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## DIGITAL MARKETING STRATEGIES ADOPTED FOR ATTRACTING RURAL CONSUMERS: A CONCEPTUAL STUDY

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*Abstract*

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*Digital marketing is rapidly developing in India. The impact of digital marketing on economic growth has shown a positive impact for the marketers in almost all sectors. Recent initiatives by major telecom operators and companies, such as lower data pack prices and low-cost mobile phones has resulted in an increase in the number of smartphone and internet users in rural areas, leading to digital literacy. And growth in digital literacy has paved way for digital marketing in rural areas. Since the urban market is becoming saturated, moving to the rural market is a sustainable option for companies. Even though digital marketing has several advantages like low-cost, real-time results, and wider audience over traditional marketing, the consumer reach of digital marketing in rural areas is poor. Marketers face challenges like pricing and styling of a product, literacy rate, local language preference, multi-media penetration and profession of the consumer. As there is a great potential to be tapped in, finding effective strategies is necessary for the growth of digital marketing.*

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**Keywords:** Digital marketing, economic growth, rural areas, digital literacy, consumer reach

### **Introduction**

Digital marketing is rapidly developing in India. The impact of digital marketing on economic growth has shown positive impact for the marketers in almost all sectors (Bhagowati & Dutta, 2018). Several Indian organisations are adopting

digital marketing to gain competitive advantage. Rural digitalization is seen as an efficient technique of accelerating a country's development (Venkatesh, 2018). In India, more than fifty per cent of the GDP is contributed by the rural population. The "digital India" initiative

by the government has bought high-speed internet networks, and information and communication technologies (ICT) to rural areas. Currently, there are 78 million people using internet daily and 140 million using the internet at least once a month (Dar, 2019). The private sectors have also realised that the urban market is becoming saturated, and the other sustainable approach is to enter the rural market. HUL, P&G and ITC are companies that have successfully penetrated the rural market (Venkatesh, 2018). The E-CHOUPAL initiate by ITC has helped farmers to sell agriculture and aquaculture products online (Taiminen, 2022). Recent initiatives, such as lower data pack prices, by major telecom operators have resulted in a large increase in the number of internet users in rural areas. Moreover low-cost smartphones running on low-cost operating system like android one are helping the expansion of smartphones in rural areas (Kumar, 2019). India Digital marketing has led to a rise in purchasing power of the rural consumers. In the rural areas, a majority of the rural population have access to mobile phone and internet and seventy per cent of rural mobile users use different social media platforms, and fifty per cent of middle aged and old people use online shopping occasionally and seventy per cent of customers are youngsters (Venkatesh, 2018). Therefore, the rural market offers several opportunities for digital marketers to advertise and sell their products.

As there is a great potential to be tapped in, digital marketing has been introduced in the rural areas too. The term “digital marketing” has evolved over time.

It has changed from using digital channels to market goods to describing the process to acquire customers, build customer relationships, promote brands and increase sales (Verma, 2018). Kanna et al. (2017, P.5) defines digital marketing as “an adaptive, technology-enabled process by which firms collaborate with customers and partners to jointly create, communicate, deliver, and sustain value for all stakeholders”. Digital marketing is a cost-effective method to promote business for brand awareness and business development. As the use of digital devices is becoming prevalent day by day, incorporation of digital marketing is a necessity to promote products (Sawicki, 2016). Marketers hire content writers, social media marketers, influencers, and use search engine optimization, pay-per-click and website traffic to bring their products to the limelight (Gawade, 2019)

#### **Impact of Digital Marketing in India**

India’s digital marketing industry is growing at the rate of 33.5 per cent per year and the value of digital marketing is expected to exceed Rs. 255 billion (Srivastava, 2022). Seventy-two per cent of the marketers have moved from traditional marketing to digital marketing and thirty-four per cent companies have an integrated digital marketing strategy (Kumar, 2019). The cost-effectiveness and interactivity are undoubtedly the most remarkable aspects of future digital marketing in India (Kannan, 2017). Irrespective of educational qualifications and income, an increase in number of people are purchasing convenience goods through internet (Mahalaxmi, 2021). The research on market response modelling

shows digital marketing is effective for selling cars to Indian consumers. Every stage of the car-buying decision-making process, from need recognition to post purchase, was substantially influenced by digital marketing communication (Dahiya, 2018). Leading Indian firms like Myra, Zomato, Ola Cabs, Wow Momo, and many others are employing their email marketing strategy for a strong online presence and have seen significant growth. Ola autos used the email marketing strategy for professional commuters who are using public transport daily. This strategy received an overwhelming response, and Ola Auto is currently functional in seventy-three cities, with over two lakh autos on the road (Gulati, 2019). According to a study conducted in Nagpur, the educational institutions that began digital marketing had increased number of admissions compared to traditional marketing strategies (Gondane, 2021).

