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INDIA'S AVANT-GARDE D2C SMALL BUSINESS ADVERTISING ECONOMY: A CASE-INFORMED QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Abstract: This paper explores how digital media, new platforms and emerging technologies change advertising in India's Direct to Consumer (D2C) market. The research uses a qualitative case-based approach, focusing on an in-depth interview with Aunip Jain, the founder of Curious Apes, a consulting firm based in Jaipur, which works with D2C brands in paid media, creative production, website optimization and artificial intelligence marketing workflows. In particular, India's context is relevant, because digital access has expanded rapidly: at the beginning of 2025, India had 806 billion internet users and 491 billion social media user identities (Kemp, 2025), while TRAI reported more than 1.028 billion internet subscribers by the quarter ending December 2025 (TRAI, 2026). Analysis shows that D2C advertising is moving from broad-ranging advertising to a system defined by native targeting of platforms, continuous creative tests, data-driven personalization and AI-assisted production. The interview also revealed a significant internal differentiation between product categories, with AI proven to be more effective in static-heavy advertising sectors than in aesthetically dependent sectors such as clothing. At the same time, the interview exposes tensions about the fatigue of influencers, privacy, skill gaps, and the limits of complete automation. The paper claims that the future of D2C advertising in India lies in the integration of human judgment, emotional intelligence, platform functionality and AI-enabled operating speed.

Index Terms - D2C Advertising, Digital Media, Artificial Intelligence, Social Commerce, Personalization, Performance Marketing

I. INTRODUCTION

The evolution of advertising in India has transcended the simple shift from offline to online platforms. It now involves a comprehensive overhaul of how brands recognize their target audiences, create engaging content, capture attention, enhance conversion rates, and maintain relationships after purchases. This transformation is especially evident in the D2C sector, where brands prefer direct digital interactions over traditional middlemen. India serves as a crucial backdrop for this change. According to DataReportal, there were 806 million internet users and 491 million social media identities in India at the beginning of 2025 (Kemp, 2025), with TRAI later reporting 1,028.61 million internet subscribers by December 2025 (TRAI, 2026), highlighting the vast reach and spread of digital connectivity.

The D2C market is expanding, with Mr. Mrigank Gutgutia from Redseer predicting that the Indian D2C sector could achieve a GMV of US\$30–35 billion and up to 3 billion shipments by 2027 (Gutgutia, 2023). CBRE has noted that Indian D2C brands are increasingly adopting omnichannel strategies to provide personalized experiences and expand into offline retail (CBRE, 2025). Consequently, advertising for D2C brands has evolved beyond just building awareness. It now plays a central role in customer acquisition, personalization, website conversion, retention, and fostering brand trust.

This paper examines these changes through a qualitative case study of Aunip Jain, the founder of Curious Apes, whose expertise spans Meta and Google advertising, website optimization, creative strategy, data analysis, and design development for D2C brands. The interview reveals that his insights are rooted in experience across analytics, product management, machine learning, and D2C consulting. The aim of this paper is not to draw statistical generalizations from a single respondent but to use a detailed interview to shed light on broader structural shifts in Indian D2C advertising.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Researchers in digital marketing have consistently maintained that digital technologies reshape the entire customer journey rather than merely introducing new media channels. Kannan & Hongshuang describe digital marketing as a flexible, technology-driven process for creating value and emphasize how digital technologies alter consumer behavior, particularly by reducing information asymmetry and through the influence of social media and user-generated content (UGC). They also stress the strategic management of brands and customers in the digital realm, highlighting the significance of new channels and devices, and identify future research areas such as the effects of emerging technologies (mobile, AI, IoT) on customer journeys and marketing analytics, which are vital for D2C businesses adopting innovative advertising strategies (Kannan & Hongshuang, 2017). Meanwhile, Dwivedi and colleagues assert that digital and social media marketing have fundamentally changed consumer behavior and business operations, providing substantial opportunities for organizations, especially small businesses, through reduced costs, enhanced brand awareness, and increased sales (Dwivedi, et al., 2021).

In the realm of retail and commerce research, D2C has emerged as a distinct strategic form. Eda Kalayci's work reveals that the retail landscape has experienced a significant expansion of channel formats, leading brands to widely adopt omnichannel distribution strategies that include online, mobile, and offline channels. D2C operations give brands complete control over pricing and marketing, enable product differentiation, and facilitate the testing of innovations and exclusive assortments. This dynamic interaction highlights the necessity for brands, particularly small businesses, to strategically manage their presence across channels, using D2C to foster deeper customer relationships and data-driven insights while navigating the reach of multi-brand platforms (Kalayci, Becker, & Barrot, 2024). Johanna Knapp suggests a hybrid approach, which involves integrating dealers into DTC strategies throughout the entire customer journey from initial awareness to purchasing, usage, and retention to alleviate tension within established dealer networks. This collaborative model aids in building stronger customer relationships and reducing channel conflict (Knapp, Gebauer, & Wortmann, 2025).

