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# A Study on Shoes Brands Trust in D2C(Direct to Customer) Branding

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**ABSTRACT:** *The rapid proliferation of Direct-to-Customer (D2C) business models in the Indian footwear industry has fundamentally altered the dynamics of brand-consumer relationships. As shoe brands increasingly bypass traditional retail intermediaries to sell directly through owned digital platforms, brand trust has emerged as a decisive determinant of purchase intention, customer loyalty, and long-term competitive advantage. Unlike established multi-brand retail environments where consumers can physically inspect products and rely on retailer credibility, D2C channels demand that consumers place significantly greater trust in the brand itself — its authenticity, product quality, after-sales service, and digital experience. This research paper investigates the nature, dimensions, and antecedents of brand trust in the context of D2C shoe brands in India, with particular focus on the urban consumer segment in Maharashtra. The study employs a mixed-methods research design, combining a structured questionnaire survey of 210 respondents with qualitative insights from focused group discussions and in-depth interviews with brand managers and consumers. Findings reveal that perceived product quality, website usability, transparent communication, social proof mechanisms (including influencer endorsements and user-generated reviews), and reliable delivery experience are the most significant drivers of D2C brand trust. The research further identifies that brand trust mediates the relationship between D2C marketing practices and consumer loyalty, and that trust-building in the D2C context requires strategies that differ meaningfully from those effective in traditional retail channels. The paper concludes with a proposed D2C Brand Trust Framework for shoe brands and practical recommendations for brand managers seeking to build and sustain consumer trust in digital-first commerce environments.*

**Keywords:** *D2C Branding, Brand Trust, Shoe Brands, Direct-to-Customer, Consumer Loyalty, E-Commerce, Digital Marketing, Footwear Industry, Brand Authenticity, Customer Experience*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The global footwear industry is undergoing one of the most significant structural transformations in its history, driven by the twin forces of digitalization and changing consumer behaviour. In India, this transformation has manifested most visibly in the explosive growth of Direct-to-Customer (D2C) shoe brands — enterprises that design, manufacture, and sell footwear directly to consumers through their own digital platforms, bypassing traditional wholesale and retail intermediaries. Brands such as Bata's online vertical, Neeman's, Flatheads, Walkaroo, and a host of emerging Indian footwear startups have demonstrated that the D2C model can support rapid brand building, margin optimization, and deep customer engagement when executed effectively.

India's footwear market, valued at approximately USD 20 billion and growing at a CAGR of over 11%, represents one of the world's largest and most dynamic footwear economies. The e-commerce segment within this market has grown disproportionately faster, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic's structural shift toward online shopping, increasing smartphone penetration, and the widespread availability of digital payment infrastructure. Within this e-commerce ecosystem, the D2C segment has attracted particular attention from investors, entrepreneurs, and established brands, as it offers the promise of higher margins, direct consumer data ownership, and the ability to build authentic, purpose-driven brand identities without the constraints of third-party retail relationships.

However, the D2C model also presents distinctive challenges, chief among them the imperative to establish consumer trust in the absence of physical touchpoints, established retailer endorsement, or the accumulated familiarity that traditional brands have built through decades of high-street presence. When a consumer purchases shoes from a well-known multi-brand retailer, the retailer's reputation functions as a trust proxy, reducing perceived risk.

In the D2C context, this intermediary trust buffer is absent: the consumer must trust the brand directly — its digital interface, its product quality claims, its size charts, its return policies, and its ability to deliver a satisfactory post-purchase experience. Building this direct, unmediated brand trust is therefore not merely a marketing objective for D2C shoe companies; it is an existential prerequisite for customer acquisition and retention.

Despite the strategic centrality of brand trust in D2C commerce, the academic literature has not kept pace with the practical realities of this rapidly evolving space. Most existing research on brand trust in the footwear industry addresses traditional retail or general e-commerce contexts and does not adequately account for the distinctive characteristics of the D2C model. This research paper addresses this gap by systematically investigating the dimensions, antecedents, and consequences of brand trust in the D2C shoe brand context, with specific reference to the Indian consumer market.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Conceptualizing Brand Trust

Brand trust has been extensively studied in the marketing and consumer behaviour literature. Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) defined brand trust as the willingness of the average consumer to rely on the ability of the brand to perform its stated function. This definition highlights two essential components of trust: reliability (the expectation that the brand will deliver on its functional promises) and benevolence (the belief that the brand acts in the consumer's interest, not merely its own). Morgan and Hunt (1994), in their landmark study on relationship marketing, positioned trust as a central construct in long-term buyer-seller relationships, arguing that trust reduces transaction costs, increases commitment, and enables cooperative behaviour between parties.

Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Aleman (2005) extended this conceptualization by proposing a two-dimensional model of brand trust comprising brand reliability (the technical or competence-based expectation that the brand delivers on its promises) and brand intentions (the attribution of goodwill and benevolence to the brand in case of problems). Their research demonstrated that both dimensions independently contribute to consumer loyalty and willingness to pay price premiums, with brand intentions playing a particularly significant role in high-involvement categories — a finding directly relevant to footwear, where fit, comfort, and durability are high-stakes purchase considerations.

### B. Brand Trust in Digital and E-Commerce Contexts

The digital commerce literature has developed a parallel stream of research on online trust, which shares conceptual foundations with brand trust but adds platform-specific dimensions. Gefen, Karahanna, and Straub (2003) identified that online trust encompasses institution-based trust (trust in the technological and legal infrastructure of e-commerce), calculative-based trust (rational assessment of the platform's trustworthiness based on available information), and knowledge-based trust (familiarity developed through repeated positive interactions). McKnight, Choudhury, and Kacmar (2002) demonstrated that perceived website quality, including usability, information quality, and security, is a significant antecedent of online consumer trust.

In the fashion and footwear e-commerce context specifically, Ha and Lennon (2010) found that perceived online brand experience — encompassing visual presentation, ease of navigation, product information quality, and responsiveness — significantly influences trust and purchase intention. Bilgihan (2016) identified that millennial consumers in online fashion retail are particularly sensitive to social proof mechanisms, including peer reviews and social media endorsements, as substitutes for physical product inspection and expert retailer guidance.

### C. D2C Brand Building and Trust Dynamics

The D2C business model literature, while relatively recent, has begun to address the distinctive trust-building challenges that D2C brands face. Wormald and Pappalardo (2020) argued that D2C brands must invest heavily in content marketing, community building, and user-generated content to substitute for the social proof and physical credibility that traditional retail channels provide. They found that D2C brands which cultivated authentic consumer communities demonstrated significantly higher trust scores and repeat purchase rates than those that relied primarily on performance advertising.

Kapferer (2012), in his discussion of brand identity and authenticity, noted that direct-to-consumer engagement offers brands an unprecedented opportunity to communicate their founding story, values, and craftsmanship philosophy in ways that are impossible in multi-brand retail environments. This authenticity communication, he argued, is a powerful differentiator and trust builder, particularly among younger consumers who are increasingly skeptical of corporate marketing communications but responsive to brand narratives that demonstrate genuine values alignment.

In the Indian D2C context, Kapoor and Bhardwaj (2021) studied consumer perceptions of emerging Indian D2C brands and found that delivery reliability, hassle-free return policies, and transparent communication of product specifications were the most frequently cited trust drivers among Indian online shoppers. Their study also highlighted that negative experiences at any stage of the post-purchase journey — including delays, packaging damage, or difficult return processes — disproportionately erode trust compared to equivalent positive experiences, a finding with direct implications for D2C shoe brands where size-fit concerns make returns a frequent occurrence.

#### *D. Footwear-Specific Trust Considerations*

Footwear presents unique trust challenges in digital commerce because the fit, comfort, and material quality of shoes are inherently tactile qualities that cannot be fully conveyed through digital product presentation. Korgaonkar and Wolin (1999) identified that product categories characterized by high sensory evaluation requirements (touch, feel, fit) face elevated trust barriers in online channels. D2C shoe brands must therefore develop compensatory trust mechanisms — detailed size guides, augmented reality try-on features, generous return windows, and detailed material descriptions — to overcome consumers' inherent hesitation about purchasing footwear without physical trial.

### **III. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

#### *A. Primary Objectives*

- 1) To identify and evaluate the key dimensions of brand trust that consumers associate with D2C shoe brands in the Indian market.
- 2) To examine the antecedents of brand trust in D2C shoe branding, including product quality perception, digital experience quality, social proof, price transparency, and after-sales service.
- 3) To assess the relationship between brand trust and consumer outcomes including purchase intention, repeat purchase behaviour, brand advocacy, and willingness to pay price premiums.
- 4) To identify the primary barriers and risk factors that erode consumer trust in D2C shoe brand contexts.