Farmers have also benefitted from digital marketing. They are able to find multiple buyers for their produce and sell them at a better price. E- choupal, Agmark.net, Uzhavan app, Naapanta app and Kishan sarathi are digital platforms which help farmers to sell their products online (Taiminen, 2022). Digital marketing has helped tourism sustainability and promotion. Kumar et al. (2020) pointed out that factors such as customer's demand for digitization, the existence of social media, and the use of virtual reality has led to development of tourism industry in India. Digital marketing has opened up a cost-effective marketing strategy for start-ups. Gulati et al. (2019) showed sixty-eight per cent of

Indian Start Up brands use digital marketing to promote their products and services, fifty-two per cent use digital marketing to generate sales and twenty-eight per cent allot over forty-seven per cent of their marketing budget for digital marketing. OYO Rooms is a successful startup in India that has used social media platforms for marketing. Even though digital marketing has penetrated several sectors in India, pharmaceutical business has not been able to fully embrace digital marketing (Rajasekharan, 2022).

### **Effective ways of Digital Marketing in rural India**

The tactics used for digital marketing depends on the consumers. Several factors like target audience, brand awareness, access to technology and customer satisfaction affect the outcome of digital marketing (Eldahamsheh et al., 2021). Therefore, identifying effective means of digital market is crucial for the growth of a company. In India, seventy per cent of the population live in rural areas and have access to mobile phones and internet (Ravinder, 2022). Henceforth the scope for digital marketing is immense in rural India, but the fundamental challenge is language (Dewangan, 2022). The Common-sense Advisory board polled 3,002 consumers in ten countries in their native languages. The poll showed that majority of the consumer's avoided English - language website and avoided purchasing products that lack instructions or post-sales customer assistance in their language. Therefore, language directly correlates with the likelihood of purchase (Oza, 2019). In India, seventy-four per cent of the population is literate, but only

ten per cent are literate in English; the remaining sixty-six per cent can read and write in their regional language (Mohammed, 2022).

According to CSA's "Can't Read, Won't Purchase" report, sixty-eight per cent of internet users choose regional language in digital content as credible (Depalma et al., 2006). Therefore, using regional language in digital marketing will help businesses and brands gain a large number of customers. Moreover, availability of regional content will also increase the number of mobile users. Currently Google search engine and social media platforms provide nine Indian languages: Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Bengali, Gujarati, Marathi, Kannada, Malayalam, and Punjabi and companies have begun integrating regional language in various components of digital marketing such as Search Engine Optimization (SEO), content marketing, and social media to attract customers. Brands like Policy Bazaar, Kotak Mahindra Bank, Rapido and Reckitt have started advertising in regional languages. Dettol India created a Hindi language website in addition to the English version. Customers who visit the Dettol Hindi website spend more time online than those who visit the English site. Rapido began advertising their bike taxis in four different languages on social medias and this has helped them expand the company in hundred cities. Policy bazaar is the leading internet insurance marketplace in India. Policy Bazaar employs Google trends such as Jivan Bima Plan (life insurance plan), sabse sasta term plan (cheapest term plan), and customises creative messages based on search demand

for these terms. This strategy led to eighteen per cent decrease in cost per lead, four per cent increase in incremental leads and eleven per cent increase in clicks through local-language keywords, compared to advertisements in English (Mohammed, 2022).

The percentage of illiterate population in rural India is seventy-three (Swargiary, 2022). For this group of people, literature suggest advertising in televisions, radios and you tube as effective methods of marketing (Mishra et al., 2020; Srivastava, 2022; Venkatesh, 2018). The Khan Khajura Tesan (KKT) by Hindustan Unilever (HUL) is a 'mobile radio' which provides on – demand entertainment to the rural areas of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Jharkhand. The campaign took advantage of All India Radio (AIR) to invite consumers to give a missed -call to a specific number, only to be called back and fed with joke which entertained them. KKT received around eight million subscribers within the first six months, proving to be an instant hit among rural consumers. Throughout the conversation, HUL interspersed advertisements for its mass consumer products such as Lifebouy, Ponds, and Close Up. Thus, the KKT campaign assisted HUL in communicating directly with its consumers in rural regions while also resolving the issue of poor penetration of digital media (Srivastava, 2022).

The 'mSamvaad' launched by GlaxoSmithKline plc (GSK) to advertise Horlicks in 'media-dark' rural areas of Bihar was a great success among mothers. The program's purpose was to generate awareness about the brand's scientific

credentials through a voice message recorded by celebrated Bhojpuri actor Ravi Kishan. They also created brand awareness through SMS, chat rooms, one-on-one voice calls and conference calls. The platform's major distinction is that it functions independently of the internet and can be utilised with any voice-enabled device, including landline and feature phones. GSK saw an increase in percentage of women aware of the brand and in purchase of Horlicks in rural areas (Koti, 2021).

