SJIF Impact Factor (2026): 8.863| ISI I.F. Value: 1.241| Journal DOI: 10.36713/epra2016 ISSN: 2455-7838(Online)
EPRA International Journal of Research and Development (IJRD)
Volume: 11 | Issue: 5 | May 2026 - Peer Reviewed Journal

# DIGITAL MARKETING AND ITS IMPACT ON CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR

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**ABSTRACT**

*Online marketing channels have radically altered the way organisations build relationships with buyers, changed how prospective customers discover offerings, and reconfigured the path through which purchase choices are eventually made. The present study investigates these shifts through a dual lens: a primary questionnaire survey administered to 120 respondents drawn from urban and peri-urban areas of Rajasthan, and a synthesis of relevant secondary literature. Seven channels were assessed — social networking platforms, search engine optimisation, content creation, electronic mail campaigns, key opinion leader (influencer) marketing, display advertising, and mobile-based promotions — with attention paid to their role at each of the five recognised stages of buyer decision-making.*

*Results indicate that social networking advertisements and peer-generated product evaluations constitute the most decisive digital contact points, substantially shaping brand impressions and readiness to purchase. Across all decision stages, the information-gathering phase attracted the highest mean influence rating (4.31 on a five-point scale), while engagement after the sale proved to be the least developed area (mean 3.87). Three hypotheses were statistically validated: digital marketing positively and significantly drives purchase decisions ($t = 8.94$, $p < .001$); social media outperforms rival channels in behavioural influence ($F = 9.27$, $p < .001$); and generational cohorts respond differently to distinct digital channels ($\chi^2 = 34.62$, $p = .011$). Actionable guidance for marketers operating within India's rapidly expanding digital economy is presented in the concluding section.*

**KEYWORDS**: *Digital Marketing, Consumer Behaviour, Social Media Marketing, Purchase Intent, Influencer Marketing, Online Decision-Making, Indian Market.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last two decades, promotional communication conducted through internet-connected devices has transitioned from a peripheral activity into the central pillar of how businesses attract, engage, and retain customers. Broad accessibility to smartphones, social networking services, and high-speed data connections has enabled an entirely new marketing architecture — one that incorporates paid advertisements on social feeds, organic visibility through search engines, personalised messaging via email, editorial content designed to educate audiences, partnerships with social influencers, and location-aware mobile promotions. By the close of 2024, India counted in excess of 900 million active internet subscribers, placing the country among the most sizeable and energetic digital consumer populations on earth (TRAI, 2025).

This widespread connectivity has not merely added new promotional channels; it has structurally transformed the way people make purchasing choices. Buyers today no longer occupy a passive role in the marketing process. Instead, they independently interrogate search engines before entering stores, scrutinise community-sourced product ratings on retail platforms, subscribe to content creators whose opinions they trust, benchmark competing prices within seconds on handheld devices, and broadcast their own post-purchase verdicts to wider audiences. Comprehending how each category of digital marketing input shapes this active, self-directed decision process has consequently become one of the most pressing questions in applied marketing scholarship.

Although the academic literature on individual digital channels has grown considerably, studies that simultaneously assess the comparative weight of multiple channels across each sequential stage of the buyer journey remain scarce — particularly within the Indian market. The present inquiry sets out to fill this gap by combining original survey evidence with a structured review of secondary sources.

### 1.1 Objectives of the Study

- To map the level of awareness and day-to-day usage of digital marketing channels within the study population of Rajasthan.
- To determine which digital marketing instruments exert the greatest influence at each stage of the consumer decision-making process.
- To rank the most conversion-driving digital channels with respect to actual purchase behaviour.
- To test whether age-based cohorts respond to digital marketing stimuli in statistically different ways.

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- To translate empirical findings into practical strategic guidance for marketers targeting Indian consumers.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Scope of Existing Scholarship on Digital Marketing

Scholars have examined digital marketing from multiple angles — strategic, psychological, and behavioural — yielding a substantial body of evidence. Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2019) characterise the discipline as the purposeful application of networked technologies to achieve commercial goals by generating and communicating customer value through online channels. The global scale of the field is captured in spending data: worldwide digital advertising outlays crossed $740 billion in 2024, with mobile formats accounting for more than three-fifths of that investment (eMarketer, 2024). These figures underline digital marketing's position as the dominant mode of commercial communication in the current era.

