolios and segmenting their audiences. Mehta (2023) also noted that vernacular video content in regional languages has significantly higher organic reach for rural and semi-urban audiences compared to content in English. This is a critical insight that has implications for content strategy and partnerships with creators, as vernacular video content in regional languages has significantly higher organic reach for rural and semi-urban audiences compared to English language content (Mehta, 2023).

Gupta (2022) examined the social media strategies of Indian startups, such as Zomato and Swiggy, and how tone, personality and real-time cultural responsiveness can replace big advertising budgets in creating brand equity for digitally native consumers. Raghavan (2021) explored the concept of ethical branding in India using the examples of Tata Tea and Nykaa, stating that the key factors that distinguish successful brands from

unsuccessful ones in establishing ethical brands on social media are authenticity and consistency in purpose-driven communication. Sharma and Patel (2022) have reported that the adoption of WhatsApp commerce by Indian Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) has had a significant impact on the commercial landscape, as the integration of social media and digital payments has opened up a new world of e-commerce opportunities for these businesses, far beyond the traditional urban, formally banked customer base. Ballabh (2024) and Tuten and Solomon (2017) also explored the evolution of influencer marketing, revealing a trend towards micro and nano influencers, which focus on building trust and authenticity with their followers rather than simply numbers.

A synthesis of this literature shows that in simpler markets, the technological capability, cultural sensitivity and ethical governance are relatively independent dimensions of complexity, but in the Indian context they are deeply interlinked and must be managed simultaneously to achieve successful social media marketing. Without technological capability, cultural sensitivity can lead to efficient, but irrelevant, communication; without cultural sensitivity, engagement can be fleeting; and without ethical governance, organisations can make token gestures that they are unable to scale up. The literature, however, has focused on these three dimensions individually, either based on international technology-oriented frameworks or empirical studies in India, but not to the extent of combining both in a single strategic framework. Furthermore, the Indian SMM environment is constantly changing, with the rise of vernacular platforms, the development of SMM infrastructure, and the increasing speed of AI-powered marketing tools, which has left practitioners lacking in evidence-based guidance for the new challenges they encounter.

This study aims to fill these gaps by integrating the findings from the key international frameworks, the latest empirical studies in India and documented brand case studies in a cohesive thematic analysis. It aims to achieve three research goals in doing so. First, it aims to understand the current landscape of social media marketing in India, identifying the key platforms, content types, metrics, and governance issues that define the present-day social media marketing landscape. Second, it looks at the future trajectory of Indian SMM in the context of five emerging forces: artificial intelligence and automation, immersive augmented and virtual reality experiences, social commerce integration, ethical branding and governance, and deep vernacular localisation. Third, it provides

practical strategic guidance for businesses of all sizes and industries, offering insights on how to leverage technological advancements, cultural awareness, and ethical governance to build effective and sustainable SMM strategies. The paper thus provides a synthesising framework that connects the international theory with Indian practice, providing conceptual integration and managerial applicability.

3. Methodology

The research design used in this study is integrative research design using qualitative approach based on thematic synthesis. The relevant articles from the peer-reviewed journals, industry reports and documented Indian brand case studies published from the year 2009 to 2025 were selected based on their relevance to social media marketing practice, technological innovation, and Indian market dynamics. Thematic synthesis was used, based on Thomas and Harden's (2008) framework for qualitative evidence synthesis, which included iterative reading; open coding of key themes and the construction of analytical categories that spanned across individual studies. A cross-case analysis of Indian brand experiences allowed the identification of strategic patterns that are not specific to any single company. To structure managerial implications in a way that is easily accessible to practitioners, strategy matrices and comparative tables were created. This approach is suitable for a domain that is dynamic, context-specific, and where a systematic narrative synthesis can offer more in-depth and actionable information than a quantitative meta-analysis.

4. Present State of Social Media Marketing in India

In 2025, India's social media marketing landscape is characterized by large-scale digital adoption, substantial cultural and linguistic diversity, and the growing influence of social media platforms and algorithm-driven marketing practices (Rakshana, 2026). To grasp the current situation, it is important to look at the platform ecosystem, content dynamics, commercial integration, measurement maturity and governance issues that make up the operating environment of Indian marketers.

4.1 User Base and Platform Mix

The number of social media users in India has increased from around 310 million in 2018 to over 467 million in 2024 and is expected to reach around 480 million by the end of 2025.² This growth, as described in Table 1, has been unevenly distributed, both demographically and geographically.

