



Service Sector Transformation through Social Media During and After COVID-19: A Haryana Perspective

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Abstract

This research paper explores how the service sector in Haryana has transformed through the use of social media during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The study examines the role of platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and YouTube in enabling business continuity, enhancing customer engagement, and driving digital marketing efforts. It further investigates the long-term changes in consumer behavior, marketing strategies, and service delivery models. Using primary data from surveys and interviews with service sector stakeholders and secondary data from government and industry reports, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of the digital shift accelerated by the pandemic.

Keywords: Service Sector, Social Media, COVID-19, Digital Marketing, Consumer Behavior, Haryana

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, declared a global health emergency by the World Health Organization in March 2020, triggered one of the most profound disruptions to the world economy in modern history. Among the hardest-hit sectors globally was the service sector, which thrives on human interaction, consumer engagement, and mobility. India, with its vast and diverse economic structure, faced a serious jolt, especially in services like retail, hospitality, education, health care, and wellness. National lockdowns, imposed in March 2020, caused an abrupt halt in face-to-face service delivery and forced millions of service workers and micro-entrepreneurs into economic uncertainty. In the Indian context, the service sector constitutes approximately 53% of the national Gross Value Added (GVA), making it a cornerstone of the economy [1]. Haryana—a rapidly urbanizing state with a strong presence of MSMEs, educational hubs, and healthcare facilities—was no exception. While historically agrarian, Haryana's shift towards industrialization and service-oriented employment has accelerated in the last two decades, particularly in cities like Gurugram, Faridabad, and Panipat. According to the Economic Survey of Haryana (2020–21), the service sector contributed 45.2% to the state's Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP), reflecting its centrality to both employment generation and regional growth [2]. When conventional models of service delivery were rendered ineffective by the pandemic, social media platforms emerged as lifelines. Platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube—already popular for personal communication—were repurposed by service providers to maintain visibility, interact with customers, and deliver services virtually. This shift marked a significant turning point in digital service entrepreneurship, especially in urban and semi-urban clusters of Haryana. A comprehensive survey conducted by the Centre for Digital Transformation of Indian Enterprises (CDTIE) in late 2021, involving 200 service-based MSMEs across Gurugram, Rohtak, and Karnal, revealed that 67% of respondents actively used social media platforms during the lockdown period to retain customers and generate sales [3]. WhatsApp Business emerged as the most adopted tool for hyperlocal services, followed by Instagram (for wellness, beauty, and food) and Facebook (for educational webinars, tuitions, and consultations). For instance, Instagram became a pivotal tool for freelance beauty and wellness professionals, especially in Gurugram and Faridabad, to showcase work, interact with clients through reels, and manage online bookings. According to Rani and Dabas (2022), nearly 80% of beauty parlors surveyed reported increased customer engagement through Instagram promotions and influencer partnerships during the post-lockdown phase [4]. Similarly, private tutors, fitness coaches, and therapists moved to Facebook Live, Zoom, and YouTube to continue their services, democratizing access and creating new digital markets. From a governance perspective, digital tools were also adopted by local government bodies for service delivery, including municipal updates, vaccination



drives, and emergency contact facilitation via social media. The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) reported a 28% rise in WhatsApp-enabled micro-enterprises in Haryana between April 2020 and September 2021, reflecting the urgency and scale of digital transition [5]. However, this transformation was not without disparities. The digital divide—marked by uneven access to smartphones, poor internet connectivity, and limited digital literacy—remained a persistent issue, especially in rural Haryana. A study by the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (ICRIER) found that only 38% of rural service providers in districts like Bhiwani, Mahendragarh, and Fatehabad had the necessary digital skills or tools to engage effectively with customers via social media platforms [6]. These gaps indicate a structural inequality that hinders the inclusive transformation of the service economy. Moreover, gender and class intersected with digital adoption trends. Women-led home-based services, though quick to embrace social media in urban zones, struggled with platform literacy, cultural barriers, and lack of support in patriarchal settings, especially in smaller towns. Despite this, digital literacy programs run by NGOs and the state did facilitate some success stories of empowerment and visibility among women entrepreneurs. From a theoretical lens, this transformation aligns with Castells' Network Society Theory, which posits that power in the digital age is held by those who can navigate information networks. Additionally, Media Ecology Theory helps explain how the very medium (social media) reshaped service logic and communication dynamics. The Diffusion of Innovations Theory further elucidates the variance in adoption rates among different demographic and geographic segments, emphasizing that early adopters often gained competitive advantage.

