

CHAPTER 4

NAVIGATING MODERN CHALLENGES IN JOURNALISM AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Social Media and Consumer Buying Decisions in the Indian Automobile Market

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Abstract. The evolving dynamics of the Indian automobile market have intensified the consumerization of the industry and created new challenges for car manufacturers. Today, consumers no longer demand only a car as a product, but expect a comprehensive experience package that includes information, interaction, trust, service quality, and post-purchase engagement. In this context, social media has become a powerful platform not only for corporate marketing and promotion, but also for consumer research, comparison, opinion formation, and decision-making. The internet has become a dominant source of consumer-driven communication, where information, feedback, opinions, reviews, and sentiments spread rapidly and often influence consumers more effectively than traditional corporate messages. This paper examines the role of social media in consumer buying decisions in the Indian automobile market, with particular attention to passenger cars. The study is based on an exploratory empirical survey of 300 young adults who are educated, technologically active, smartphone users, and active participants in social media platforms. The findings show that social media influences consumer awareness, information search, evaluation of alternatives, attitude formation, and post-purchase communication. However, the final automobile purchase decision is still more likely to occur offline due to the high-involvement nature of automobile products. The study also identifies gender-based differences in internet use, trust in social media, and information-seeking behaviour. The article concludes that automobile companies in India should integrate traditional and digital media strategies, strengthen brand communities, improve online information quality, and use social media not only as a promotional channel but also as a consumer engagement and relationship-building tool.

Keywords: competitive differentiation; social media; consumerization; Indian automobile industry; passenger cars; digitization; consumer buying decision; online word-of-mouth; automobile marketing; consumer engagement; brand reputation; social media marketing.

JEL Classification: M31; M37; D12; L62; O33

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Introduction. Marketing has long been a cornerstone of business success, with many well-established companies achieving prominence through effective marketing strategies. An integrated communication strategy has played a crucial role in shaping these successes. In the past, traditional mass communication methods, such as television, print media, newspapers, magazines, and direct mail, were the primary ways to reach audiences. These media channels were used to deliver messages aimed at shaping consumer awareness, attitudes, and perceptions toward brands.

However, as the business environment has evolved and technology has advanced, marketing messages have shifted to engage consumers on a deeper level, whether physically or emotionally. A major shift in this evolution is the rise of social media, which has been embraced by companies to connect with consumers in innovative ways. Social media refers to web-based and mobile platforms that facilitate two-way communication, transforming the interaction between companies and consumers into an engaging dialogue (Baruah, 2012).

Social media takes many forms, including blogs, wikis, podcasts, video content, social networking platforms, microblogging platforms, and other online communication tools. Unlike traditional media, which was largely one-way communication from producer to audience, social media enables customers to actively participate in the creation and dissemination of content. This has changed the nature of marketing because consumers are no longer passive receivers of brand messages. They are active participants in the communication process.

The concept of social media has revolutionized marketing by enabling brands to engage directly with consumers and encourage interaction. The growth of digital media has been particularly noteworthy, with digital advertising increasing by 44.5% in 2014 compared to 2013 (FICCI-KPMG, 2015). This reflects the growing impact of social media on consumer behaviour and decision-making.

Consumer-generated media now plays a crucial role in shaping buying decisions, influencing everything from brand awareness and information gathering to post-purchase evaluations. Social media platforms have become increasingly trusted sources of information, often competing with traditional corporate communication in credibility. Today, social media not only informs consumers but also influences their purchasing decisions, making it an essential tool for brands.

For businesses, social media represents a low-cost promotional avenue that offers vast reach, connects with large audiences, and generates substantial traffic. It provides a platform for companies to showcase their products and services, engage with customers, and promote brand awareness. In addition to marketing, social media offers benefits in marketing research, public relations, customer engagement, and product development. Marketers are increasingly focusing on social media-driven

campaigns to strengthen customer relationships and foster brand loyalty in a constantly changing digital environment.

The Indian automobile industry is a key driver of economic growth, combining innovation, technology, and creativity. In 2020-2021, the sector produced 26.3 million vehicles, including passenger vehicles, commercial vehicles, two-wheelers, and three-wheelers, marking a 16.2% increase compared to the previous year (SIAM, 2021). The industry accounts for 7.1% of India's GDP and employs more than 37 million people. India is the fifth-largest vehicle producer globally and is projected to become the third-largest automobile market by 2025, with 6.5% of global vehicle sales (Make in India, 2021).

