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Study on the Role of Social Media in Shaping Customer Purchasing Choice with respect to the Nashik District

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Abstract — The proliferation of social media platforms across India has fundamentally altered the manner in which consumers discover, evaluate and purchase products and services. This study examines the role of social media in shaping customer purchasing choice with specific reference to consumers in the Nashik District of Maharashtra, a fast-growing tier-2 urban-agrarian economy that combines a strong agricultural base with emerging automobile, engineering and wine-tourism clusters. Using a mixed-methods design that integrates a structured survey of 384 respondents drawn from the urban and rural talukas of Nashik with secondary data from industry reports and peer- reviewed literature, the paper investigates five dimensions of social-media influence: platform-usage patterns, influencer and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) effects, demographic variations, product-category impact and trust- related challenges. The findings indicate that WhatsApp and Instagram are the most influential platforms in the district, that micro-influencers generate higher purchase intent than celebrity endorsements, and that social media's influence is strongest for apparel, electronics and food delivery categories while remaining moderate for high-involvement purchases such as two-wheelers and real estate. Trust, privacy and the credibility of online reviews emerge as significant concerns, particularly among older and rural respondents. The paper concludes with practical implications for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and marketers operating in Nashik, and outlines directions for future longitudinal research in similar tier-2 Indian markets.

Keywords — social media marketing, consumer purchase choice, electronic word-of-mouth, influencer marketing, Nashik district, tier-2 city, digital consumer behaviour, Maharashtra.

I. Introduction

The diffusion of low-cost mobile internet across India, accelerated by the launch of affordable data plans in 2016, has reshaped the country's consumer landscape in less than a decade. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube, X (formerly Twitter) and ShareChat are no longer purely social utilities; they have evolved into full-fledged marketplace environments where brands are discovered, compared, reviewed and purchased in near real time. According to industry estimates, more than 550 million Indians were active social media users by 2024, and a substantial share of them reported that social content directly influenced at least one purchase decision during the preceding year. This transformation is no longer confined to metropolitan centres; tier-2 and tier-3 cities are increasingly driving the next wave of digital consumption growth.

The Nashik District of Maharashtra presents an especially relevant setting for studying this phenomenon. Nashik combines a historically agrarian economy centred on grapes, onions and pomegranates with rapidly expanding industrial clusters around automobile manufacturing, engineering goods, pharmaceuticals and wine tourism. The district's population is demographically young, its urban core is well-connected through 4G and expanding 5G coverage, and a growing share of its households now report regular e-commerce and social-commerce activity. Yet, despite this trajectory, very little published research has examined how Nashik consumers specifically engage with social media at the point of purchase decision-making. Most existing Indian studies treat the national consumer as a single undifferentiated block, which obscures the distinct cultural, linguistic and economic textures of districts such as Nashik.

This paper attempts to close that gap by investigating the role of social media in shaping customer purchasing choice with respect to the Nashik District. It pursues three intertwined goals: first, to map the dominant social-media platforms and content formats that influence purchase decisions of Nashik consumers; second, to examine how demographic variables such as age, gender, education and income moderate that influence across product categories; and third, to derive actionable recommendations for local marketers, SME owners and policy stakeholders. The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. Section II reviews the relevant literature. Section III states the research objectives and methodology. Section IV describes the Nashik context. Sections V through VIII report the empirical findings on platform usage, influencers and eWOM, demographic moderators and product-category impacts. Section IX discusses trust and privacy concerns, Section X offers managerial implications, Section XI summarises findings and limitations, and Section XII concludes.

II. Literature Review

Scholarly interest in social media's influence on consumer behaviour has grown rapidly since the early 2010s. Cheung and Lee [1] established that perceived informativeness and social presence on platforms such as Facebook significantly shape

Table 1. Research design summary.