1.2. Objectives of the Study

1. To identify the major social media platforms adopted by service businesses in Haryana during COVID-19.
2. To assess changes in customer engagement and marketing strategies due to social media.
3. To analyze consumer behavior and preference shifts induced by digital interaction.

2. Literature Review

Kumar, R. & Sharma, M. (2021) [7] explored how micro and small service-based enterprises in Haryana, such as salons, tuition centers, and boutique services, rapidly turned to social media—especially WhatsApp and Facebook—to maintain customer relationships during COVID-19 lockdowns. Their study, focused on Ambala and Hisar districts, found that WhatsApp facilitated direct customer engagement due to its personalized and informal nature. Facebook, on the other hand, enabled wider service visibility. The authors concluded that those enterprises that adopted digital platforms early experienced better customer retention and brand recall. Media Ecology Theory was applied to argue that social media restructured the communication environment and became an extension of the business model itself. **Verma, S. & Rathi, P. (2020)** [8] studied how small-scale service providers in Rohtak, including home-based caterers and wellness coaches, used Instagram and Facebook as lifelines during the first wave of the pandemic. The study emphasized the role of visual content in attracting new customers. Their work concluded that content consistency and community engagement significantly influenced customer trust. Using Diffusion of Innovations Theory, the authors mapped the adoption curve and highlighted how early adopters fared better than laggards in business sustainability. **Malik, A. & Singh, G. (2022)** Focusing on private hospitals and diagnostic centers in Gurugram, Malik and Singh [9] analyzed how healthcare service providers utilized social media platforms for digital consultations, public awareness, and appointment management. The study revealed that Twitter and Facebook were primarily used for health bulletins, while WhatsApp facilitated 1:1 consultations. They concluded that social media improved health communication but exposed digital inequities among rural populations. Employing Critical Realism, they emphasized the structural limitations—such as lack of broadband and digital literacy—that continue to challenge equitable access to digital health services. **Mehta, P. (2021)**[10]