Table 1: Social Media User Growth in India (2018–2025)

Year	Users (Millions)	Growth Rate (%)
2018	310	—
2019	340	9.7
2020	390	14.7
2021	430	10.2
2022	450	4.6
2023	460	2.2
2024	467	1.5
2025* (projected)	480	2.8

Source: Compiled by author; * Statista (2025). See Footnote 2

Instagram and YouTube have a large user base of urban youth with high digital literacy, whereas regional platforms like ShareChat and Moj have a large rural and semi-urban audience, whose digital participation has increased after the democratisation of mobile data (Mehta, 2023; Gupta, 2022). Indian businesses have to deal with a more complicated platform mix than most other key markets. Facebook and Instagram continue to be the most popular social media channels for brand pages, paid ads and influencer marketing (Gupta, 2022; Kamath & Alur, 2024). YouTube is a unique site for long-form and vernacular video. Nearly everyone with a smartphone is using WhatsApp, making it a key direct customer communications, commerce facilitation, and peer-to-peer marketing tool. ShareChat and Moj offer access to audiences whose media consumption is largely in regional languages, and who are a significant and growing group that is largely ignored by globalised platform strategies (Mehta, 2023). Table 2 presents the key features and trade-offs of each of the major platforms.

² Statista (2025), *Number of social media users in India from 2018 to 2025*. Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com> (accessed in April, 2026)

Table 2: Leading Social Media Platforms in India for Business Marketing

Platform	Primary Use Case	Strengths	Limitations
Facebook	Community building	Large user base, multilingual reach	Declining youth engagement
Instagram	Visual branding	Influencer ecosystem, fashion & lifestyle	Algorithm dependency
YouTube	Video marketing	Long-form content, vernacular reach	High competition
WhatsApp	Direct commerce	Peer-to-peer marketing, SME adoption	Limited advertising features
ShareChat	Regional content	Strong rural penetration, local languages	Limited global reach

Source: Compiled by the author

4.2 Content Formats, Influencer Ecosystems, and Commerce

Short-form video content like Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts is the most popular content format for urban youth, and community groups on WhatsApp and Facebook are great for peer recommendations among rural and non-metropolitan audiences (Mehta, 2023). The influencer ecosystem has evolved into a more segmented and specialised structure. Celebrity macro-influencers are typically used for brand awareness campaigns that require large budgets. However, there has been a systematic shift of investment towards micro-influencers and nano-influencers, generally classified as creators with 10,000–100,000 and 1,000–10,000 followers, respectively (Korzynski et al., 2025). Their smaller but highly engaged communities are often perceived as more authentic and cost-effective for specialised product categories (Ballabh, 2024; Tuten & Solomon, 2017).

Social commerce, which combines social media with e-commerce, is one of the most promising trends in Indian SMM today. The penetration of UPI based digital payments has triggered a paradigm shift from social media as an awareness creator to a point-of-sale environment. With WhatsApp Business storefronts, SMEs can handle catalogues, answer inquiries, and finalize transactions all in one messaging platform, without the need for a separate e-commerce platform (Sharma & Patel, 2022; Kumar & Singh, 2021). Indian marketers use a variety of measurement techniques, ranging from the most sophisticated, like sentiment analysis and predictive attribution modelling, to the most basic, such as platform-native vanity metrics, for instance likes and follower counts, which makes it difficult for them to prove Return on Investment (ROI) and invest strategically (Kamath & Alur, 2024; Appel et al., 2020).

5. Future of Social Media Marketing in India

Table 3 provides a summary of five forces that will define the future course of Indian SMM. These forces are not working in isolation; they will interact to generate some of the most important business opportunities and governance challenges in the next era of digital marketing in India.

First is AI-driven personalization. AI will transform the economics of SMM by making hyper-personalisation possible at scale, thanks to dynamic creative optimisation, predictive audience modelling and conversational AI, which Appel et al. (2020) predicted would become a standard for advanced marketers. AI-based personalisation is especially strategically relevant in India's linguistic landscape and income inequality. AI-powered personalisation will be leveraged by SMEs more and more via platform-native tools that were previously exclusive to tech giants (Kumar & Singh, 2021). Second are the augmented reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR) experiences. The experiential nature of digital commerce is slowly being overcome by AR/VR technologies. Lenskart's try-on features, which have been used by eyewear brands and are now being tested by fashion and cosmetics brands, enable customers to see products on themselves, helping to overcome the uncertainty that discourages online shopping for products where fit and appearance are important (Mehta, 2023). VR showrooms developed by Tata Motors for discovering cars and real estate platforms for viewing properties offer a more immersive brand experience, resulting in higher emotional engagement and purchase intent than static formats. These technologies are likely to become commonplace in the social commerce toolbox, which is the third emerging trend, as hardware becomes more affordable and as platform-native AR tools gain traction.