As internet usage and social media grow, the automobile sector has a unique opportunity to connect with consumers through digital platforms. In 2021, more than 43% of traffic to automotive websites came from search engines, while social media also became an important source of consumer engagement (Statista, 2021). Consumers use automotive websites and social media platforms to compare features, check prices, research companies, read reviews, follow new launches, and engage with brands.

The Indian automobile industry concluded FY 2021 with a 7.2% growth in unit sales (ICRA Research Services, 2021). It is one of the largest automobile markets globally, with annual production of 26.3 million vehicles in FY 2020-2021, reflecting a 16.2% increase from the previous year. The industry contributes about 7.1% to India's GDP (India Brand Equity Foundation, 2021). India is currently the fifth-largest vehicle producer in the world and is projected to become the third-largest automobile market by 2025 (Make in India, 2021).

A study by Capgemini revealed that 78% of Indian consumers would be likely to purchase a vehicle from a specific car manufacturer or dealer if positive comments and reviews were found on social media (Economic Times, 2021). The increasing role of online research and web usage in vehicle purchases is evident, with 95% of consumers in India researching vehicles online in 2021, up from 86% in 2010. Given this trend, it is crucial for automobile companies to understand how to engage with social media effectively and connect with potential customers. Social media platforms also give existing customers a voice, allowing brands to gain valuable feedback and strengthen relationships with loyal consumers.

For automobile companies, a strong digital presence and effective social media optimization are essential to staying competitive and connecting with today's technologically active consumers. Therefore, this paper explores the role of social media at various stages of the consumer decision-making process and proposes strategies that can help automobile companies design comprehensive social media campaigns. These strategies can assist not only in attracting potential customers, but also in retaining and nurturing customer loyalty over the long term.

Literature Review. Social media has become a top priority for many executives at leading global companies. Decision-makers are increasingly looking for ways to use platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, and other social networking sites for profitable business purposes. Social media serves as an open platform for interactive communication, enabling individuals to become content creators and share information with others through dynamic engagement.

Stokes defines social media as content created, published, and shared by individuals online, including blogs, images, videos, and other digital formats (Sharma, 2013). Strauss and Frost also describe social media as online tools and platforms that enable internet users to collaborate on content, share insights and experiences, and connect for both business and personal purposes (Sharma, 2013). Since its emergence, social media has become a preferred mode of communication, and companies have recognized it as a strategic marketing tool.

Several factors have contributed to the rapid growth of social media as a marketing tool. These include technological advancements, such as expanded broadband access, improved software, and the increased availability of computers and mobile phones. Social factors, such as the rapid adoption of social media by younger age groups, and economic factors, such as the growing affordability of digital devices, have also played an important role.

Social media plays a crucial role in delivering effective customer support (Sharma, 2013). It serves as an interactive platform where customers can share opinions about products or services. Social media is often perceived as more trustworthy than traditional media channels. Consequently, a company's reputation is no longer controlled only by its corporate communications team, but is also shaped by technologically active customers who can quickly share positive or negative experiences.

This creates a major challenge for organizations. Companies need to monitor social media actively in order to understand feedback, ideas, complaints, and opinions related to their products or services. Such monitoring allows companies to understand the role of social media in influencing consumer decision-making and to respond effectively to consumer expectations.

The evolution of social media can be understood as part of the broader development of communication systems. Early long-distance communication methods included audio and visual forms of messaging. The postal system in ancient Persia, telegraph, telephone, and radio all contributed to the development of long-distance communication. In the twentieth century, the internet created a new era of digital communication. Early tools such as email, ARPANET, USENET, Bulletin Board Systems, IRC, and Napster paved the way for online interaction. In the twenty-first century, platforms such as Friendster, Flickr, Orkut, Facebook, Twitter, and

YouTube transformed online communication. Today, platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, LinkedIn, and others shape how individuals communicate, share content, and interact with brands.

Social media has become an integral part of online life and has transformed how consumers obtain information and express opinions. Consumers are part of, or aspire to belong to, various online groups that may significantly influence their purchasing behaviour (Solomon, 2010). Traditionally, purchasing decisions were based largely on information from mass media. However, online social networks now play an important role in shaping customer buying behaviour (East et al., 2013).