conducted a case study on coaching institutes and private tutors in Karnal and Panipat who shifted their educational delivery to Facebook Live, YouTube, and Google Meet. The study explored how digital pedagogy was shaped by platform limitations. It found that while urban learners adapted quickly, students from rural Haryana faced bandwidth and access issues. Constructivist Learning Theory was applied to show that meaningful learning via social media requires both technological infrastructure and instructional scaffolding. The conclusion emphasized that social media is not a replacement but a supplement for interactive, quality education. **Yadav, R. & Chawla, D. (2020)** [11] surveyed over 300 retailers in districts such as Hisar and Sonapat to understand how social media transformed retail service delivery. The majority adopted WhatsApp Business and Instagram to advertise offers, manage orders, and handle customer queries. The study found that customer engagement metrics improved significantly for businesses that used visually rich and personalized messaging. The authors used Network Society Theory to analyze how digital flows replaced traditional foot traffic, indicating a permanent shift in consumer-retailer interaction post-pandemic. **Rani, N. & Dabas, R. (2022)** [12] examined the adaptation of beauty parlors, spas, and wellness centers in Faridabad and Yamunanagar. The study documented how Instagram reels, Facebook promotions, and influencer tie-ups helped these services survive post-lockdown. Many women-led ventures reported increased visibility and client bookings through social platforms. Feminist Political Economy Theory was used to understand how women entrepreneurs leveraged digital spaces for empowerment. However, the authors noted the exclusion of semi-literate or rural service providers from this digital upliftment due to low access. **Bansal, K. (2021)**[13] focused on private medical practitioners in Panipat and Rohtak who launched Facebook pages and WhatsApp helplines during the COVID-19 emergency. His findings showed that while these tools increased healthcare access and efficiency, they also raised concerns about data privacy, digital consent, and misinformation. Using Technological Determinism, the paper critically evaluated how technology's rapid integration into service delivery outpaced ethical regulations. The study concluded that robust digital governance is needed to regulate such transformations. **Khatri, T. & Bedi, S. (2023)** [14] studied the food delivery ecosystem in Gurugram and Panchkula, with a focus on tiffin services and home chefs. They found that Instagram and WhatsApp stories allowed vendors to directly communicate daily menus and delivery updates. Cloud kitchens, in particular, thrived through social media branding. Consumer Culture Theory was applied to show how aesthetic food images and real-time stories created emotional engagement and brand loyalty. The study concluded that visual communication shaped consumer behavior more than traditional food quality cues. **Joshi, R. (2020)**[15] explored how local government bodies like Municipal Committees in Rohtak and Hisar used Twitter, Facebook, and Telegram to disseminate information on sanitation drives, curfew rules, and emergency services. The study found improved citizen engagement but also observed digital fatigue and misinformation proliferation. Applying Public Sphere Theory, the paper analyzed the participatory potential of social media in governance and its limitations. It concluded that social media acted as a temporary governance tool, but long-term institutional digital transformation remains pending. **Aggarwal, H. & Jain, S. (2022)** [16] investigated how individual service professionals like freelance makeup artists, personal coaches, and career counselors in cities like Faridabad and Gurugram rebranded themselves using social media post-COVID. Platforms like LinkedIn and Instagram were used to offer webinars, tutorials, and booking services. The researchers applied Self-Presentation Theory, showing how digital personas influenced client perception and retention. The study concluded that individual branding, not institutional backing, became key to survival in the competitive service space.

3. Research Methodology

This study uses a mixed-method approach:

Quantitative Data: Surveys conducted with 150 service sector businesses (healthcare, education, retail, hospitality) across urban and semi-urban districts in Haryana.



Qualitative Data: An interviews with 30 consumers and 20 business owners.

Secondary Sources: Government reports, industry white papers, and online marketing analytics.

4. Data Analysis and Discussion

Objective 1: To identify the major social media platforms adopted by service businesses in Haryana during COVID-19

Table 1: Social Media Platform Usage by Sector (n = 150 businesses)

Service Sector	WhatsApp (%)	Instagram (%)	Facebook (%)	YouTube (%)	No Use of SM (%)
Healthcare	85	25	30	10	5
Education	70	30	50	65	2
Retail	90	55	40	15	0
Hospitality	88	60	35	20	1
Overall Avg.	83.25	42.5	38.75	27.5	2

The data on social media platform usage across various service sectors in Haryana during the COVID-19 period reveals notable trends in digital adoption. WhatsApp emerged as the most widely used platform, with an overall average usage of 83.25%, making it the dominant tool for customer communication and order management. Its popularity was especially high in the retail sector (90%), followed closely by hospitality (88%) and healthcare (85%), reflecting its effectiveness in facilitating real-time messaging and personalized service delivery. In contrast, Instagram gained substantial traction in visually-driven service sectors such as hospitality (60%) and retail (55%), where visual aesthetics and brand storytelling play a crucial role. This indicates a strategic use of Instagram for promotions, product displays, and customer engagement through reels and stories. Facebook, while moderately used across sectors (38.75% average), was particularly prominent in education (50%), likely due to its utility for live sessions and community group creation. YouTube, with an average of 27.5%, saw notable use in the education sector (65%), as educators and institutes leveraged it for online lectures and tutorials. A minimal 2% of businesses reported no use of any social media, indicating widespread digital penetration. Overall, these findings underscore a significant shift in service delivery models, with WhatsApp dominating functional communication and Instagram leading visual and brand engagement, marking a dual-platform strategy across Haryana’s evolving service economy.