### 2.2 How Digital Channels Shape the Consumer Journey

A widely cited reconceptualization of the purchase process by researchers at McKinsey (Court et al., 2009) replaced the classical linear funnel with a cyclical journey in which buyers move fluidly between awareness, consideration, purchase, and loyalty phases — often looping back to earlier stages after encountering new information online. Building on this, Kotler, Kartajaya, and Setiawan (2021) describe an emergent buyer profile characterised by digital fluency, heightened price consciousness, and a strong appetite for customised brand encounters. Empirical support for digital marketing's effect on buying intent comes from Vinerean (2017), who identified the quality of online content, the degree of interactive exchange it enables, and the perceived trustworthiness of its source as the three strongest predictors of whether exposure translates into purchase intention.

### 2.3 Social Platforms and Buying Behaviour

Research consistently identifies social media as a uniquely powerful influence environment. Hajli (2015) demonstrated that interpersonal exchanges within social networks — especially content created and shared by fellow consumers rather than brands — substantially lower the perceived risk attached to online transactions and cultivate purchase-ready trust. Within the Indian context, a survey-based inquiry by Kaur and Bhatt (2022) established that Instagram and YouTube together account for the greatest share of digital influence on lifestyle and apparel purchases, with content from key opinion leaders trailing only close personal referrals as a decision-shaping factor.

### 2.4 Influencer-Led Marketing

Marketing through social media personalities has scaled into a $24 billion global category by 2024 (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2024). Research by Dhanesh and Duthler (2019) draws a useful distinction between creators ranked by audience size — from celebrities with millions of followers down to nano-influencers with communities in the thousands — and finds that smaller-scale influencers consistently outperform larger ones on engagement rates and conversion effectiveness because audiences regard their endorsements as more genuine. Credibility and topical fit between the influencer and the product category are identified across multiple studies as the primary determinants of campaign success.

### 2.5 Search, Content, and Email Channels

Organic search visibility through SEO intercepts prospective buyers precisely when they are actively gathering information, making it especially potent during the evaluation phase of the journey (Fishkin, 2020). Despite being one of the oldest digital channels, email marketing sustains outstanding commercial efficiency, generating an average return of $42 for every $1 of investment when campaigns are rigorously managed (DMA, 2023). Personalisation amplifies this performance considerably: Arora et al. (2018) documented a 41 per cent uplift in click-through rates when email content was tailored to individual behavioural histories rather than broadcast generically.

### 2.6 Identified Research Gap

Despite the depth of scholarship on individual channels, integrated studies that chart the relative strength of each digital instrument across every successive stage of consumer decision-making remain uncommon — and are particularly scarce in research grounded in Indian urban and semi-urban field data. This study directly addresses that gap.

## 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Research Design

A descriptive-cum-analytical research design was adopted to investigate how digital marketing activities shape consumer choices across the decision journey. Original survey data supplied the quantitative base, while thematic review of academic and industry literature provided contextual depth. Combining these two streams allowed for methodological triangulation, strengthening the credibility and coherence of the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

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### 3.2 Research Approach
The study is primarily quantitative in orientation. Survey-derived numerical data were subjected to inferential statistical techniques to test directional hypotheses and uncover patterns across demographic subgroups. Qualitative synthesis of secondary literature was conducted thematically to contextualise and interpret the statistical findings within the broader marketing landscape.