The social aspect of digital advertising holds significant importance. Research by Mousa Al-kfairy introduces an e-commerce trust model that highlights the importance of vulnerability and reliance on suitable behaviors, which is particularly pertinent given the peer-generated content and social interactions common on today's online platforms (Al-kfairy, Shuhaiber, Al-khatib, Alrabae, & Khaddaj, 2024). Concurrently, studies on influencers reveal that their credibility influences purchase intentions, loyalty, and recommendation behavior, even as brands increasingly prioritize creator relevance and content quality over follower counts (WPP, 2025).

Generative AI is transforming customer engagement, content creation, marketing research, and service processes. Tools like ChatGPT, Google Gemini, Claude & Perplexity offer accessible ways to create value by generating social media posts, checking code, or crafting sales scripts, even without high-quality proprietary data (Guha, Grewal, & Atlas, 2023). Dhruv Grewal emphasizes that Gen AI provides significant productivity and cost benefits, especially for tasks like social media content creation, but stresses the importance of recognizing its limitations and the need for human input to ensure accuracy and appropriateness (Grewal, Satornino, Davenport, & Guha, 2025). Paola Cillo's study indicates that this technology is vital for marketing, with projections suggesting it could boost marketing productivity by up to 15% of total expenditure. The inherent randomness in GenAI's content generation, influenced by prompts and learned distributions, enables diverse and unique outputs, making it a potent tool for creativity (Cillo & Rubera, 2025). However, this increase in personalization brings about privacy-related concerns. Ana Isabel Canhoto discusses the "personalisation-privacy paradox," highlighting the tension between the advantages consumers gain from personalization and their resistance if data collection is perceived as overly intrusive. This paradox requires understanding the benefits users gain from interacting with personalized media and their concerns about information privacy (Canhoto, Keegan, & Ryzhikh, 2024).

Collectively, this literature suggests that D2C advertising now functions at the crossroads of digital infrastructure, platform logic, data analytics, creative experimentation, and trust management. An interview with Aunip Jain provides a practical perspective on how these elements are being managed in Indian practice.

III. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study works with four objectives.

1. It seeks to understand how digital media and new-age platforms have altered advertising practice in India's D2C sector.
2. It examines how AI and analytics are being integrated into creative production, targeting, and website optimization.
3. It explores changes in consumer behavior, especially around trust, interactivity, and decision-making.
4. It identifies the emerging skill sets and barriers associated with technological adoption in D2C advertising.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative exploratory approach to investigate the impact of digital media, modern platforms, and technology on advertising practices for direct-to-consumer (D2C) businesses in India. A qualitative method was deemed suitable as the study's aim was not to statistically quantify frequency or scale, but rather to gain insights into professional experiences, interpretations, and meaning-making from the viewpoint of a practitioner actively engaged in the field. Given that the broader research aims to explore how new technologies are altering advertising strategies, creative production, audience targeting, and consumer engagement, conducting an in-depth interview was considered an effective way to capture these processes comprehensively.



Figure 1: Aunip Jain from Curious Apes, Jaipur (<https://curiousapes.in/>)

The study focuses on a purposive sample consisting of a single key respondent: Mr. Aunip Jain, the founder and CEO of Curious Apes, a consulting firm based in Jaipur that collaborates with D2C brands. Mr. Jain was chosen due to his extensive professional experience across various relevant areas, including market and data analytics, product management, performance marketing, website optimization, creative strategy, and the application of artificial intelligence in advertising workflows. His involvement with emerging D2C brands, particularly in sectors like apparel, skincare, and jewelry, makes him a fitting respondent for understanding how digital transformation is being experienced by smaller, growth-focused businesses rather than large, established brands.

Primary data was gathered through a semi-structured in-depth interview. The respondent, Aunip Jain, is a 27-year-old entrepreneur from Jaipur with a background in Mathematics Honours from the University of Delhi and an MBA in International Business from Shri Ram College of Commerce. Prior to founding Curious Apes, he worked at Gartner in market and data analytics and at IndiaMART as a product manager, concentrating on upsell and churn. His previous work involved developing a machine-learning model using 26 parameters to predict high-probability upsell users among 60,000 monthly subscribers. The interview was analyzed thematically, revealing central themes such as the democratization of advertising, analytics-driven creative strategization, platform-led targeting, personalization, AI-assisted creative production, hook-based optimization, evolving consumer behavior, emerging skill requirements, and obstacles to technological adoption.