Several social networking groups influence consumer behaviour. Primary groups include people with close relationships, such as family members or close friends. Secondary groups are broader and may include several primary groups. Informal groups include individuals with common interests or cultural backgrounds. Formal groups are more structured and organized. Virtual groups include online communities, blogs, and forums where people connect digitally.

Reference groups are particularly important because their opinions and experiences influence consumer purchase decisions. Reference groups influence consumers in three major ways. First, informational influence occurs when consumers seek information about different brands from others. Second, utilitarian influence occurs when consumers make decisions based on the satisfaction or expectations of others in their social circle. Third, value-expressive influence occurs when consumers choose brands that reflect their personal values or social identity (Solomon, 2010).

Online word-of-mouth communication refers to the sharing of positive or negative experiences by consumers. It can result from satisfaction or dissatisfaction with a product or service. Word-of-mouth is a form of personal communication that influences consumer decisions regarding brands, products, services, companies, or organizations (Evans et al., 2009). Its influence is shaped by factors such as tie strength, homophily, and source credibility (Brown, 2007). Tie strength refers to the strength of interpersonal relationships within social networks. Homophily refers to similarity between group members. Source credibility refers to the perceived expertise and objectivity of the person providing information.

Online word-of-mouth occurs through social networking sites, blogs, online forums, virtual communities, and review or rating websites (Goldsmith & Horowitz, 2006). One of its main advantages is that it allows consumers to gather insights from a broad range of people, not only from individuals they personally know. Information search is a crucial step in decision-making because consumers seek information to reduce uncertainty and perceived risk (Peterson & Marino, 2003). Many consumers rely on online reviews and recommendations before making purchase decisions, particularly when considering new products (Kim & Srivastava, 2007).

Thurau and Walsh (2003) identified five motivations that drive consumers to engage with online opinions and allow them to influence purchase decisions. These motivations include seeking purchase-related information, social orientation through information, community membership, incentives and rewards, and learning about new products. Webster (2011) found that many American social media users maintained at least one social media profile, while a significant proportion followed favorite brands, products, or companies. These findings show that online social networks have become important sources of product-related information for consumers.

In India, social media has become a major marketing channel. As of 2015, 75% of India's online population could be classified as digital consumers, meaning they engaged with digital media in some form during the purchasing journey (Ernst & Young, 2015). The number of internet users in India reached 302 million by December 2014, while active social media users surpassed 106 million (Ernst & Young, 2015). India was among the top three countries globally in terms of Facebook users, with more than 100 million active users on the platform (Ernst & Young, 2015).

With this large user base, social media has moved from being a supplementary marketing tool to becoming a primary communication channel. Facebook has been the dominant platform, followed by Twitter and YouTube. These platforms have become important for businesses that seek to build a strong online presence. The three main goals that social media helps companies achieve are building brand awareness, disseminating brand news, and fostering community and customer engagement.

In the Indian automobile market, these developments are highly relevant. Automobile purchases are high-involvement decisions that require extensive information search, comparison, and evaluation. Consumers increasingly use automotive websites and social media platforms to compare features, check prices, evaluate brand reputation, read reviews, and interact with companies. Therefore, the role of social media in automobile buying decisions requires systematic analysis.

The influence of social media on automobile buying behaviour can be understood through the consumer decision-making process. Social media affects not only the initial awareness of automobile brands, but also information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase intention, and post-purchase communication. Since automobiles are high-involvement products, consumers usually combine online information with offline experience, particularly dealer visits and test drives. Therefore, social media should be considered not as a replacement for traditional sales channels, but as an important supporting mechanism that strengthens consumer awareness, trust, comparison, and engagement.