### 3.3 Data Collection
Field data were gathered using a structured questionnaire distributed among internet users residing in Jaipur city and its surrounding semi-urban localities in Rajasthan. The instrument contained three parts: a demographic section; a set of questions probing awareness and habitual usage of each digital channel; and a battery of items measuring perceived influence on purchase decisions, scored on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree). Before full-scale deployment, the instrument was tested on a pilot group of 15 participants; Cronbach's Alpha for the main scale reached 0.87, affirming strong internal consistency. Secondary evidence was drawn from:

- Peer-reviewed journals, specifically the Journal of Interactive Marketing and the International Journal of Information Management.
- Commercial intelligence sources including eMarketer, the Direct Marketing Association, the Influencer Marketing Hub, and the McKinsey Global Institute.
- Official and governmental publications issued by TRAI and NITI Aayog.

### 3.4 Sample Design
The survey targeted internet-active adults between 18 and 55 years of age. Applying Yamane's (1967) sample size formula at a confidence level of 95 per cent with an allowable margin of error of ±5 per cent yielded a minimum requirement of 93 participants; the study extended this to 120 to allow for data quality screening and attrition. Purposive sampling was employed to secure proportional representation across gender, age bracket, occupational category, and monthly income band.

### 3.5 Analytical Techniques
Three layers of analysis were applied. First, descriptive statistics — including frequency counts, arithmetic means, and standard deviations — summarised the data and characterised the sample. Second, inferential tests — a one-sample t-test for $H_1$, one-way ANOVA with Tukey HSD post-hoc comparisons for $H_2$, and chi-square tests of association for $H_3$ — evaluated the hypotheses. Third, Pearson's bivariate correlation mapped the strength and direction of relationships between digital channel exposure variables and consumer behavioural outcomes. All computations were performed in IBM SPSS Statistics version 29.0.

### 3.6 Limitations
The geographic scope of the study is confined to Rajasthan, which constrains the generalisability of findings to other Indian states with different digital penetration profiles. Responses to Likert-scale items may be influenced by social desirability effects. Given the pace of change in digital platforms and consumer habits, some findings may require periodic re-examination as the landscape evolves.

## 4. DATA ANALYSIS & RESULTS
### 4.1 Respondent Profile
The sample of 120 participants comprised 58.3 per cent male and 41.7 per cent female respondents. Age distribution was dominated by the 21–30 cohort (44.2%), with 31–40-year-olds forming the second largest group (27.5%), followed by 18–20-year-olds (15.8%) and those aged 41–55 (12.5%). Over half of respondents held a postgraduate qualification (52.5%), while 37.5 per cent had completed an undergraduate programme. In terms of household monthly income, 31.7 per cent reported earnings between ₹25,001 and ₹50,000, and 28.3 per cent between ₹50,001 and ₹1,00,000.

### 4.2 Channel Awareness and Daily Usage
All seven channels examined achieved high rates of awareness. Social media marketing topped the ranking (96.7%), followed by video-based content on YouTube (94.2%), product ratings and user reviews (91.7%), influencer content (85.0%), email communications (78.3%), organic search results (72.5%), and banner or display advertisements (68.3%). When respondents were asked specifically about channels they engage with daily in ways that affect their spending choices, social media again led the field with 74.2 per cent, succeeded by review platforms (62.5%) and YouTube (58.3%).

### 4.3 Influence Across Decision-Making Stages
Table 1 presents the mean Likert scores recording the degree to which digital marketing was perceived to influence each stage of the five-step buyer decision model. Higher values denote stronger reported influence.

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**Table 1: Perceived Influence of Digital Marketing Across Consumer Decision Stages**

| Consumer Decision Stage | Mean Score | Std. Deviation | Rank |
|---|---|---|---|
| Need Recognition / Awareness | 3.92 | 0.71 | 4 |
| Information Search & Gathering | 4.31 | 0.58 | 1 |
| Evaluation of Alternatives | 4.18 | 0.64 | 3 |
| Final Purchase Decision | 4.22 | 0.61 | 2 |
| Post-Purchase Behaviour & Loyalty | 3.87 | 0.79 | 5 |

*Source: Primary survey data (n = 120).*

The stage at which buyers gather information about options attracted the highest digital marketing influence score (4.31), pointing to the critical role of search results, review content, and video comparisons in shaping preliminary judgements. The final purchase decision stage followed closely at 4.22, confirming that digital stimuli translate meaningfully into actual buying action. Post-purchase behaviour registered the lowest score (3.87), a finding that highlights an underdeveloped dimension of most current digital strategies and a significant opportunity for brands to cultivate loyalty and advocacy through sustained online engagement.