Bala et al. (2018) suggests attracting the literate youth from rural areas is an effective method of digital marketing. Since, seventy per cent of the rural youth use the internet, SEO, social media platforms, Pay-per-click, e-mails, and content marketing are effective methods to draw consumers. Attracting the youth would aid in the propagation of their products through 'word of mouth' thereby increasing the overall purchase (Venkatesh, 2018). Moreover, rural markets require items that are tailored to their needs. Nokia, for example, supplied a customised phone with features appreciated by rural customers such as multi-lingual keypads, a built-in torch, and FM radio, available for less than Rs. 200. Likewise, LG received significant benefits from the customised 'Sampoorna' TV with easy-to-use features at Rs. 14,400, which was a success despite costing Rs. 2000 more than competing models. On the contrary, Godrej Appliances' Champion refrigerator did not fare well. So, Godrej conducted a survey to understand the rural consumer's requirement and created a compact refrigerator without a compressor,

powered by a battery, weighing less than 8 kgs, and including a top loading storage space for roughly Rs. 3,000 (Mishra et al., 2020).

The majority of the rural population are also farmers, and marketing products that aids in agriculture is an effective strategy. Netafim launched FlexNet, a leak-proof flexible pipe for improving the irrigation system in agriculture fields. They employed a multi-lingual campaign #Farming simplified on social media platforms. The product was subsequently introduced with a film that highlighted its performance, flexibility, durability, convenience of use with connections, and minimal labour cost. The campaign reached 5.8 million people and 1855 leads. Agrostar developed a digital platform through which farmers may directly obtain the necessary agricultural products at reasonable prices. The farmers connect with Agrostar either by a missed call or through 'AgroStar' android app. On receiving a call, the executive responds to their question, offers them customised agronomy and product recommendations, and places an order on the client's behalf.

Over the past two years, Agrostar has grown over 300% and has proved to be a game-changer in the field of agribusiness (Deshmukh, 2021). Similarly, for creating brand awareness among poultry farmers, Japfa started Japfa Neeti, a program for promoting better poultry practices. Farmers were invited to follow five easy biosecurity measures and share farm videos with Japfa on WhatsApp as part of a user-generated content contest. Cleanest farms would be highlighted and rewarded. The challenge compelled farmers to make

the required improvements to keep their farms clean. By campaigning for better poultry practices, Japfa became a known and trustable brand among poultry farmers (*Japfa Ltd | Sustainability Report 2021, 2021*).

Even though digital marketing in rural India comes with challenges, finding ways to market products is essential for a company's growth. Erda (2008) found that in contrast to urban consumers, rural consumers are less concerned with quality, function, and brand and are more concerned with pricing and style. Therefore, extrapolation of urban marketing tactics may fail in rural markets. In addition to these differences, the level of development in rural areas also varies across the country. For effective digital marketing, marketers must understand the rural consumer's niche and work towards it (Ravinder, 2022).

### **Conclusion**

India is moving towards digitalization at a rapid pace (Vachhani, 2016). Adaptation of smartphones and internet has been increasing in the rural areas of India and this has led to a growth in digital literacy (Srivastava, 2022). Since the urban market is becoming saturated, moving to rural market is a sustainable option for companies. And growth in digital literacy has paved way for digital marketing in rural areas (Venkatesh, 2018). In addition to large companies, small and medium enterprises (SME) also rely on social-media marketing for developing their business (Chatterjee, 2020). Pradhan (2018) pointed out the lack of systemic research studies on digital marketing in small enterprises in India.

Even though digital marketing has several advantages like low-cost, real-time results, and wider audience over traditional marketing, the consumer reach of digital marketing in rural areas is poor (Lakha, 2018). Literature has shown that this is due to lack of insight about the target audience. Pricing and styling of a product, literacy rate, local language preference, multi-media penetration and profession of the consumer are the factors which affect the outcome of digital marketing (Deshmukh, 2021; Mishra et al., 2020; Ravinder, 2022; Srivastava, 2022; Venkatesh, 2018).. The choice of digital platform (television, social media, E-mails, phone calls, SMS and radio) is also important for creating brand awareness among people (Dewangan, 2022). Apart from ineffective marketing strategies, digital marketers also face a lot of challenges in marketing to the rural population. The rural markets in India are wide and scattered; majority of the villages have populations of less than 500 people. Only one percent of villages have a population more than 5000 people.

Therefore, choosing target markets and efficiently serving them is a difficult challenge. Marketers cannot meet the language expectations of rural people of the entire country, when developing advertisements. Henceforth, promotional strategies will always lack flexibility. Furthermore, 30% of the rural population lives below poverty line and cannot be targeted for digital marketing (Ravinder, 2022). In addition to these, lack of personal contact, trust, security and privacy are other problems faced by digital marketers (Bhagowati, 2018; Vachhani., 2016). Despite several hurdles, rural India

is an ‘untapped potential’ for marketers. Companies must frame effective strategies for implementing digital marketing in various parts of rural India.

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