#### *B. Secondary Objectives*

- 1) To propose a D2C Brand Trust Framework specific to the footwear category, integrating findings from the primary research with insights from the extant literature.
- 2) To provide actionable recommendations for D2C shoe brand managers seeking to design and implement effective trust-building strategies in digital-first commerce environments.
- 3) To contribute empirical evidence from the Maharashtra urban consumer market to the emerging literature on D2C brand trust in developing economies.

### **IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

#### *A. Research Design*

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, integrating quantitative survey data with qualitative insights from focused group discussions and in-depth interviews. The quantitative component enables statistical testing of hypothesized relationships between trust antecedents and consumer outcomes, while the qualitative component provides contextual depth and nuance that survey instruments cannot fully capture. This triangulated approach is particularly appropriate for a research domain — D2C brand trust — where consumer perceptions and motivations are complex, multi-dimensional, and context-dependent.

#### *B. Study Area and Sample*

The study was conducted among urban consumers in Maharashtra, with primary data collection concentrated in Chh. Sambhaji Nagar, Pune, and Nashik — cities representing a cross-section of Maharashtra's urban consumer market in terms of income levels, digital literacy, and exposure to D2C footwear brands. A purposive sampling approach was used to recruit respondents who had purchased footwear from a D2C brand's own website or app at least once in the preceding twelve months, ensuring that all respondents had direct experience of the D2C purchase journey.

A total of 210 valid survey responses were collected, with the following demographic profile: 54% male, 46% female; age distribution predominantly in the 18-35 bracket (73%); income distribution spanning entry-level salaried (below INR 5 lakh annual, 28%), mid-level salaried (INR 5-15 lakh, 49%), and upper-income (above INR 15 lakh, 23%) segments.

In addition, three focused group discussions (8-10 participants each) and 18 in-depth interviews with consumers and D2C brand marketing managers were conducted to supplement the survey data.

**C. Data Collection Instruments**

The primary quantitative instrument was a structured questionnaire comprising five sections: respondent demographics and D2C purchase experience; perceived antecedents of brand trust (product quality, digital experience, social proof, price transparency, after-sales service); overall brand trust level; consumer outcome variables (purchase intention, repurchase, advocacy, price premium willingness); and open-ended questions capturing trust-eroding experiences. All attitudinal items used a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). Reliability analysis confirmed satisfactory internal consistency for all scale items (Cronbach's Alpha > 0.78 for all constructs).

**D. Data Analysis**

Quantitative data was analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation analysis, and multiple regression to examine the predictive relationships between trust antecedents and consumer outcomes. Chi-square tests were used to identify significant associations between demographic variables and trust perceptions. Qualitative data from group discussions and interviews was coded thematically using an inductive approach, with emerging themes cross-referenced against the quantitative findings to identify convergences and divergences.

**V. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS**

**A. Consumer Awareness and Engagement with D2C Shoe Brands**

Survey findings indicate a high level of awareness and engagement with D2C shoe brands among the study sample, consistent with the rapid growth of this segment in the Indian market. The following table presents respondent engagement profiles across major D2C shoe brand categories:

D2C Shoe Brand / Category	% Aware	% Purchased	Avg. Trust Score (1-5)
Sports & Athletic D2C Brands	89%	61%	3.8
Casual / Lifestyle Footwear D2C	84%	58%	3.7
Sustainable / Eco Footwear D2C	67%	34%	4.1
Formal Footwear D2C	72%	41%	3.5
Premium / Luxury Footwear D2C	55%	22%	3.9

Notably, sustainable and eco-focused D2C shoe brands received the highest average trust scores (4.1/5), suggesting that purpose-driven brand narratives and environmental commitments function as powerful trust signals, particularly among younger, urban consumers. This finding aligns with the broader literature on purpose-driven branding and consumers' increasing preference for brands whose values align with their own.