Dimension	Description
Research approach	Mixed methods: structured survey + secondary data
Sample size	384 respondents (95% CI, ±5% margin)
Sampling method	Stratified random sampling across 4 urban + 4 rural talukas
Target population	Social-media users aged 18–60 residing in Nashik District
Survey instrument	32-item structured questionnaire, 5-point Likert scale
Data collection	February–April 2025, both online and face-to-face
Secondary sources	IAMAI, TRAI, Nielsen, Deloitte, peer-reviewed studies
Analytical tools	Descriptive statistics, cross-tabs, chi-square tests
Ethical compliance	Informed consent; no personally identifiable data stored

consumer trust and intention to purchase. Hajli [2] extended this work by introducing the construct of social commerce, arguing that the convergence of social interaction and commercial transaction on the same platform creates a novel purchase environment distinct from traditional e-commerce. Kapoor et al. [3] subsequently proposed a multi-dimensional framework linking platform engagement, content personalisation and brand trust to actual purchase behaviour, a framework that has been validated in several emerging-market contexts.

A parallel stream of research has examined electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). Hennig-Thurau et al. [4] defined eWOM as any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual or former customers about a product or company, made available to a multiplicity of people via the internet. Their work highlighted that eWOM carries more persuasive weight than firm-generated advertising because it is perceived as more credible and less commercially motivated. Cheung et al. [5] further demonstrated that the volume, valence and consistency of online reviews jointly influence consumer purchase decisions, with negative reviews exerting a disproportionately strong effect relative to positive ones.

Influencer marketing represents the third strand of literature relevant to this study. De Veirman et al. [6] showed that the number of followers an influencer has affects perceived credibility, but that extremely high follower counts can reduce perceived authenticity. Ki et al. [7] proposed a model in which parasocial interaction, source credibility and trust transfer jointly mediate the relationship between influencer endorsement and purchase intention. Indian evidence supports these findings. Sharma and Singh [8] documented that micro- influencers with fewer than 100,000 followers outperform celebrities in driving purchase intent for fast-moving consumer goods in tier-2 Indian cities. Bansal and Choudhary [9] reported that WhatsApp-based group recommendations are a dominant influence channel in Maharashtra's small towns, particularly for apparel and consumer electronics.

Empirical studies specific to Nashik remain scarce. Patil and Joshi [10] analysed digital payment adoption in Nashik's retail sector and found a positive correlation between social-media exposure and willingness to use digital payment instruments. More recently, Deshmukh and Kulkarni [11] examined consumer attitudes towards Instagram-based apparel retail in Nashik city, finding that visual authenticity and influencer styling tips significantly increased purchase conversion. Beyond the academic literature, industry reports by IAMAI and Kantar [12], Nielsen India [13] and Deloitte [14] have repeatedly identified Maharashtra's tier-2 cities, including Nashik, as the next frontier for social commerce growth.

Despite this progress, three gaps persist. First, most Indian studies aggregate tier-2 cities without isolating district-level effects. Second, the interaction between demographic variables and platform-specific influence is rarely examined at sufficient granularity. Third, the implications of trust deficits and fake reviews are acknowledged but seldom quantified. The present study attempts to address all three gaps for the specific context of the Nashik District.

III. Research Objectives and Methodology

The study pursues the following five objectives: (i) to identify the most influential social media platforms used by consumers in the Nashik District; (ii) to assess the relative impact of influencer endorsements, online reviews and eWOM on purchase decisions across product categories; (iii) to analyse demographic variations in social-media influence across age, gender, education, income and occupation groups; (iv) to examine trust, privacy and credibility concerns associated with social-media- driven purchasing; and (v) to derive actionable managerial implications for local businesses. Four research questions (RQ1–RQ4) follow directly from these objectives: RQ1 — which platforms most strongly shape purchase choice in Nashik? RQ2 — how do influencers and eWOM compare in their persuasive effect? RQ3 — how do demographic variables moderate social-media influence? RQ4 — what trust and credibility barriers do Nashik consumers report?