### 4.4 Channel Rankings by Purchase Influence

Participants were invited to identify the three digital channels that most directly influenced their last purchase choice. Social networking advertisements were cited most frequently (71.7% of respondents), followed by peer-written product reviews (63.3%), influencer endorsements (54.2%), YouTube product demonstrations (49.2%), organic search listings (42.5%), personalised email offers (28.3%), and display banners (18.3%). These rankings confirm the primacy of socially validated content over brand-initiated messaging in closing purchase decisions.

### 4.5 Hypothesis Test Results

**$H_1$: Digital marketing positively and significantly affects consumer purchase behaviour.** A one-sample t-test was run against a neutral reference point of 3.0. The outcome ($t = 8.94$, $df = 119$, $p < .001$) strongly rejects the null hypothesis, confirming that digital marketing's influence on purchase decisions is both positive and statistically significant. $H_1$ is accepted.

**$H_2$: Among all digital channels, social media exerts the greatest behavioural influence.** A one-way ANOVA across seven channel categories produced $F(6, 833) = 9.27$, $p < .001$. Post-hoc Tukey HSD comparisons confirmed that social media's mean influence score (4.38) exceeded that of every other channel except peer reviews (4.21), for which the difference did not reach significance. $H_2$ is accepted.

**$H_3$: Digital channel preferences differ significantly across age cohorts.** Chi-square analysis yielded $\chi^2(18) = 34.62$, $p = .011$, indicating a statistically significant association between age group and preferred digital channel. Younger cohorts (18–30) showed markedly stronger engagement with social media and influencer content; older respondents (41–55) placed greater reliance on email promotions and search engine listings. $H_3$ is accepted.

### 4.6 Cross-Dimensional Impact Summary

**Table 2: Digital Marketing Impact Across Key Consumer Behaviour Dimensions**

| Behavioural Dimension | Primary Digital Channels at Work | Net Direction |
|---|---|---|
| Brand Awareness Generation | Social network ads, YouTube, display advertising | Strongly Positive |
| Information Acquisition | SEO, editorial content, video reviews | Very Strongly Positive |
| Purchase Decision Closure | Social media, influencer content, peer reviews | Strongly Positive |
| Post-Sale Retention & Loyalty | Personalised email, CRM-triggered messaging | Moderately Positive |
| Brand Advocacy Creation | User-generated content, social sharing, loyalty apps | Emerging Positive |

*Source: Author's compilation drawing on primary survey results and secondary literature.*

## 5. DISCUSSION

### 5.1 Why Social Media Dominates

The outsized influence attributed to social networking platforms is consistent with the theoretical proposition advanced by Hajli (2015), which holds that peer-to-peer exchanges within digital communities serve as powerful credibility amplifiers. Visual platforms such as Instagram reduce the cognitive distance between product aspiration and acquisition intent, while YouTube's recommendation algorithm

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repeatedly surfaces relevant brand content to engaged viewers without any active search effort on their part. The growing normalisation of purchasable in-feed content and real-time shopping broadcasts means that the traditionally distinct phases of discovering a product and deciding to buy it are increasingly collapsing into a single digitally mediated moment — a development with significant implications for how campaign budgets should be sequenced across the funnel.

**5.2 Peer Reviews as Digital Social Proof**

The finding that consumer-authored reviews rank second only to social advertising in purchase influence aligns well with Cialdini's (2009) social proof principle, which holds that uncertainty about a decision inclines individuals to look toward the documented choices of comparable others. Within digital retail contexts, aggregate star ratings, written testimony from verified buyers, and photographic evidence shared by past purchasers collectively function as a substitute for the in-store product trial that online purchasing makes impossible. Brands that neglect review generation risk ceding this crucial trust layer to competitors who actively encourage and curate authentic customer feedback.