**B. Antecedents of Brand Trust in D2C Shoe Brands**

Regression analysis identified five primary antecedents as significant predictors of overall brand trust in D2C shoe brands, ranked below by their standardized regression coefficient (beta):

Trust Antecedent	Beta Coefficient	Significance	Mean Score (1-5)
Perceived Product	0.52	p < 0.001	3.6

Quality			
After-Sales Service & Returns	0.41	$p < 0.001$	3.2
Website / App Usability	0.38	$p < 0.001$	3.7
Social Proof (Reviews & Influencers)	0.34	$p < 0.01$	3.5
Price Transparency	0.29	$p < 0.01$	3.4
Brand Authenticity Communication	0.27	$p < 0.05$	3.3
Delivery Reliability	0.25	$p < 0.05$	3.6

Perceived product quality emerged as the strongest predictor of brand trust ( $\beta = 0.52$ ), reinforcing the fundamental importance of core product delivery in building consumer confidence. This is particularly significant in the footwear category, where material quality, comfort, and durability are primary purchase criteria that consumers have historically verified through physical product examination. In the D2C context, the inability to touch and try products before purchase means that quality perception must be constructed through digital means — detailed material descriptions, high-resolution imagery from multiple angles, consumer review photographs, and certification claims.

After-sales service and the ease of returns ranked second ( $\beta = 0.41$ ), reflecting the outsized importance of post-purchase experience in D2C shoe purchasing. Qualitative interview data reinforced this finding: multiple respondents indicated that their trust in D2C shoe brands was crystallized — either positively or negatively — during their first return or exchange experience. One respondent articulated this clearly: 'I buy the product on hope, but I trust the brand based on what happens when something goes wrong.' This insight has direct implications for D2C brand managers, suggesting that investment in seamless returns infrastructure and responsive customer service is not merely a cost of doing business but a central trust-building investment.

### C. Consumer Perceptions of Trust Dimensions

Respondents were asked to rate their perceptions of D2C shoe brands on five core trust dimensions. The mean scores below reflect aggregate perceptions across all D2C shoe brands purchased by respondents:

Trust Dimension	Mean Score (1-5)	Standard Deviation
Product Quality Reliability	3.58	0.87
Brand Benevolence / Genuine Care	3.21	0.94
Transparency of Communication	3.34	0.91
Digital Security & Data Privacy	3.12	1.02
Consistency of Brand Promise Delivery	3.44	0.89
Overall Brand Trust Score	3.34	0.88

The data reveals that while product quality reliability receives the highest trust score, perceived brand benevolence and digital security receive notably lower ratings. These gaps indicate that D2C shoe brands are achieving functional trust (confidence in product delivery) more effectively than relational trust (confidence in the brand's genuine consumer-centric intent) and institutional trust (confidence in the digital platform's safety and privacy practices). These three dimensions of trust — functional, relational, and institutional — must all be addressed in a comprehensive D2C trust-building strategy.

*D. Trust and Consumer Outcomes*

Correlation analysis confirms strong, statistically significant relationships between brand trust and all measured consumer outcome variables:

Consumer Outcome Variable	Correlation with Trust (r)	Significance
Repurchase Intention	0.71	p < 0.001
Brand Advocacy / Word of Mouth	0.68	p < 0.001
Willingness to Pay Price Premium	0.59	p < 0.001
Resistance to Competitor Switching	0.62	p < 0.001
Positive Review Generation	0.65	p < 0.001

The strong correlation between brand trust and repurchase intention ( $r = 0.71$ ) confirms that trust is not merely a nice-to-have brand attribute in D2C shoe commerce — it is a direct driver of customer lifetime value. Equally significant is the correlation with brand advocacy ( $r = 0.68$ ), which underscores the virtuous cycle between trust and word-of-mouth marketing: trusted D2C brands benefit from organic consumer endorsement that both reduces customer acquisition costs and further reinforces the social proof signals that new consumers rely on when evaluating unfamiliar D2C brands.

*E. Trust Erosion Factors*

Thematic analysis of qualitative data identified the following as the most frequently cited trust-eroding experiences in D2C shoe brand interactions:

- Size mismatch between advertised and delivered product, with difficult or delayed resolution.
- Misleading product photography that misrepresented colour, texture, or material quality.
- Delayed delivery without proactive communication or updates.
- Unresponsive or unhelpful customer service during return and exchange processes.
- Discovery of hidden charges (shipping, handling, or return fees) not disclosed at the point of purchase.
- Suspicion or evidence of fake or incentivized positive reviews on the brand's own platform.
- Poor post-purchase email communication — either absent or overly promotional.

A particularly notable finding from the qualitative data is the disproportionate impact of negative experiences on trust. Multiple respondents used terms such as 'betrayal' and 'disappointment' to describe trust-eroding incidents, whereas satisfactory experiences were described in more neutral terms. This asymmetry — consistent with prospect theory's loss aversion principle — suggests that D2C shoe brands must adopt a loss-prevention orientation in trust management, prioritizing the elimination of trust-destroying failures over the incremental enhancement of trust-building features.