The study adopts a mixed-methods design that combines primary survey data with secondary evidence drawn from industry reports and prior academic work. The primary survey was conducted between February and April 2025 across four urban talukas (Nashik City, Nashik Road, CIDCO, Deolali) and four rural talukas (Niphad, Sinnar, Igatpuri, Chandvad). A

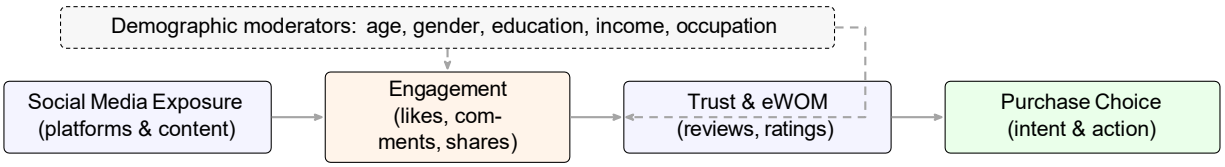

Figure 1. Research model: social-media influence on purchase choice with demographic moderators.

stratified random sample of 384 respondents was selected using a sample-size formula appropriate for an infinite population at a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error. The questionnaire contained 32 items spanning platform usage, influencer influence, eWOM reliance, demographic profile and trust perceptions. Table 1 summarises the design. Secondary data were drawn from IAMAI–Kantar, TRAI, Nielsen and Deloitte reports as well as peer-reviewed literature listed in the references.

Figure 1 presents the research model that integrates exposure, engagement, trust and eWOM into a single causal chain leading to purchase choice, with demographic variables acting as moderators. This model draws on the frameworks of Cheung and Lee [1], Hajli [2] and Kapoor et al. [3], and is adapted to the Indian tier-2 context in line with the observations of Sharma and Singh [8].

IV. Nashik District Context

The Nashik District, located in the north-western part of Maharashtra, covers an area of approximately 15,582 square kilometres and supports a population of around 6.5 million according to the 2011 census, with subsequent projections placing the 2025 figure closer to 7.8 million. Administratively, the district is divided into fifteen talukas, with Nashik City, CIDCO and Deolali forming the dense urban core while Niphad, Sinnar, Igatpuri and Chandvad represent the agriculturally dominant periphery. The literacy rate of the district is approximately 80%, which is comparable to the Maharashtra state average, and a young demographic profile places a substantial share of the population in the 18–35 age band that is most active on social media.

Economically, Nashik occupies a distinctive position. The district is one of India's leading producers of grapes, onions and pomegranates, and hosts the country's largest wholesale onion market at Lasalgaon. It is also the centre of the Indian wine industry, with more than thirty wineries concentrated around the Niphad and Dindori belt. The industrial corridor stretching from Ambad to Sinnar hosts major automobile and engineering plants, including a large passenger-vehicle manufacturing facility, ancillary engineering units and a growing pharmaceuticals cluster. This combination of agrarian, industrial and tourism activity creates a heterogeneous consumer base that is materially different from either the metropolitan patterns of Mumbai and Pune or the predominantly rural patterns of Vidarbha and Marathwada.

Digital infrastructure in Nashik has expanded rapidly. According to TRAI data, mobile tele-density in the district exceeds 95%, and 4G coverage is near-universal in the urban core and along major highways. Smart-phone penetration among adults aged 18–60 in the urban talukas is estimated at over 78%, while the rural talukas trail at around 54%. WhatsApp is near-universal among smart-phone owners, and Instagram has shown the fastest growth among users aged 18–30 over the last three years. The combination of rising disposable incomes, expanding smart-phone access and a young demographic profile makes Nashik a particularly informative setting for studying the social media–purchase relationship.

V. Social Media Platform Usage in Nashik

The survey results reveal a clear hierarchy of platform usage among Nashik consumers. WhatsApp is the most pervasive platform, used by 96.4 per cent of respondents on a daily basis, primarily for personal communication but also as a source of product discovery through group chats, status updates and WhatsApp Business catalogues. Instagram ranks second in terms of purchase influence, used by 71.2 per cent of respondents, with the highest engagement observed among the 18–30 age cohort. YouTube is used by 84.6 per cent of respondents, but its purchase influence is largely indirect: how-to videos, unboxing content and product comparison videos shape consideration rather than triggering immediate purchase. Facebook remains relevant for the 35–60 cohort but has lost ground among younger users. X (formerly Twitter) and ShareChat have narrower but engaged user bases, the latter being particularly relevant among Marathi-language users in the rural talukas.