V. FINDINGS & DISCUSSIONS

5.1 Democratization of D2C advertising

One of the most prominent themes in the interview is the democratization of advertising opportunities. Jain draws a clear distinction between the past dominance of radio and television and today's digital environment, asserting that the widespread use of the internet and smartphones has allowed smaller brands to advertise without needing the large budgets associated with traditional media. He explains, "due to democratization of technology and the proliferation of internet and smartphones to every user in India, a brand that is from a tier 2 city and does not have that huge media spend can start running ads, talk about their product on social media, make their own website, land traffic on their website and then sell through that."

This insight aligns with broader digital marketing research, which suggests that digital transformation increases the number and strategic significance of brand touchpoints (Kannan & Hongshuang, 2017). In the Indian context, it also matches the scale of internet and social media usage and the anticipated growth of the D2C economy (Kemp, 2025).

5.2 Platform strategy and performance media

Jain's narrative highlights a performance-driven advertising landscape. He mentions that Curious Apes currently prioritizes "Meta and Google," not OTT, for the brands it handles. This indicates that for D2C companies, the practical rationale for media selection is not just visibility but also measurable acquisition and conversion. His focus on websites, retargeting, and user journeys aligns with the literature on D2C webstores, which indicates that brand-owned channels become especially valuable when brands require information-rich, personalized, and controlled customer experiences (Knapp, Gebauer, & Wortmann, 2025) (Kalayci, Becker, & Barrot, 2024).

His discussion of Meta's evolving ad-delivery infrastructure is also significant. He mentions Andromeda as a key development in the platform's machine-learning capabilities. Meta describes Andromeda as a personalized ads retrieval engine that uses NVIDIA Grace Hopper Superchips to enhance personalization and advertiser performance (Meta, 2024). Analytically, Jain's observation reflects a broader transition from manual targeting to machine-driven relevance systems.

5.3 Data, user journeys, and personalization

The most important conceptual discovery of the interview is the centrality of personalization. Jain directly stated: “the most important aspect that data is solving is personalization and all the technology is solving is personalization.” This is not an incidental observation, but it seems to organize his whole understanding of D2C advertising.

He explained personalized communication at multiple levels: audience targeting, retargeting, customized messaging, and website intervention. Particularly useful example from the interview is Valentine’s Day messages for a jewellery brand. Instead of sending uniform messages to all previous customers, they analyzed the names, previous purchases and inferred the relevance of gifts for sending personalized communications. This reflects the fact that current marketing and advertising literature recognizes that AI can facilitate personalized customer interaction and campaign implementation (Grewal, Satornino, Davenport, & Guha, 2025).

At the same time, Jain’s comments invite critical scrutiny. He describes a relatively high level of comfort with data capture, noting that consumers may already know their data is stored and “do not have any problem with that.” The personalization-privacy paradox literature suggests that consumers often value relevance while remaining uneasy about surveillance, data retention, and opaque targeting. This tension is important for future Indian D2C research (Canhoto, Keegan, & Ryzhikh, 2024).

5.4 AI-assisted creativity and category variation

A major contribution of the interview is its nuanced account of where AI works well and where it does not. Jain argues that “almost every designer in India 80 to 90 percent of them is using some sort of AI tools,” especially for copywriting and conceptualization using “chat-gpt or gemini” and for graphics using “nano banana” and “sora.” This perspective is in line with previous research demonstrating the growing importance of generative AI in the creation of text, images, and videos in advertising (Grewal, Satornino, Davenport, & Guha, 2025) (Cillo & Rubera, 2025).

Jain does not, however, characterize AI as consistently effective. Rather, he makes a category-specific difference. According to him, “for a skincare brand, it is very easy to create statics using any AI software because it just has product image and the copywriting,” whereas “for an apparel brand, it is hard to create because people want to know how the product would look on them.” He summarizes the split clearly: “for the brands which are static heavy, we are using a lot of AI there. For the brands that are video heavy, then we are still using the human-generated content there.”

This is a powerful empirical realization. It implies that the use of AI in advertising depends on both product ontology and technical accessibility. While categories like fit, drape, embodiment, or realism continue to rely more heavily on human shoots, user-generated content, and model-led content, categories where the product may be represented through still photos, packshots, and benefit-led content may be easier to automate.

5.5 Changing consumer trust: influencers, founders, and authenticity

The interview presents a particularly fascinating tension regarding trust. According to industry research, influencer marketing continues to be a significant strategic tool in India, with projections for the sector at ₹3,600 crore in 2024. The same report highlights a movement towards the importance of creator authenticity and the quality of content (WPP, 2025). Nevertheless, Jain takes a more cautious stance. He claims that consumers are increasingly “just tend to stop responding to the influencers ads” as they become more aware that these endorsements are paid and not based on authentic product usage.