Table 3: Emerging Trends in Indian Social Media Marketing

Trend	Business Impact	Example Application
AI-driven personalization	Higher conversion rates	Flipkart product recommendations
AR/VR experiences	Enhanced customer engagement	Lenskart AR try-on; Tata Motors VR showroom
Social commerce	Direct revenue generation	WhatsApp Pay storefronts; Instagram Shops
Ethical branding	Improved trust and loyalty	Tata Tea 'Jaago Re'; FabIndia sustainability
Regional content	Wider rural penetration	ShareChat vernacular campaigns

Source: Compiled by the author

Third, social media will keep evolving into a transactional platform with the integration of social platforms and India's UPI-based payment infrastructure. With the penetration of almost all Indian adults with smartphones, WhatsApp Pay allows end-to-end commerce, from product discovery to enquiry, from payment and after-sales service to all in one messaging interface (Sharma & Patel, 2022). This democratisation of social commerce will increase the addressable market to tens of millions of micro enterprises that form the backbone of Indian retail. At the same time, consumers are becoming more aware of how brands behave in terms of environmental and social issues, and this is now becoming a minimum market standard rather than a differentiator (Kapoor et al., 2022; Raghavan, 2021), making companies to go for ethical branding, which is the fourth emerging trend. Lastly, vernacular localisation is no longer a niche issue, but a commercial necessity in India, where there is a wide variety of languages. By collaborating with local creators and supporting culturally relevant content creation, brands can tap into the audience segments that are shaping the future of Indian internet usage (Mehta, 2023; Gupta, 2022). Thus, developing regional content is crucial.

6. Case Studies: Indian Brand Experiences

The strategic principles outlined in the previous sections are illustrated by four Indian brand cases, which collectively show the diversity of SMM approaches in various industry contexts, at various scales and with various strategic goals.

6.1 Zomato and Swiggy: Real-Time Brand Engagement

India's leading food delivery apps Zomato and Swiggy have built up social media accounts that are considered to be the gold standard of brand personality management in the Indian digital marketing landscape. Both brands are part of a fiercely competitive space with very similar service offerings and a consumer base of digitally savvy urban millennials and Gen-Zers who are immune to traditional advertising. In such structural situations, both brands adopted social media strategies that were based on editorial authenticity instead of product promotion (Gupta, 2022). Their social media teams are as

nimble as newsrooms, watching in real time what is happening in the culture, news and sporting events, and reacting in hours with content that makes the brand a part of the conversation, not a vendor trying to get noticed. This has created significant earned media value, with the Zomato Twitter account being featured in the national media on several occasions, making social media a public relations outcome at a low cost. The strategic lesson is that in service categories where the product is commoditised, with limited product differentiation, brand voice and cultural intelligence can be key sources of competitive advantage, which is in line with the theoretical focus of Tuten and Solomon (2017) on the role of social media in the construction of brand personality.

6.2 Nykaa: Content-Led Commerce and Tiered Influencer Strategy

Nykaa, India's largest beauty and lifestyle brand, is one of the best examples of a brand that has been created almost solely through social media and influencer marketing. In a market where beauty retail was offline, fragmented and international brand counters dominated, Nykaa had to build the credibility and consumer trust for a digital-first retail model in a high involvement product category where the product experience is key to purchase confidence. It has reacted by becoming more than a retailer; it's a beauty authority and content publisher (Raghavan, 2021). The long-form tutorial videos, ingredient explanations and seasonal beauty trend analyses that were posted on YouTube and Instagram were a massive investment and helped to establish Nykaa's reputation as a trusted source of information before they even got to the sales pitch. The content foundation allowed for a tiered influencer strategy: macro-influencers were partnered to build brand awareness among aspirational audiences, and micro- and nano-influencers were partnered to create authentic and community trust that led to conversion among value-conscious and specialised consumers in specific beauty subcategories, such as skin care for specific skin types, regional makeup styles, and affordable beauty alternatives. This content-led and influencer-driven strategy contributed significantly to Nykaa's brand visibility and consumer engagement, supporting its successful public listing in 2021 (Bhattacharjee, 2023). The success of Nykaa's influencer strategy also supports Ballabh's (2024) view that influencer marketing in India is best executed when it is tiered, targeted and based on category-specific expertise.