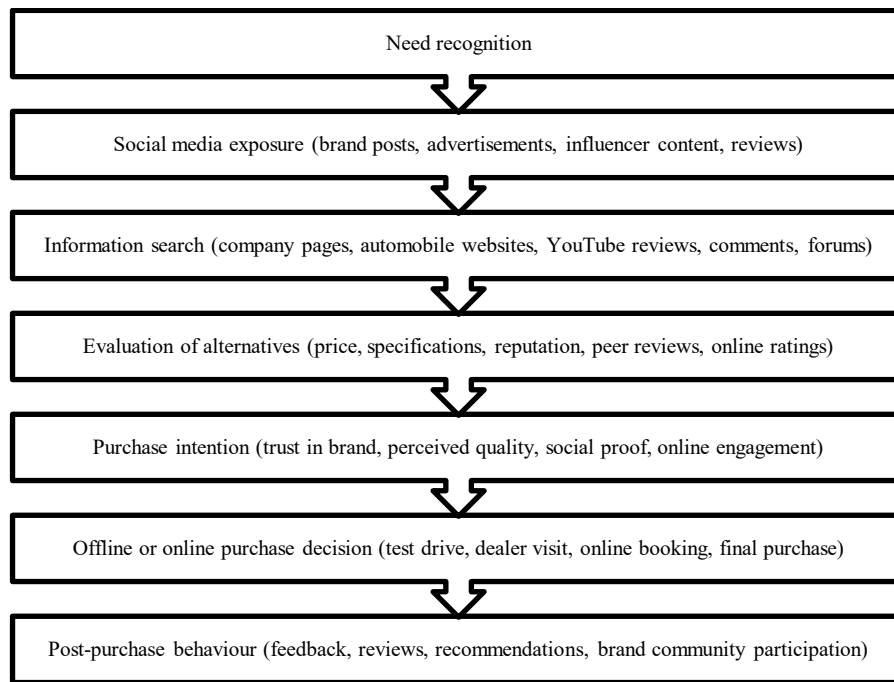


Figure 1. The role of social media in the consumer buying decision process in the automobile market

Source: developed by the authors based on East et al. (2013), Evans et al. (2009), Goldsmith and Horowitz (2006), Kim and Srivastava (2007), Solomon (2010), and the survey results.

Aims. The aim of this study is to examine the role of social media in consumer buying decisions in the Indian automobile market, with particular attention to the way social media influences awareness, information search, evaluation of alternatives, attitude formation, purchase intention, and post-purchase communication.

The objectives of the study are to understand the concept of social media marketing and its applications in the Indian automobile industry; to identify the influence of social media on the consumer decision-making process; and to suggest social media strategies for automobile companies at different stages of consumer decision-making.

Methodology. An exploratory empirical study was conducted to examine the behaviour of young adult students in relation to the automobile market. The study focused on information search, brand perception, social media use, and decision-making processes. The main purpose was to understand the role and significance of social media in brand building and automobile marketing.

The sample consisted of 300 young adults. The respondents were evenly split between genders, educated, technologically active, smartphone users, and active users of social media for various purposes. They were enrolled in BE, BBA, and BCA programs. The respondents came from families with substantial financial means and owned at least one bike, while a few also owned cars. Although the respondents were students with no independent income and were not directly involved in purchasing high-value

products such as cars at the time of the study, they were considered potential future customers.

The study is exploratory in nature. It does not aim to generalize findings to all automobile consumers in India, but rather to identify behavioural characteristics of young, educated, and digitally active consumers. This makes the sample relevant for understanding future automobile buyers and for developing social media strategies for automobile manufacturers.

The study uses descriptive analysis to present the findings. The results are structured around internet usage, traditional media consumption, information search for automobile products, credibility and reliability of social media, factors influencing purchase decisions, preferences for learning about automobile products, and factors encouraging consumers to revisit automobile social media pages.

Results. The results show that social media plays a significant role in the consumer decision-making process in the Indian automobile market. However, its influence differs across stages of decision-making and varies by gender. Social media appears especially important in information search, comparison, review reading, attitude formation, and post-purchase communication. Nevertheless, traditional media, especially television, continues to play a strong role in shaping consumer perceptions, while actual automobile purchases still tend to occur offline.

Gender differences in social media use and automobile information search. The first group of results shows gender-based differences in internet usage, mass media consumption, information search, reliability perceptions, and the perceived effectiveness of social media. These results are important because they indicate that male and female consumers may interact differently with digital platforms in the automobile market.

Table 1. Gender differences in internet use and perception of social media

Indicator	Boys	Girls	Main interpretation
Respondents spending less than 10 hours per week on the internet	60%	43%	Boys were more likely to spend less than 10 hours online, while girls were more likely to spend more than 10 hours online.
Respondents spending more than 10 hours per week on the internet	40%	57%	Girls reported higher internet use in terms of time spent online.
Respondents spending less than 10 hours per week on mass media	60%	79%	Girls spent less time on traditional mass media than boys.
Respondents using the internet to research automobile products	76%	37%	Boys were more likely to use the internet for automobile product research.
Respondents finding social media easier than mass media for automobile information search	84%	58%	Boys perceived social media as a more convenient source for automobile information.
Respondents trusting social media more than mass media in case of product uncertainty	56%	42%	Boys showed higher trust in social media when uncertain about products.
Respondents considering social media more effective in capturing customer attention	88%	63%	Boys perceived social media as more effective for customer attention.