**VI. BARRIERS TO BRAND TRUST IN D2C SHOE BRANDING**

*A. Absence of Physical Trial Experience*

The most fundamental trust barrier in D2C shoe commerce is the impossibility of physical product trial before purchase. Shoes are among the most body-specific consumer products: fit, arch support, width, and toe-box dimensions vary significantly across brands and even across product lines within the same brand. Consumers who have experienced size mismatches or comfort disappointments in previous D2C shoe purchases carry residual skepticism into subsequent purchase decisions, creating a structural trust deficit that D2C brands must continuously work to overcome through digital compensatory mechanisms.

*B. Proliferation of Inauthentic Reviews*

Consumer reliance on peer reviews as a trust proxy has been well-documented in the e-commerce literature. However, the proliferation of fake, incentivized, or algorithmically manipulated reviews on D2C platforms has created a credibility crisis that undermines one of the primary trust-building tools available to D2C shoe brands.

Survey data indicates that 61% of respondents express moderate to significant skepticism about the authenticity of reviews on brand-owned websites, and 44% report that review skepticism has deterred them from purchasing from an otherwise appealing D2C brand. This finding highlights the importance of third-party review platforms, video reviews, and transparent review policies as credibility mechanisms.

### C. *Digital Security Concerns*

Concerns about payment security and personal data privacy constitute a significant trust barrier, particularly among first-time D2C purchasers and older consumer segments. India's rapidly expanding digital payment infrastructure has increased consumer confidence in established payment platforms, but suspicion of lesser-known D2C brand payment gateways and data handling practices remains a barrier, particularly for premium-priced footwear purchases where transaction values are higher and perceived financial risk is correspondingly elevated.

### D. *Return and Refund Process Complexity*

The complexity and perceived fairness of return and refund processes emerged consistently across qualitative interviews as a trust barrier. Respondents described experiences of return requests being rejected on narrow technicalities, refunds being delayed beyond stated timelines, and the process of returning shoes — including repackaging, scheduling pickup, and tracking refund status — being burdensome and opaque. In a product category where returns are structurally common due to fit uncertainty, a cumbersome returns process directly undermines the willingness of consumers to take the purchase risk that D2C shoe buying requires.

### E. *Influencer Credibility Concerns*

Social media influencer endorsements have become a central marketing tool for D2C shoe brands, particularly in reaching younger urban consumer segments. However, the widespread use of undisclosed or inadequately disclosed paid endorsements has eroded the credibility of influencer-driven social proof. Survey respondents rated influencer endorsements as the least credible form of social proof (mean credibility rating: 2.8/5), significantly below verified customer reviews (3.9/5) and expert editorial reviews (3.7/5). This finding suggests that D2C shoe brands should shift their social proof investment from pure influencer reach to authenticity-verified, user-generated content strategies.

## VII. PROPOSED D2C BRAND TRUST FRAMEWORK FOR SHOE BRANDS

Drawing on the empirical findings of this study and the conceptual foundations established in the literature review, this research proposes a D2C Brand Trust Framework (DBTF) for shoe brands. The framework is organized around four interconnected pillars:

### A. *Product Truth Pillar*

The foundation of D2C brand trust in footwear is unwavering truthfulness in product representation. This pillar encompasses the accuracy of product photography and material descriptions, the reliability of size guides and fit recommendations (ideally supported by foot-scanning technology or detailed measurement guidance), clear disclosure of manufacturing standards and material sourcing, and honest communication of product limitations. D2C shoe brands that consistently deliver products matching their digital representations build a bedrock of functional trust that is difficult for competitors to erode.

### B. *Digital Experience Pillar*

The quality of the digital experience — encompassing website and app usability, page load performance, mobile optimization, secure payment infrastructure, and personalization capability — functions as a second dimension of brand trust. A seamless, professional digital experience communicates brand competence and seriousness of purpose, reducing consumer uncertainty about the brand's ability to fulfill its commercial commitments. Conversely, a poorly designed, slow, or insecure digital platform undermines trust irrespective of the underlying product quality. D2C shoe brands must invest in digital experience excellence as a trust-building priority, not merely as a conversion optimization tool.

### C. *Relationship Integrity Pillar*

The third pillar addresses the relational dimension of D2C brand trust — the consumer's confidence that the brand genuinely cares about their interests and will act in good faith when problems arise.