6.3 Amul: Translating Legacy Brand Equity into Digital Virality

Amul's signature advertisement style, known as Amul Girl, which has been commenting on news, politics and culture with wit and cultural insight since 1966, is a unique example of legacy brand equity being transferred to social media. The format is simple, visually appealing (a unique cartoon character in front of a white background with a punning caption), topical and timely (new creatives created within 24-48 hours of a newsworthy event) and culturally resonant (national), which makes it a format that is able to generate organic social sharing without paid amplification (Mehta, 2023). The social media age has seen Amul's creative team speed up their production pace and expands their topical reach to include sports, entertainment and social issues as well as politics, while keeping the format's core intact, but making it more relevant to the news cycles and cultural references of digital audiences. The commercial impact has been significant – Amul is one of the most followed and most engaging Indian brand social media accounts, even with a much smaller digital marketing budget than its competitors. The strategic lesson is that heritage brands with a strong cultural equity don't need to change in order to be relevant to digital audiences; they just need to find ways to adapt the qualities that earned their equity (relevance, wit, cultural intelligence, speed) to the formats and cadences that digital platforms reward. This finding further supports Kaplan and Haenlein's (2010) argument that brand assets should be aligned with the characteristics of the platform.

6.4 Reliance JioMart: Social Commerce as Economic Inclusion

Reliance JioMart's entry into WhatsApp commerce is a groundbreaking move to expand social commerce to the informal sector of Indian SMM, which has been largely under-researched. JioMart allows local kirana stores and neighbourhood retailers to become sellers on WhatsApp Business, manage product catalogues in the messaging app and accept orders from customers who are already using WhatsApp for personal messaging (Sharma & Patel, 2022). The strategic rationale behind this model is clear: JioMart does not try to convince India's approximately 13 million kirana and neighbourhood stores (Goyal, 2021) to install a dedicated app and onboard them to a proprietary e-commerce platform, but instead integrates commerce into a platform that retailers and customers

already use for everyday communication. The impact of JioMart's commercialization goes beyond just the revenue it can generate for the company; it also creates an economic opportunity for small traders in tier-2 and tier-3 cities, who have not had the technical resources to engage in digital commerce, to do so without needing to invest in anything beyond using a smartphone. JioMart is thus helping to expand the addressable market for digital retail while simultaneously building the platform density that makes JioMart's own marketplace more valuable. This case highlights that social commerce strategy, when conceived with the actual capabilities and limitations of less digitally-sophisticated participants, can deliver economic development outcomes in addition to commercial goals, a combination of commercial and social value creation, in line with the ethical branding literature as reviewed by Raghavan (2021).

7. Strategic Implications for Indian Businesses

The theoretical frameworks, empirical studies, and case evidences converge to five strategic priorities for Indian businesses, which are summarised comparatively in Table 4. These strategic priorities are not mutually exclusive but are interrelated. The most successful social media marketing campaigns will likely involve a combination of several elements, including content, analytics, customer trust, and social commerce, depending on the specific needs and capabilities of the target audience, the industry, and the organisation.

Table 4: Present vs. Future Business Strategies in Indian SMM

Dimension	Present Strategy	Future Strategy
Content	Celebrity endorsements, memes	AI-generated personalization, immersive formats
Analytics	Engagement metrics, ROI tracking	Predictive modeling, sentiment AI
Customer Trust	Compliance with IT rules	Ethical transparency, sustainability
Sales	Lead generation	Integrated WhatsApp/Instagram commerce