Source: Compiled by the authors based on the survey results.

The results presented in Table 1 show that gender differences exist in the way young consumers use social media for automobile-related information. Boys are more active in using the internet for automobile product research and are more likely to trust social media when uncertain about a product. Girls, however, spend more time online overall, but are less likely to use the internet specifically for automobile product research. These findings suggest that automobile companies should consider gender-sensitive content strategies when designing social media campaigns.

General perceptions of social media in automobile buying decisions. The second group of findings shows areas where no significant gender differences were found. These results demonstrate that both male and female respondents recognize the importance of social media in automobile-related communication, review reading, attitude formation, and decision-making.

Table 2. General perceptions of social media in automobile buying decisions

Indicator	Result	Main interpretation
Respondents willing to use the internet to communicate and share experiences with automobile products	75%	Social media supports consumer-to-consumer and consumer-to-company communication.
Respondents interested in making an online purchase of an automobile	42%	Consumers remain hesitant to purchase high-value automobile products online.
Respondents agreeing that social media is essential for actively seeking information about automobile products	83%	Social media is an important information-search tool.
Respondents believing that reviews and comments help customers try new automobile brands	78%	Online word-of-mouth affects openness to new brands.
Respondents considering social media communication more credible than traditional media	54%	Social media has moderate credibility compared with traditional media.
Respondents believing positive online comments can change attitudes toward automobile brands	71%	Positive reviews may influence brand perception.
Respondents acknowledging that feedback and comments on social media influence automobile purchasing decisions	69%	Social media affects the purchase decision process.
Respondents agreeing that social media is an effective platform for communication with consumers and companies	77%	Social media supports interaction and engagement.
Respondents encouraged to share opinions after purchase through social media	64%	Social media supports post-purchase communication.
Respondents agreeing that social media makes decision-making easier	76%	Social media simplifies information access and evaluation.

Source: compiled by the authors based on the survey results.

Table 2 confirms that social media has become a significant factor in consumer buying decisions in the automobile market. Although only 42% of respondents expressed interest in purchasing an automobile online, a much larger share recognized social media as useful for information search, review evaluation, communication, and decision support. This shows that social

media is more influential before and after the purchase than at the final transaction stage.

Internet usage preferences among young consumers. The study also examined the main reasons respondents use the internet. Shopping did not emerge as one of the top three primary reasons for internet use among this age group. Research, email correspondence, social networking, and entertainment were more prominent motivations.

Table 3. Internet usage preferences among respondents

Internet usage purpose	Result	Main interpretation
Respondents ranking research as the most important reason for internet use	54.24%	Research is the dominant primary purpose of internet use.
Respondents ranking email correspondence as the most important reason	22.03%	Email remains an important functional use of the internet.
Respondents ranking social networking as the most important reason	13.56%	Social networking is relevant, but not the leading primary purpose.
Respondents ranking entertainment as the second most important reason	23.73%	Entertainment is an important secondary motivation.
Respondents ranking shopping as the second most important reason	18.64%	Shopping is not the primary motivation, but has some relevance.
Respondents ranking social networking as the third most important reason	32.20%	Social networking is a strong supporting use of the internet.
Respondents citing research among the top three reasons	26.55%	Research remains central across ranked preferences.
Respondents identifying shopping as the top reason	6.78%	Online shopping is a weak primary motivation for this group.
Respondents considering shopping among the top three internet uses	13.5%	Shopping remains secondary among young respondents.

Source: compiled by the authors based on the survey results.

The findings in Table 3 show that the internet is used primarily as an information and research tool rather than as a direct shopping platform. This is especially relevant for automobiles, which are high-involvement and high-value products. Young consumers may use online sources extensively to gather and compare information, but they remain cautious about completing the final purchase online.

Preferences for learning about automobile products. The study found that automobile company websites and social media platforms were equally favoured by consumers when seeking information about automobile products. Television emerged as the most influential medium for learning about automobile brands, with 25% of respondents selecting it, followed by online competitions at 10% and celebrity endorsements at 8%.