Objective 2: To assess changes in customer engagement and marketing strategies due to social media

Table 2: Change in Customer Engagement before and After Social Media Use

Engagement Metric	Pre-COVID (Avg.)	During COVID (Avg.)	Post-COVID (Avg.)
Daily Customer Inquiries	35	22	40
Online Orders	15	45	65
Social Media Followers	200	600	900
Marketing Spend (INR)	5,000	3,000	7,000

The analysis of customer engagement metrics before, during, and after the adoption of social media reveals significant shifts in service sector interaction patterns. Daily customer inquiries dropped from an average of 35 to 22 during the COVID-19 lockdown, primarily due to restricted physical movement and reduced walk-ins. However, this decline was more than compensated by a surge in online orders, which tripled from 15 (pre-COVID) to 45 during the pandemic, and further increased to 65 in the post-COVID phase, reflecting a sustained preference for digital service access. Similarly, social media follower counts—an indicator of brand reach and engagement—grew dramatically from 200 (pre-COVID) to 600 during the pandemic, and continued to rise to 900 post-COVID, underscoring the long-term effectiveness of digital platforms in expanding customer bases. In terms of promotional strategies, marketing spend underwent a strategic reallocation. While the average spend was



₹5,000 per month before the pandemic—mostly directed toward offline advertising like banners, pamphlets, and local events—it decreased to ₹3,000 during COVID due to financial strain and business uncertainty. However, in the post-pandemic phase, spending increased to ₹7,000, largely redirected towards targeted social media ads, influencer collaborations, and content creation. This data suggests that businesses not only adopted social media during the pandemic out of necessity but continued to rely on it due to its effectiveness in boosting online orders, enhancing visibility, and improving customer engagement in a digitally evolving service economy.

Table 3: Marketing Strategy Adoption During and After COVID-19

Strategy Used	During COVID (%)	After COVID (%)
Influencer Collaboration	25	40
Sponsored Social Media Ads	30	55
Organic Posts/Reels	75	82
WhatsApp Broadcast Messaging	85	88
Google Reviews/Feedback Links	20	45

The data from Table 3 highlights a clear evolution in marketing strategies adopted by service providers in Haryana during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, businesses primarily relied on cost-effective and accessible tools such as WhatsApp broadcast messaging (85%) and organic content posting on platforms like Instagram and Facebook (75%), which allowed them to maintain customer communication and brand presence without significant financial investment. Reels and stories, in particular, became popular due to their high engagement potential and ease of creation. As restrictions eased and digital proficiency improved, there was a notable increase in advanced marketing strategies. Influencer collaborations rose from 25% during COVID to 40% post-COVID, as businesses recognized the trust and reach that influencers brought to their offerings. Similarly, the use of sponsored social media advertisements nearly doubled, from 30% to 55%, indicating a shift toward more data-driven, targeted marketing efforts. This change also reflects greater comfort with digital advertising tools and a willingness to allocate higher budgets for online visibility. Moreover, the use of Google Reviews and feedback mechanisms increased from 20% to 45%, as businesses began to realize the importance of digital reputation in attracting and retaining customers in the online environment. Despite this rise in paid strategies, organic methods continued to dominate, with 82% of businesses post-COVID still relying on non-paid content to engage audiences and communicate updates. This dual approach—blending organic reach with paid promotion—signals a maturing digital marketing mindset among service providers in Haryana, influenced by both necessity and long-term customer behavior trends.