Source: Compiled by the author

First, investing in data analytics and creative technology is the strategic investment at the core of capability building. Appel et al. (2020) found that the quality of data infrastructure is a key element of AI-driven personalisation, and Indian enterprises need to invest in marketing technology, analytical expertise and cross-functional skills to link social media engagement with business results. Second, a diversified platform portfolio is key to capturing the full Indian market – large brands should have a presence on both global and regional platforms, while SMEs should aim for depth rather than breadth, targeting one or two platforms where their specific target audience is most active (Kamath & Alur, 2024). Third, social commerce integration, which refers to the integration of transactional features into social media platforms, is a key priority, especially for SMEs in consumer-centric industries where WhatsApp storefronts and UPI payments provide a seamless journey from social discovery to purchase (Sharma & Patel, 2022). Fourth, companies need to proactively institutionalise ethical governance by creating policies on data usage, disclosure of influencers, content moderation, and sustainability communication, before the regulatory issues or reputational problems occur (Kapoor et al., 2022; Raghavan, 2021). Fifth, localisation strategy should be viewed as a long-term capability of the organisation and should be supported by local creators, cultural advisors and community managers who have first-hand experience of the local context (Mehta, 2023; Gupta, 2022).

8. Discussion

The analytical amalgamation of theoretical frameworks, empirical literature, and Indian case evidences brings to light three major challenges that Indian social media marketers must face.

The first major challenge is to strike a balance between mass reach and cultural and regional relevance. Platforms with the widest reach, like Facebook, Instagram and YouTube, are geared towards the global audience and optimize for engagement patterns that might not be culturally and linguistically specific to Indian consumer segments. Content standardisation is often required to achieve scale on these platforms, which

compromises the authenticity of the content, and platforms like ShareChat and Moj have better relevance but do not have the advertiser infrastructure of their international counterparts (Kamath & Alur, 2024; Mehta, 2023).

The second big challenge is to find the balance between technology automation and genuine consumer interaction. While AI-powered personalisation and automated campaign management can be highly efficient, over-automated social presences may come across as algorithmically generated and less authentic, especially in the context of influencer marketing where the key to commercial persuasion is the perception of a real human endorsement (Appel et al., 2020; Ballabh, 2024). The key is to use automation to improve efficiency and maintain the human touch, cultural savvy, and warmth that keeps consumers connected.

The third big challenge is to find a balance between fast commercial expansion and responsible governance practices. The commercial pressures of social commerce present structural challenges to the ability to put data privacy and disclosure requirements first and foremost, which both Kapoor et al. (2022) and Mangold and Faulds (2009) have suggested is ultimately counterproductive, as the costs of regulatory and reputational damage are likely to be much higher than the short-term growth sacrificed by operating within an ethical framework.

These challenges indicate that the best way to Indian SMM is to integrate AI-driven operational efficiency and human creative and cultural intelligence in a tiered manner, with proactively institutionalised ethical frameworks. In the case of resource-constrained SMEs, they should focus on investing in WhatsApp commerce and regional platform integrations that can be the most direct route from social engagement to commercial transaction (Sharma & Patel, 2022).

9. Conclusion

Social media marketing in India has moved from an experimental side-line to the main stream of business communication and earning. In India, the social media environment is characterized by the adoption of various platforms, evolving content formats, the

integration of commerce functionalities, and the adoption of analytics and data-driven marketing practices, albeit with varying degrees of penetration. The future of social media marketing in India will be defined by AI-powered hyper-personalisation, AR and VR-enhanced shopping experiences, the rise of social commerce, and a greater focus on ethical governance, both for market appeal and regulatory compliance.

In this context, the strategic priorities for businesses are becoming more and more apparent. The key prerequisite for successful personalisation with AI is investment in data and analytical capabilities. With the Indian social media audience being linguistically diverse, vernacular and cultural localisation are the key commercial imperatives. Ethical governance should be integrated into the organisation's practices before issues arise, such as data privacy, disclosure of influencers, content moderation and sustainability communication. Given the UPI infrastructure, WhatsApp penetration and the commerce environment, social commerce integration, especially for SMEs, is the most promising near-term opportunity, and is ideally suited to India's structural attributes. Organisations that systematically build these capacities, produce genuinely localised content, and embed ethical governance into their organisational culture will have an edge in creating value for their business in the long run from India's vast digital scale.

Acknowledgement: The author sincerely appreciates the constructive comments and valuable suggestions offered by the reviewers, which greatly improved the manuscript. Gratitude is also extended to the editor for guidance and support during the publication process.

Conflict of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest related to this study.

Financial Disclosure Statement: The author declares that no financial support or sponsorship was received for this study. The research was conducted independently.

Author Contribution Statement: The author exclusively undertook and executed all dimensions of this research, including its conceptualization, methodological design, data analysis, preparation of the manuscript, and the final authorization of the version for publication.

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