This pillar encompasses transparent pricing and fee disclosure, proactive communication at all stages of the purchase and delivery journey, a genuinely consumer-friendly returns and exchange process, responsive and empathetic customer service, and authentic brand storytelling that communicates values rather than merely products. Brands that demonstrate relationship integrity build the benevolence-based trust that converts satisfied customers into loyal advocates.

#### *D. Social Validation Pillar*

The fourth pillar recognizes that trust in D2C shoe brands is substantially social in nature — it is constructed through the experiences and endorsements of other consumers. Effective social validation strategies for D2C shoe brands include actively soliciting and authentically curating verified customer reviews, encouraging user-generated content including fit photos and unboxing videos, partnering with credible micro-influencers whose audience trust levels are high even if their reach is modest, integrating third-party review platforms to demonstrate review authenticity, and building brand communities — through social media groups, loyalty programmes, and consumer events — that generate organic peer endorsement.

### **VIII. RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the research findings and the proposed D2C Brand Trust Framework, the following practical recommendations are offered to D2C shoe brand managers:

- 1) **Invest in AR Try-On Technology:** Augmented reality virtual try-on features significantly reduce the perceived risk of purchasing shoes without physical trial. Brands should prioritize AR integration as a trust-building infrastructure investment, not merely a novelty feature.
- 2) **Implement a Transparent Review Ecosystem:** Shift from curated, brand-controlled reviews to third-party verified review platforms (such as Trustpilot or Google Reviews). Display negative reviews alongside positive ones with brand responses, demonstrating confidence and transparency that enhances rather than erodes trust.
- 3) **Design Returns for Trust, Not Cost Minimization:** Redesign return policies with consumer convenience as the primary design criterion. Extended return windows (30+ days), free return shipping, and instant refund or exchange processing signal brand confidence in product quality and genuine consumer orientation.
- 4) **Build Size Intelligence:** Invest in AI-powered size recommendation systems that learn from purchase and return data to improve fit prediction. Accurate size recommendations reduce the primary source of D2C shoe returns and the primary trust-eroding experience.
- 5) **Prioritize Post-Purchase Communication:** Develop a structured post-purchase communication journey that proactively updates consumers on order status, provides care and maintenance guidance, and invites authentic review sharing. Post-purchase communication is both a trust maintenance tool and a loyalty driver that is frequently underprioritized by D2C brands.
- 6) **Develop Authentic Brand Narratives:** Invest in content that tells the genuine story of the brand's founding philosophy, material sourcing practices, and craftsmanship standards. Authenticity-driven brand storytelling builds the values-alignment trust that is increasingly decisive for younger consumers.
- 7) **Cultivate Micro-Influencer Communities:** Shift influencer marketing investment from high-reach macro-influencer campaigns (high cost, low credibility) to micro-influencer communities (lower reach, higher trust) whose endorsements are perceived by their audiences as genuine personal recommendations.

### **IX. CONCLUSION**

This research has demonstrated that brand trust is the central currency of success for D2C shoe brands in the Indian digital commerce environment. As D2C footwear brands multiply and consumer choice expands, the competitive differentiation that product quality and price competitiveness once provided is rapidly commoditizing. The enduring competitive advantage available to D2C shoe brands lies in the depth and durability of the trust relationships they build with consumers across functional, relational, and institutional dimensions.

The D2C Brand Trust Framework proposed in this study offers a structured approach for shoe brand managers to diagnose their current trust positioning, identify priority investment areas, and design integrated trust-building strategies that address the full spectrum of consumer trust requirements — from the accuracy of product representation to the integrity of post-purchase service. The empirical evidence from the Maharashtra urban consumer market confirms that investments in trust-building directly translate into superior consumer outcomes: higher repurchase rates, stronger advocacy, and greater resistance to competitive switching.

As India's D2C footwear market continues its trajectory of rapid growth, driven by increasing digital penetration, rising disposable incomes, and the structural shift toward online commerce, the brands that will emerge as long-term category leaders will be those that recognize brand trust not as a soft marketing aspiration but as a strategic asset to be systematically built, measured, and protected. The findings and framework presented in this paper provide a foundation for that strategic orientation.

Future research should examine the longitudinal dynamics of D2C brand trust over time, the role of artificial intelligence and personalization technologies in trust building, and the influence of cultural and regional factors on D2C trust perceptions across India's diverse consumer markets.

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