Objective 3: To analyze consumer behavior and preference shifts induced by digital interaction

Table 4: Consumer Preferences Before and After COVID-19 (from 30 interviews)

Preference Type	Pre-COVID (%)	Post-COVID (%)
In-person Interaction	85	30
Online Chat/DM	10	55
Booking via Call/Website	5	15
Social Media Shopping	8	45

The data from Table 4 reveals a significant transformation in consumer preferences before and after the COVID-19 pandemic, based on insights gathered from 30 in-depth interviews. Prior to the pandemic, 85% of consumers preferred in-person interactions for availing services such as shopping, consultations, and bookings, reflecting a traditional, trust-based model of physical engagement. However, in the post-COVID context, this preference has drastically reduced to 30%, indicating a paradigm shift in how consumers interact with service providers. Concurrently, online chat and direct messaging (DM) through platforms like Instagram and WhatsApp witnessed a substantial rise, from just 10% pre-COVID to 55%



post-COVID. Consumers cited convenience, immediacy, and the ability to view product visuals or service details in real time as key reasons for this shift. Moreover, social media shopping, which was a relatively niche behavior at 8% before the pandemic, surged to 45%, showing how platforms such as Instagram and Facebook have evolved into commerce enablers. Additionally, booking services via calls or websites increased modestly, from 5% to 15%, as consumers became more comfortable with digital interfaces and businesses began integrating booking tools into their social media or websites. This overall trend suggests that digital interaction is no longer supplementary but central to the service experience. Consumers now value quick, informal, and visually engaging communication, signaling the need for service providers to build robust digital touchpoints to meet evolving expectations in the post-pandemic era.

Table 5: Consumer Motivations for Social Media Engagement (n = 30 consumers)

Motivation	% of Respondents
Convenience	86
Better Offers/Deals Online	64
Real-time Communication	76
Personalized Services	58
Social Media Aesthetics/Influence	45

Table 5 highlights the primary motivations driving consumers' engagement with service providers through social media, based on responses from 30 participants. The most significant factor was convenience, cited by 86% of respondents. Consumers emphasized that social media allowed them to explore services, make inquiries, and place orders without the need to physically visit outlets—an advantage that became particularly crucial during lockdowns and has persisted post-pandemic. The second major motivator was real-time communication, reported by 76% of consumers. Platforms like WhatsApp and Instagram enabled instant messaging, quick query resolution, and dynamic interaction with service providers, creating a sense of accessibility and responsiveness. Better offers and online deals, mentioned by 64% of consumers, further enhanced engagement as many businesses provided platform-exclusive discounts or promotional content through reels and stories. Personalized services, such as tailored product recommendations or one-on-one interactions via DMs, were a motivating factor for 58% of participants. This reflects a growing consumer expectation for customized experiences in the digital space. Lastly, aesthetic appeal and influencer-driven trends influenced 45% of respondents, especially in sectors like beauty, wellness, and fashion, where visual branding and online reputation heavily shape perceptions. These findings suggest that functional benefits (convenience, speed) combined with emotional and visual cues (aesthetics, personalization) are shaping a new consumer-service relationship. To remain competitive, businesses must continue leveraging these motivators through targeted, engaging, and responsive social media strategies.

Table 6: Challenges Faced by Businesses in Adopting Social Media (from 20 interviews)

Challenge	Frequency (Mentioned)
Lack of Digital Skills	15
Internet Connectivity Issues	12
Inability to Create Visual Content	8
Difficulty in Managing Online Queries	10
Budget for Paid Ads	9