Simultaneously, he does not completely dismiss social proof. Instead, he shifts the basis of trust from influencers to the actual founders and brand representatives. As he points out, “Founders are talking about their product because it creates trust.” This is analytically significant. It indicates that what is diminishing, according to him, is not the act of mediated persuasion but rather a specific type of perceived inauthenticity. This corresponds with wider research that demonstrates trust and the credibility of the source continue to be crucial to online buying behavior (Handoyo, 2024) (Alcántara-Pilar, Rodríguez-López, Kalinić, & Liébana-Cabanillas, 2024).

5.6 Analytics-led optimization: hooks, websites, and conversion

Jain goes back to measurement and iteration time and time again. According to him, the “starting three seconds of an ad” serve as the hook, and the hook rate is monitored and examined to find trends that should be replicated. Additionally, he explains how “winning creatives” and “winning hooks” can be deduced from Meta ad data using creative analytics tools like MagicBrief and Motion. The shift in modern advertising toward AI and data-assisted experimentation, where campaign efficacy rely on quick learning loops rather than single creative wagers, is largely congruent with this functional logic.

Optimization of websites becomes equally important. Identifying gaps, assessing the effects of improvements, and facilitating customisation are the three ways that Jain defines data utilization. He provides a real-world example from a pants company, where website modifications that enhanced conversion performance were the result of analysis and competitive examination. Additionally, he points out that as the team expanded the sizes that were offered, add-to-cart rates and conversion rose since previously underserved consumers stopped bouncing. These illustrations show that merchandising, UX, assortment strategy, and site design are all essential to the success of D2C advertising.

5.7 Emerging skills and organizational change

Future talents are one of the interview's strongest points. Jain places a strong emphasis on problem-solving, pattern detection, emotional intelligence, and data interpretation. He contends that workers need to be able to “connect the dots and read between the lines,” and he explicitly rejects narrow specialization, saying, “a person should be a generalist not be a specialist according to me.”

This result is in line with more general talks about digital capacity gaps in advertising, where businesses are in more need of hybrid professionals who can integrate technological, strategic, creative, and analytical knowledge (Grewal, Saturnino, Davenport, & Guha, 2025) (Herhausen, Miočević, Morgan, & Kleijnen, 2020). Jain's comments also support a major idea of this essay: although technology alters the foundation of creative work, human judgment remains valuable. Rather, it elevates the value of interpretative intelligence.

5.8 Barriers to adoption in India

Jain highlights that the integration of modern media technologies in D2C advertising faces challenges due to not only a perceived lack of significant impact but also an overwhelming array of choices, skepticism towards AI-generated content, and resistance within organizations to adopt new systems. He notes, “that for some people technology is not able to create such an impact that they would switch to that technology,” and “people are used to doing things in an older fashion.” His insights reveal that even with numerous tools at their disposal, businesses often find it difficult to determine which platforms or technologies align with their goals. Additionally, consumer reluctance towards AI-driven creatives and synthetic videos poses another obstacle, as trust is crucial in D2C communication. Jain also points out an internal reluctance to change, where teams prefer sticking to familiar practices rather than trying out new digital solutions. This is particularly relevant for D2C brands and Indian agencies, as successful technology adoption relies not only on access and innovation but also on trust, clarity, and a readiness to embrace change.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates how digital media and cutting-edge technology are transforming D2C advertising in India by changing the core logic of advertising practice in addition to bringing new platforms. Aunip Jain discusses in the interview a world where advertising is ongoing, data-driven, tailored, and closely linked to product strategy, website activity, and AI-enabled creative workflows. His story demonstrates the transition from static campaign planning to continuous experimentation, from generic message to customized communication, and from manual targeting to machine-assisted relevance.

Simultaneously, the analysis challenges oversimplified accounts of complete automation. The future of advertising is not solely technological, according to Jain's category-specific differentiation between static-heavy and video-heavy firms, his doubts about influencer authenticity, and his focus on emotional intelligence and generalist thinking. It is socio-technical instead. Those who are able to integrate platform literacy, data interpretation, creative sensibility, and human understanding will be the most successful D2C practitioners.

This paper's scope is inherently constrained because it is a qualitative case study. Future studies could compare consumers, designers, agency executives, and several D2C founders in areas including electronics, clothing, beauty, and wellness. Nevertheless, the interview provides a useful practice-based description of the restructuring of advertising in India's direct-to-consumer market. It implies that the next stage of advertising research should concentrate more on how specific technologies, categories, and organizational cultures influence the link between creativity, conversion, and trust rather than on whether digital media is important.

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