The Purchase Influence Index (PII) in Table 2 was constructed as a composite of five Likert-scale items measuring the extent to which each platform influences the discovery, consideration, trust, purchase intent and actual purchase stages of

the consumer journey. The index ranges from 0 (no influence) to 1 (very strong influence). WhatsApp and Instagram emerge as the two platforms with the highest influence, which is consistent with their combination of high usage frequency and integrated commercial features. YouTube's influence is comparatively lower despite its high usage, because users primarily treat it as an information source rather than a transactional environment. Facebook's influence is moderated downward by its older user base and the declining presence of younger consumers.

Table 2. Platform-wise usage and purchase influence (n=384).

Platform	Daily use (%)	Avg. time (min/day)	Purchase influence index[a]	Primary purpose
WhatsApp	96.4	78	0.82	Peer recommendations, business catalogues
Instagram	71.2	54	0.78	Visual discovery, influencer content
YouTube	84.6	41	0.66	Reviews, tutorials, comparisons
Facebook	49.5	27	0.51	Brand pages, community groups
ShareChat	22.8	18	0.44	Vernacular content, local humour
X (Twitter)	18.4	11	0.32	News, real-time updates
Telegram	27.1	14	0.29	Channel-based deals, niche groups

[a] Composite index (0–1) derived from five Likert items on discovery, consideration, trust, intent and purchase.

Table 3. Influence of endorsement source by product category (mean score 1–5).

Product category	Celebrity	Macro-infl.	Micro-infl.	Peer eWOM
Apparel & accessories	2.8	3.6	**4.1**	3.9
Consumer electronics	2.6	3.4	**3.8**	3.7
FMCG & groceries	2.9	3.2	3.5	**3.9**
Food delivery & restaurants	2.4	3.3	**4.2**	4.0
Personal care & beauty	2.7	3.7	**4.0**	3.6
Two-wheelers	**3.4**	3.2	3.0	2.8
Real estate	**3.1**	2.8	2.6	2.5
Wine & agro-products	2.1	2.6	**3.4**	3.2

An important behavioural pattern observed in the survey is the multi-platform journey. Most respondents (62.3%) reported that their typical purchase pathway involves at least three platforms: discovery often begins on Instagram or YouTube, validation through reviews happens on YouTube and Google, and final recommendation is sought in WhatsApp groups before the purchase is executed either online or in a physical store. This multi-platform behaviour has significant implications for marketers, who cannot rely on a single-platform strategy but must design coherent cross-platform content journeys.

VI. Influencer Marketing and Electronic Word-of-Mouth

Influencer marketing has emerged as one of the most influential levers in the social media purchase journey. The survey measured respondents' self-reported influence of three categories of endorsers: celebrity endorsers (film actors, cricketers), macro-influencers (followers between 100,000 and one million) and micro-influencers (followers below 100,000, often with a local or niche focus). The results are summarised in Table 3.

Three patterns stand out. First, micro-influencers consistently outperform both celebrities and macro-influencers for low- to mid-involvement categories such as apparel, electronics, food delivery and personal care. This aligns with the findings of De Veirman et al. [6] and Sharma and Singh [8], who argued that perceived authenticity and parasocial closeness decline as follower counts grow. In Nashik, this effect is amplified by linguistic and cultural proximity: micro- influencers who

create Marathi-language content and reference local landmarks and festivals are perceived as more trustworthy than distant national celebrities.

Second, peer eWOM (reviews, ratings, unboxing videos by ordinary users) exerts influence comparable to micro-influencers and is the dominant influence channel for FMCG and groceries. This is consistent with the broader eWOM literature [4, 5], which suggests that peer reviews are perceived as the least commercially motivated and therefore the most credible. Third, for high-involvement purchases such as two-wheelers and real estate, the influence of social media declines sharply, and celebrity endorsements retain some residual value primarily as brand-awareness builders rather than as direct purchase triggers.

A notable finding is that the credibility of influencer endorsements varies significantly with the perceived disclosure of paid partnerships. Respondents reported higher trust in influencers who explicitly used tags such as "paid partnership" or "sponsored", paradoxically because the disclosure was interpreted as a sign of honesty rather than as a detriment. This finding has direct implications for the regulatory framing of influencer marketing in India, where the Advertising Standards Council of India has issued guidelines on mandatory disclosure.