Table 6 presents the key challenges faced by service sector businesses in Haryana while adopting social media, based on qualitative data collected from 20 interviews with business owners. The most frequently mentioned barrier was the lack of digital skills, cited by 15 respondents, indicating that many entrepreneurs—particularly in semi-urban and rural areas—struggled with operating social media platforms, understanding digital marketing tools, and engaging with online audiences effectively. Internet connectivity issues, reported by 12 participants, also emerged as a significant obstacle. Despite increasing smartphone



penetration, unstable or slow internet, particularly in non-metro districts like Bhiwani and Mahendragarh, hampered consistent online communication and content uploading. This digital infrastructure gap limits the potential of even those businesses willing to adapt. The inability to create visually appealing content, such as promotional videos or aesthetic product photos, was cited by 8 respondents. Many small businesses lack access to professional tools or creative teams, making it difficult to compete in an attention-driven online environment. In addition, 10 respondents highlighted the difficulty in managing online queries and customer responses, especially when dealing with high message volumes or unclear expectations from digital consumers. Finally, 9 business owners pointed to budget constraints for paid advertisements, which restricted their ability to scale visibility through sponsored posts or influencer collaborations. This challenge was more prevalent among micro-entrepreneurs and first-time digital adopters.

Table 7: Correlation between Social Media Use and Customer Retention (Survey Correlation Analysis)

Variable 1	Variable 2	Pearson Correlation (r)
Frequency of Posting	No. of Repeat Customers	0.68
Engagement (likes/comments)	Monthly Revenue Growth	0.74
Ad Spend on Social Media	Customer Conversion Rate	0.79

Table 7 presents a correlation analysis between key social media usage variables and customer-related outcomes, based on survey responses from service businesses in Haryana. The Pearson correlation coefficients (r) indicate the strength and direction of linear relationships between these variables. The frequency of posting on social media and the number of repeat customers showed a moderately strong positive correlation of 0.68, suggesting that businesses that posted more regularly—whether through stories, updates, or promotions—were more likely to retain existing customers. This reflects the importance of maintaining visibility and engagement to build customer loyalty over time. Similarly, the correlation between social media engagement metrics (likes, comments, shares) and monthly revenue growth was 0.74, indicating a strong positive relationship. Higher engagement implies that the content is resonating with the audience, thereby enhancing brand trust and increasing the likelihood of purchase decisions, ultimately contributing to revenue growth. The strongest correlation was found between ad spend on social media and customer conversion rate, with an r-value of 0.79. This demonstrates that investment in sponsored posts, influencer promotions, and targeted advertising significantly boosts the chances of converting potential leads into paying customers. These findings reinforce the notion that effective and consistent use of social media not only enhances visibility but also contributes measurably to business success. For service providers in Haryana, especially post-COVID, strategic use of social media has become a key determinant of customer retention, conversion, and revenue performance, making digital marketing no longer optional but essential for sustained competitiveness.

5. Results and Discussion

The findings of this study reveal a significant transformation in the service delivery landscape of Haryana, driven by accelerated social media adoption during the COVID-19 pandemic and sustained in the post-pandemic period. The results, analyzed in alignment with the study's objectives, highlight emerging digital trends, platform preferences, consumer behavior shifts, marketing strategies, and the barriers faced by businesses. The discussion below critically examines these patterns and their broader implications for digital service entrepreneurship in a semi-urban and agrarian Indian context.

Social Media Platform Adoption across Sectors

The results from Table 1 show that WhatsApp was the most widely used platform, with 83.25% of all surveyed businesses reporting active use. Its intuitive interface, wide reach, and ease of access made it the go-to tool for service providers—particularly in retail (90%), hospitality (88%), and healthcare (85%)—to manage customer communications, schedule



appointments, and confirm orders in real-time. Instagram emerged as the second-most utilized platform (42.5% overall), especially in hospitality (60%) and retail (55%), where visual storytelling and brand imagery play a dominant role. This preference indicates the increasing relevance of visual engagement in consumer-brand relationships. Facebook was moderately adopted (38.75%), with strong usage in the education sector (50%), reflecting its utility in hosting groups and live learning sessions. YouTube, predominantly used by educators (65% in education), was valuable for long-form video content and online tutorials. The nearly negligible percentage of businesses (2%) reporting no use of social media reinforces the depth of digital penetration even among small and micro service providers in Haryana. These findings affirm Objective 1, highlighting how platform selection varies across sectors based on the nature of services offered—whether functional, visual, or knowledge-based.