Table 4 shows that social media is important, but traditional media has not lost its relevance. Television remains influential in shaping awareness and brand perceptions. Therefore, automobile companies should not replace traditional media entirely but should integrate it with digital and social media strategies.

Table 4. Preferred sources and tools for learning about automobile products

Source or promotional tool	Result	Main interpretation
Television as the most influential medium for learning about automobile brands	25%	Traditional media still strongly influences automobile brand awareness.
Online competitions	10%	Interactive online campaigns can attract consumer attention.
Celebrity endorsements	8%	Endorsements influence a smaller but relevant share of respondents.
Automobile company websites	Not quantified in the source text	Websites remain important for detailed product information.
Social media platforms	Not quantified in the source text	Social media is equally favoured with company websites for product information.

Source: compiled by the authors based on the survey results.

Factors influencing online automobile purchases and page revisits.

The study also identified the factors that may influence consumers to make an online automobile purchase and the factors encouraging consumers to revisit automobile brand social media pages. These factors are important for designing effective social media marketing strategies.

Table 5. Factors influencing online purchase and social media page revisits

Factor	Result	Main interpretation
Quality of information as a factor influencing online automobile purchase	36%	Accurate and useful information is the most important factor for online purchase intention.
Ease of navigation as a factor influencing online purchase	8%	User-friendly digital platforms support online purchase intention.
Recommendations from others as a factor influencing online purchase	7%	Peer influence has a role, although it is not the strongest factor.
Multiple factors influencing online purchase	29%	Online purchase decisions are multidimensional.
No listed factor influencing online purchase	10%	Some respondents remain resistant to online purchase.
Online advertising as a factor encouraging revisit to social media pages	37%	Online advertising is the strongest reason for revisiting automobile social media pages.
Rewards and loyalty programs as revisit factors	6%	Incentives can support engagement, but their effect is limited.
Miscellaneous factors encouraging revisit	34%	Revisit behaviour depends on diverse motivations.
No factor encouraging revisit	6%	A small share of respondents are not influenced by the listed factors.

Source: compiled by the authors based on the survey results.

Table 5 shows that the quality of information is the most important factor influencing online automobile purchase intention. This is logical because automobiles are high-involvement products and consumers require detailed, accurate, and trustworthy information before making decisions. Online advertising is the most important factor encouraging respondents to revisit

automobile social media pages, which suggests that brands need visible, creative, and engaging digital communication strategies.

Discussion. The results of the study confirm that social media has become an important part of the consumer decision-making process in the Indian automobile market. However, its role is not uniform across all stages of decision-making. Social media is especially influential in the early and middle stages of the process, including awareness, information search, opinion formation, comparison of alternatives, and evaluation of brands. It also plays an important role after the purchase because consumers use social media to share feedback, post reviews, and communicate with other consumers and companies.

The findings show that consumers increasingly rely on social media for information about automobile products. A large share of respondents agreed that social media is an essential tool for actively seeking information about automobile products. Reviews and comments on social media also influence attitudes toward automobile brands and encourage consumers to try new brands. These findings support the literature on online word-of-mouth, which argues that consumer-generated content influences purchase decisions by reducing uncertainty and providing social proof (Evans et al., 2009; Goldsmith & Horowitz, 2006; Kim & Srivastava, 2007).

At the same time, the results indicate that social media does not fully replace traditional media or offline purchasing. Television remains an influential medium for learning about automobile brands. This is particularly important in the Indian automobile market, where automobile purchases are high-involvement decisions and consumers still value traditional brand communication. The actual purchase decision also tends to happen offline, even when consumers use social media and websites for research and comparison. This confirms that for high-value products such as automobiles, social media functions primarily as an information, engagement, and trust-building channel rather than as a complete substitute for physical dealerships.

Gender differences in the findings are also important. Boys were more likely than girls to use the internet to research automobile products, to trust social media when uncertain about products, and to consider social media more effective in capturing customer attention. Girls, however, placed higher importance on brand reputation, while boys prioritized product specifications. These findings suggest that automobile companies should not use identical social media messages for all consumer groups. Instead, they should develop segmented communication strategies. For example, campaigns aimed at male consumers may emphasize technical specifications, performance, and comparative product features, while campaigns aimed at female consumers may place greater emphasis on brand reputation, safety, reliability, and user experience.