Table 4. Purchase influence index by demographic segment (0–1 scale).

Variable	Segment	PII
Age	18–24	0.84
	25–34	0.79
	35–44	0.62
	45–60	0.41
Gender	Male	0.68
	Female	0.72
Education	Up to HSC	0.49
	Graduate	0.71
	Post-graduate	0.78
Monthly income (INR)	Below 25,000	0.58
	25,000–50,000	0.69
	50,001–1,00,000	0.75
	Above 1,00,000	0.71
Locality	Urban core (Nashik City, CIDCO)	0.78
	Semi-urban (Deolali, Nashik Road)	0.66
	Rural talukas	0.47

VII. Demographic Influences on Purchase Choice

The influence of social media on purchase choice is not uniform across demographic groups. The survey data reveal significant variation by age, gender, education and income. Table 4 reports the Purchase Influence Index (PII) for major demographic segments.

Three findings stand out. First, age is the strongest demographic moderator. Respondents aged 18–24 report a PII of 0.84, while those aged 45–60 report only 0.41. The younger cohort treats social media as a primary discovery and validation channel, while the older cohort continues to rely on television, family advice and in-store experience. This generational divide is consistent with national-level findings of IAMAI–Kantar [12] and Deloitte [14].

Second, education and locality are highly correlated with social-media influence. Graduate and post-graduate respondents report PII scores well above the average, reflecting both higher digital literacy and greater comfort with online evaluation. Urban respondents outscore rural respondents by a margin of 0.31 on the PII, which mirrors the smart-phone penetration gap and the relative scarcity of vernacular high-quality content for rural audiences.

Third, gender differences are modest but directionally interesting: female respondents report a slightly higher PII than male respondents, driven primarily by their stronger engagement with Instagram and personal-care content. Chi-square tests confirmed that the relationships between age and PII ($\chi^2 = 64.8$, $p < 0.001$) and between locality and PII ($\chi^2 = 41.2$, $p < 0.001$) are statistically significant, while the gender–PII relationship was not significant at the 0.05 level.

VIII. Impact on Product Categories

Social media's influence varies considerably across product categories. Table 5 reports the share of respondents who reported that social media content directly influenced their most recent purchase in each category, along with an indicative conversion-to-purchase rate.

Apparel, personal care and food delivery emerge as the categories most strongly shaped by social-media content, with conversion rates exceeding 38 per cent. These categories share three characteristics that amplify social-media influence: relatively low ticket size, low perceived risk and high visual content suitability. Apparel and personal-care purchases are heavily driven by aspirational and aesthetic content, while food delivery is driven by real-time offers, geo-targeted advertisements and peer recommendations in WhatsApp groups.

Consumer electronics occupy an intermediate position. The purchase journey is longer and involves more research, but YouTube reviews and comparison videos have become an indispensable input. Conversion is constrained by the high ticket size and the prevalence of offline purchase habits, but influence is broad. FMCG and groceries show lower influence scores despite high WhatsApp usage, because the purchase of staples such as rice, oil and onions is driven more by household habit and local kirana relationships than by online discovery.

Table 5. Category-wise social media influence and conversion.

Category	Influenced (%)	Conversion (%)	Dominant platform
Apparel & accessories	78	41	Instagram, WhatsApp
Personal care & beauty	74	38	Instagram, YouTube
Consumer electronics	69	32	YouTube, WhatsApp
Food delivery & dining	72	46	Instagram, WhatsApp
FMCG & groceries	54	28	WhatsApp, ShareChat
Furniture & home decor	47	19	Instagram, YouTube
Two-wheelers	41	12	YouTube, Facebook
Real estate	28	6	Facebook, YouTube
Wine & agro-products	36	14	Instagram, YouTube

High-involvement categories such as furniture, two-wheelers and real estate show the lowest social-media influence. Real-estate purchase decisions in Nashik are still predominantly relationship-driven, mediated by local brokers and site

visits, and social media functions primarily as a brand-awareness channel rather than as a conversion driver. The wine and agro-products category is interesting: although the overall influence percentage is moderate, social media has played a disproportionate role in establishing the wine-tourism economy of the Niphad–Dindori belt, drawing visitors from Mumbai and Pune through Instagram-based visual storytelling.