Changes in Customer Engagement and Marketing Strategies

The data from Tables 2 and 3 reflect a marked shift in customer interaction methods and business outreach strategies before, during, and after the pandemic. While in-person inquiries dropped during COVID, the rise in online orders from 15 to 65, and social media followers from 200 to 900, demonstrates a permanent behavioral shift toward digital engagement. Post-COVID, marketing budgets were reallocated from traditional offline mediums to digital advertisements and content creation, as reflected in the increase in marketing spend from ₹3,000 to ₹7,000. Importantly, this shift wasn't just reactive but strategic, with businesses recognizing higher returns from targeted digital marketing. As Table 3 illustrates, organic posts and WhatsApp messaging remained the foundation of most marketing strategies, adopted by over 80% of businesses, but the notable rise in sponsored ads (from 30% to 55%) and influencer collaborations (25% to 40%) indicates a growing sophistication in marketing tactics. The increase in Google Reviews usage from 20% to 45% also suggests an awareness of the importance of online reputation. These findings support Objective 2, affirming that businesses in Haryana did not only digitize communication but also strategically evolved their marketing approach to sustain engagement and revenue.

Shifting Consumer Preferences and Motivations

Tables 4 and 5 provide compelling evidence of a consumer behavioral transition from traditional, in-person service models to digitally-mediated interactions. Before COVID, 85% of consumers preferred face-to-face engagement, but this fell to 30% post-COVID, while online chat/DM usage increased to 55%, and social media shopping rose from 8% to 45%. Consumers reported convenience (86%), real-time communication (76%), and better offers (64%) as top motivators for engaging via social media. Moreover, 58% appreciated personalized services, and 45% were influenced by aesthetics and influencers, particularly in visually-intensive domains like fashion, wellness, and food. These insights fulfill Objective 3, highlighting that consumer expectations have evolved toward immediacy, accessibility, and personalization, and businesses that mirror these digital behaviors are more likely to retain and attract customers.

Barriers to Digital Transition

Despite the widespread adoption of social media, Table 6 reveals persistent structural and operational challenges that hinder a fully inclusive digital transformation. The lack of digital skills, identified by 15 out of 20 interviewed business owners, emerged as the most pressing issue. This was followed by connectivity issues (12 mentions), especially in districts with underdeveloped digital infrastructure. Moreover, inability to create engaging content (8 mentions) and difficulty in managing customer queries online (10 mentions) show that even when platforms are adopted, businesses often lack the digital fluency to fully leverage them. Budget constraints for paid ads (9 mentions) further limit visibility, especially for micro-enterprises. These findings suggest a digital divide not just in access, but in capability, reinforcing the need for targeted skill-building programs, affordable marketing solutions, and support ecosystems to ensure equitable digital growth.



Correlation between Social Media Use and Business Outcomes

The data in Table 7 demonstrates statistically significant positive correlations between social media engagement and key business outcomes. The frequency of posting correlated with customer retention ($r = 0.68$), while engagement (likes/comments) correlated strongly with revenue growth ($r = 0.74$). Most notably, ad spend showed the strongest correlation ($r = 0.79$) with customer conversion rate, indicating that strategic investment in social media advertising can substantially improve performance metrics. These findings quantitatively validate that social media is not merely a communication tool but a performance enhancer, capable of influencing the bottom line for service sector businesses.

Synthesis and Implications

This study, through its mixed-method approach, presents a holistic picture of how social media became a survival mechanism during COVID-19 and evolved into a strategic growth tool post-pandemic. The multi-platform ecosystem—anchored by WhatsApp for communication, Instagram for branding, and Facebook/YouTube for education—reflected adaptive use based on service needs. However, the study also uncovers critical inequalities, especially among rural and semi-urban entrepreneurs, who struggle with infrastructure and digital capability gaps. Without addressing these, the benefits of digitalization may remain concentrated in urban pockets like Gurugram and Faridabad, leaving others behind. The findings support Castells' Network Society Theory, where information flow equals power, and Rogers' Diffusion of Innovations Theory, showing how early adopters gain resilience and growth.