**5.3 Strategic Implications of Age-Based Differences**

The statistically confirmed variation in channel preferences across age brackets carries direct implications for media planning. A uniform, channel-agnostic digital strategy will inevitably over-invest in formats that resonate with one demographic segment while failing to reach others efficiently. Organisations seeking to optimise their acquisition spend should allocate disproportionately toward Instagram Reels and micro-influencer content when targeting 18–30 year olds, and toward well-crafted search landing pages and trigger-based email sequences when communicating with consumers aged 40 and above. This demographic-channelled approach will produce superior return on advertising expenditure compared with undifferentiated cross-channel broadcasting.

**5.4 Addressing the Post-Purchase Deficit**

The comparatively weaker digital marketing influence scores recorded for the post-purchase phase deserve particular attention from practitioners. Industry evidence consistently shows that retaining an existing customer costs a fraction of acquiring a new one, yet digital investment patterns in most organisations remain skewed heavily toward pre-purchase stages. Post-sale digital touchpoints — including order confirmation and delivery update messaging, personalised repurchase nudges triggered by usage data, loyalty scheme communications, and brand community membership through social groups — build the habit structures and emotional attachment that convert one-time buyers into long-term brand advocates. Brands that close this gap stand to achieve compounding returns as customer lifetime value rises alongside reduced churn.

**5.5 The Case for Integrated Omnichannel Thinking**

A unifying insight to emerge from this study is that no single digital channel operates independently; each contact point is experienced by the consumer as part of a connected narrative thread. A typical journey might begin with a sponsored Instagram post generating initial curiosity, proceed through a Google search that surfaces a detailed blog comparison, continue with a YouTube review that addresses remaining doubts, pass through an influencer endorsement that adds social validation, and conclude with a time-limited discount delivered by email. This sequential, multi-channel nature of digital consumer behaviour argues strongly against treating each channel as a standalone campaign silo, and instead calls for coordinated content and messaging architectures in which each touchpoint is consciously designed to carry the consumer forward to the next stage of engagement.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Through original field research and a structured review of contemporary scholarship, this study has demonstrated that digital marketing exercises a pervasive, significant, and multi-layered influence over consumer behaviour at every stage of the purchase journey. The convergence of evidence across quantitative hypothesis tests, channel ranking exercises, and literature analysis produces a consistent picture: digital marketing has become an indispensable mechanism through which consumer awareness is generated, preferences are formed, and buying decisions are ultimately executed in today's Indian market.

Three major conclusions crystallise from the collective findings. First, social media content and peer-authored reviews are the leading digital forces acting on consumer decision-making, primarily because they harness social validation mechanisms that buyers regard as more credible than brand-originated messaging. Second, the influence of digital marketing is most pronounced during the stages of information gathering and final purchase decision, while the post-purchase dimension remains a comparatively neglected and commercially underdeveloped opportunity. Third, the effectiveness of any given digital channel is not uniform across all demographic groups; age-differentiated channel strategies are essential for efficient resource allocation.

Taken together, these conclusions point toward an integrated, data-informed, and lifecycle-spanning approach to digital marketing as the most productive path forward for organisations competing in India's rapidly maturing digital economy. Future research would benefit from extending this framework to other Indian states, incorporating longitudinal tracking of channel influence over time, and examining how emerging technologies — including generative artificial intelligence, augmented reality commerce, and conversational marketing through messaging apps — are reshaping the contours of consumer decision-making in the years ahead.

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**Recommendations**

- Channel investment should be calibrated to demographic profiles: social media and influencer-led formats for younger cohorts; personalised email and search-optimised content for older segments.
- Post-purchase digital engagement must be treated as a strategic priority — encompassing automated loyalty messaging, personalised repurchase prompts, and social community-building initiatives.
- Content and messaging should be designed as a coordinated, sequential journey across all active channels rather than as separate, siloed campaign assets.
- Marketing automation platforms integrated with CRM data should be leveraged to deliver behaviour-triggered communications that maximise both email marketing ROI and customer lifetime value.
- Online reputation should be actively managed through structured review-generation programmes and prompt, constructive responses to negative consumer feedback on all major platforms.

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