The finding that only 42% of respondents expressed interest in online automobile purchase is significant. It suggests that while young consumers are digitally active, they remain cautious about completing high-value transactions online. The automobile is a product that requires trust, physical inspection, test drives, and confidence in after-sales service. Therefore, companies should not interpret social media only as a sales channel. Instead, social media should be integrated with offline dealership experiences. For example, companies can use social media to generate interest, provide information, encourage test drive bookings, offer online appointment scheduling, and support post-purchase communication.

The study also shows that the quality of information is the most important factor influencing online automobile purchase intention. Consumers expect accurate, complete, transparent, and easily accessible information about vehicle features, prices, comparisons, financing options, safety, and service support. If online information is incomplete or difficult to navigate, consumers may lose trust and return to traditional information channels. Therefore, automobile companies should improve website usability, social media content quality, and digital customer support.

Online advertising was found to be the leading factor encouraging consumers to revisit automobile brand social media pages. However, online advertising should not be limited to promotional messages. It should be interactive, informative, visually appealing, and connected with consumer needs. Rewards and loyalty programs can also support engagement, but the study shows that their influence is weaker than online advertising and other miscellaneous factors. This means that consumers are attracted not only by incentives but also by relevant content, useful information, community interaction, and brand experience.

Overall, the results demonstrate that social media is becoming a powerful tool in the Indian automobile market, but its effectiveness depends on how strategically companies use it. Social media should be used to build brand awareness, provide reliable information, encourage peer interaction, respond to customer concerns, support online word-of-mouth, and maintain long-term customer relationships. The strongest approach is not to replace traditional media or dealerships, but to combine traditional media, digital platforms, social media communities, and offline experiences into one integrated consumer journey.

Conclusions. The study concludes that social media plays a significant role in shaping consumer buying decisions in the Indian automobile market. While the amount of time consumers spend online is steadily increasing, traditional media, particularly television, continues to hold an influential role in shaping consumer behaviour. Consumers actively use online platforms to search for information, compare alternatives, read reviews, share feedback, and communicate with brands. However, the actual automobile purchase decision tends to happen offline.

In the consumer decision-making process, social media primarily influences consumers up to the evaluation of alternatives stage. Even at this stage, mass media continues to play an important role in shaping perceptions. However, after the purchase decision has been made, consumers increasingly turn to online platforms to share feedback and experiences. This strengthens the credibility and reliability of future purchase decisions for other consumers.

The study also concludes that online shopping remains a secondary motivation for many consumers. Most consumers prefer to conduct online research, evaluate alternatives, and then make their purchase in-store. When evaluating automobile brands, brand reputation and product specifications are the most influential factors. Authenticity and quality of information provided online are key drivers for consumers who consider online purchases, followed by ease of navigation and recommendations from others.

Online advertising is the leading factor encouraging consumers to revisit automobile brand social media pages, while rewards and loyalty programs also play a supporting role. Younger consumers spend significant time on social media platforms to gather and validate information about products and brands, but they remain hesitant about purchasing high-value products such as automobiles online.

For automobile companies, this shift signals the need for innovative strategies that make social media a more effective consumer engagement channel. Companies should recognize differences in how males and females use social media because these variations may influence engagement and decision-making processes. Social media has the potential to transform how automobiles are marketed and sold if companies use these platforms strategically.

Automobile companies should create compelling online rewards and loyalty programs, design eye-catching advertising campaigns, emphasize brand reputation and vehicle specifications, and offer incentives for online engagement. They should also simplify website navigation and improve the online customer experience. Since automobiles are high-involvement products, companies should connect digital engagement with physical experience by offering test drives at dealerships and exclusive online booking benefits.

Building strong brand communities is also important. Such communities can provide a space for customers to share experiences, post reviews, interact with companies, and support brand loyalty. By integrating traditional and digital media, automobile companies can create a more engaging and rewarding experience for consumers while strengthening long-term brand relationships.

The study has certain limitations. It is exploratory and focuses on a sample of 300 young adults who were selected because of similar

demographic characteristics, including age, education, digital activity, and social media use. The study therefore reflects the behaviour of a specific group rather than all automobile consumers in India. Future research should examine broader and more diverse samples by considering age, income, location, education, occupation, and actual car ownership. Further studies may also compare different automobile segments and analyse how social media affects real purchase behaviour rather than only attitudes and intentions.

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