5. Challenges Faced

Digital skill gaps among small business owners: Many micro and small entrepreneurs lack the technical know-how to manage social media accounts, create content, or run ads effectively.

Limited access to devices and internet in rural regions: Inconsistent internet connectivity, low smartphone penetration, and poor digital infrastructure in villages and semi-urban pockets hinder seamless adoption.

Overcrowding and competition on popular platforms: With a surge in businesses shifting online, platforms like Instagram and Facebook are saturated, making it harder for smaller players to gain visibility without paid promotions.

Low content creation capacity: Many businesses struggle with producing visually appealing and professional content (reels, videos, graphics) due to lack of equipment, software, or skills.

Difficulty in managing high-volume customer inquiries: Responding to queries across multiple platforms in real time can be overwhelming for small teams or solo entrepreneurs.

Budget constraints for digital advertising: Running paid campaigns regularly is financially burdensome, especially for home-run or informal businesses with low operating margins.

Lack of trust in digital payments and online orders: Some customers, especially in rural areas, remain skeptical of online transactions, affecting conversion despite digital outreach.

Limited understanding of algorithm dynamics: Many service providers are unaware of how platform algorithms affect post reach, engagement, and customer targeting, leading to inconsistent results.

Cyber security and data privacy concerns: Businesses fear customer data leakage, scams, or hacking incidents, especially when handling customer details via WhatsApp or third-party booking links.

Language and literacy barriers: Regional language limitations and low literacy levels among certain entrepreneurs pose obstacles in navigating English-dominant platforms and tools.

6. Recommendations

- Training programs for digital literacy among micro and small service providers.
- Government support for digital infrastructure expansion in rural Haryana.
- Development of regional language content and hyperlocal targeting strategies.



7. Conclusion

The findings of this study clearly demonstrate that the COVID-19 pandemic served as a powerful catalyst for digital transformation within Haryana's service sector, prompting a rapid and often unplanned shift from traditional face-to-face business models to digitally enabled service delivery mechanisms, particularly through social media platforms. What began as a response to crisis—utilizing platforms like WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube to stay connected with customers—has evolved into a strategic reconfiguration of how service businesses operate, communicate, and grow in a post-pandemic economy. The research revealed that WhatsApp became the backbone of functional communication, enabling businesses to manage orders, appointments, and customer support efficiently, while Instagram emerged as a powerful tool for visual marketing, brand engagement, and community building, particularly in visually intensive sectors like retail, beauty, and hospitality. Education and healthcare sectors made substantial use of Facebook and YouTube for knowledge dissemination and consultations, signaling the growing platform-specific specialization in the digital economy. Significantly, the shift to social media was not just technological but also behavioral and cultural. The data points to a clear transformation in consumer expectations, with preferences moving toward immediacy, convenience, and personalization. Consumers not only engaged more through online messaging and DMs but also showed increased comfort with social media shopping and digital interactions—suggesting a permanent change in the service-consumer relationship. For businesses, especially small and micro-enterprises, this necessitated a relearning of marketing and communication strategies, increasingly centered on content creation, influencer collaboration, and feedback management. However, this transformation has not been without challenges. The digital divide—manifested in poor internet connectivity, lack of digital literacy, and economic limitations—continues to marginalize service providers in rural and semi-urban areas. Moreover, algorithmic complexity, content fatigue, and digital competition make it difficult for smaller players to consistently succeed online. These challenges underscore the need for policy-level intervention, capacity building, and infrastructure development to democratize access and ensure inclusive digital growth.

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