IX. Trust, Privacy and Challenges

While social media has expanded the information available to consumers, it has also introduced new sources of risk and uncertainty. The survey identified five dominant concerns reported by Nashik respondents. The most frequently cited concern was the prevalence of fake or paid reviews (reported by 64.7 per cent of respondents), followed by privacy risks associated with sharing personal information on social platforms (52.1 per cent), information overload and decision fatigue (43.8 per cent), misleading influencer endorsements (38.5 per cent) and post-purchase dissonance arising from over-claimed product features (29.4 per cent).

These concerns are not evenly distributed across demographic groups. Older respondents and rural respondents report significantly higher privacy concerns, which often translate into reluctance to share location data or payment information even when this would unlock personalised offers. Younger respondents, by contrast, report higher concerns about authenticity and information overload, reflecting their greater exposure to influencer content and their growing scepticism towards paid endorsements. The trust deficit is also category-specific: consumers report high trust in peer reviews for FMCG and apparel but significantly lower trust for high-involvement categories such as real estate and two-wheelers, where the financial stakes are larger.

A particularly important finding is that the credibility of online reviews is influenced by their perceived volume and recency. Respondents reported being sceptical of products with very few reviews, very high average ratings with limited text, and reviews that appeared to be templated or duplicated. This suggests that platforms and brands that fail to invest in authentic review generation may inadvertently depress conversion rates. The phenomenon of "review bombing", where coordinated negative reviews are posted in retaliation for unrelated grievances, was also reported by a small but non-trivial share of respondents, often in the context of consumer electronics and food delivery.

These trust challenges represent a structural limitation on the growth of social commerce in Nashik. They imply that simply increasing platform spend is unlikely to deliver proportionate returns unless accompanied by investments in credibility signals, transparent disclosure and post- purchase customer support. Regulatory interventions such as the ASCI guidelines on influencer disclosure and the proposed Digital Personal Data Protection Act are likely to play an important role in shaping the trust environment over the coming years.

X. Managerial Implications for Nashik Businesses

The findings of this study carry direct implications for SMEs and marketers operating in the Nashik District. First, given the dominant position of WhatsApp, businesses should treat WhatsApp Business and the WhatsApp Business API as foundational infrastructure rather than as optional add-ons. Catalogue setup, quick-reply templates and broadcast lists enable micro-segmented outreach at low cost. The integration of WhatsApp-based customer support with offline store operations creates a coherent omnichannel experience that matches the multi-platform journey reported by respondents.

Second, the strong performance of micro-influencers relative to celebrities suggests that marketing budgets should be reallocated towards local creator partnerships. Nashik has a growing pool of Marathi-language creators in the food, fashion and lifestyle segments who command engagement rates that often exceed those of national celebrities. A portfolio approach that engages 8–15 micro-influencers in parallel rather than a single celebrity endorser is likely to deliver higher return on investment, particularly for category launches and seasonal campaigns.

Third, vernacular content is no longer optional. ShareChat and Marathi- language YouTube channels play an important role in the rural talukas and among the 35–60 cohort. Brands that invest in Marathi-language creative assets, including subtitles on Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts, are likely to see measurably higher engagement and conversion. This is especially relevant for FMCG, agro-inputs, two-wheelers and consumer durable brands that target semi-urban and rural segments.

Fourth, trust-building assets must be designed into the social-media funnel from the outset. This includes verified customer review widgets, transparent disclosure of sponsored content, consistent response to negative reviews, and the publication of post-purchase support metrics. For high-involvement categories such as real estate and automobiles, virtual tours, WhatsApp-based consultation and explainer videos on YouTube can shorten the consideration phase while preserving the relationship-driven character of the local market.

Fifth, the heterogeneity of the Nashik market requires segmentation by taluka and locality rather than treatment as a single block. Geo-targeted advertising on Instagram and Facebook, combined with taluka-specific creative, can deliver materially better cost-per-acquisition metrics than undifferentiated district-level campaigns. Local festivals such as the Kumbh Mela, Makar Sankranti and the Nashik Grape Festival offer natural peaks around which content calendars can be designed. Finally, the measurement infrastructure itself should be strengthened: most local SMEs in Nashik do not currently track platform-specific return on investment, which makes systematic optimisation impossible. Investing in simple attribution dashboards that connect social-media engagement to offline sales would be a high-leverage first step.

XI. Findings, Discussion and Limitations

The findings of this study, viewed against the four research questions posed in Section III, can be summarised as follows. In response to RQ1, WhatsApp and Instagram are the platforms that most strongly shape purchase choice in Nashik, with YouTube playing an indirect but substantial validation role. In response to RQ2, micro-influencers and peer eWOM outperform celebrity endorsements in driving purchase intent for low- to mid-involvement categories, while celebrity endorsements retain residual value primarily for brand awareness in high-involvement categories. In response to RQ3, age, education and locality are the strongest demographic moderators of social-media influence, while gender differences are modest and income shows a non-monotonic relationship with influence. In response to RQ4, fake reviews, privacy concerns, information overload and misleading influencer endorsements emerge as the dominant trust-related barriers.

These findings contribute to the existing literature in three ways. First, they extend the social-commerce frameworks of Hajli [2] and Kapoor et al. [3] to a tier-2 Indian district context, showing that the broad causal chain from exposure to engagement to trust to purchase holds but with platform weights that differ materially from metropolitan samples. Second, they reinforce the micro-influencer advantage documented by De Veirman et al. [6] and Sharma and Singh [8] and extend it to additional product categories. Third, they quantify the trust deficit and link it to specific demographic segments, providing an empirical basis for targeted regulatory and managerial interventions.

The study has several limitations. First, the sample is confined to the Nashik District and the results should not be uncritically generalised to other tier-2 districts. Second, the survey is cross-sectional and captures self-reported perceptions at a single point in time; actual purchase behaviour may diverge from stated intent. Third, the questionnaire, although pretested, is subject to social-desirability bias and recall bias, particularly for purchases made several months prior. Fourth, the study does not include platform-side data such as click-through rates or actual conversion data, which would provide a more granular behavioural layer. Fifth, the rural sub-sample, while stratified, is smaller than the urban sub-sample, which limits the statistical power of some rural-segment comparisons.

Future research can extend this work in several directions. A longitudinal study tracking the same respondents over 12–24 months would capture behavioural change more reliably. Comparative studies across multiple tier-2 districts in Maharashtra and adjacent states would help isolate district-specific effects from regional ones. Integration of platform-side behavioural data with survey-based perception data would significantly strengthen causal inference. Qualitative studies examining the role of family decision-making units in social-media-influenced purchases would add depth to the demographic findings. Finally, as the regulatory environment evolves under the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023, repeat studies would be valuable to track how consumer trust perceptions shift in response to compliance-driven changes in platform behaviour.

XII. Conclusion

Social media has moved from the periphery to the centre of consumer decision-making in the Nashik District, but its influence is unevenly distributed across platforms, demographic groups, product categories and trust environments. WhatsApp and Instagram dominate the direct purchase- influence channel, YouTube plays a critical validation role, and micro-influencers and peer reviews outperform celebrity endorsements in driving actual purchase intent for most categories. The findings confirm that social-media influence is strongest among younger, educated, urban consumers and weakest among older and rural respondents, although the gap is narrowing as vernacular content and smart-phone access expand. Trust-related concerns, particularly around fake reviews and privacy, represent a structural constraint on the further growth of social commerce in the district.

The managerial implication is that a one-size-fits-all social-media strategy is unlikely to succeed in Nashik. Effective strategies will combine WhatsApp Business integration, micro-influencer portfolios, Marathi-language vernacular content, transparent review management and taluka-level geo-targeting. For marketers, researchers and policy makers interested in tier-2 Indian markets, Nashik offers a microcosm of the opportunities and challenges that will define the next phase of digital consumption growth in India. The pathway forward lies in treating social media not as a stand-alone channel but as an integrated layer woven into the broader consumer journey, supported by trust-building investments that match the

district's cultural and economic texture.

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