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Rural Minds and Digital Choices: Understanding Digital Marketing Awareness in Rural India

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***Abstract:** As India continues its journey toward a digitally empowered society, understanding the awareness and perceptions of rural consumers will play a crucial role in ensuring inclusive and sustainable growth in the digital marketplace. Although there is greater acceptance by urban customers of digital platforms, the extent of awareness about digital marketing on the part of rural consumers depends on varying factors related to digital literacy, availability of Internet, education, and socio-economic circumstances. The current study examines the extent of awareness about digital marketing among rural consumers in Salem District of Tamil Nadu. Primary data will be gathered using a structured questionnaire through a survey methodology. 120 rural consumers were chosen by applying convenience sampling method in Salem District. With the rising adoption of smartphones, low-priced Internet services, and various government digital schemes in rural India, there is an increased need for assessing the awareness and acceptance of digital marketing by the rural customers.*
***Keywords:** Marketplace, Digital platform, Internet, Customers, Smartphones.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of digital technologies has transformed the marketing world, and marketers have started interacting with customers in a completely different manner. Digital marketing refers to an advanced marketing strategy that helps companies promote their products or services on websites, social media channels, search engines, emails, mobile applications, and e-commerce platforms. Unlike traditional marketing strategies, digital marketing is more effective and cost-effective and helps in reaching and engaging the customers in real time. As more and more people start accessing the internet from the comfort of their homes using their phones, digital marketing has started playing an important role in people's lives. There has been substantial growth in the digital technology domain in India over the past few years. The introduction of initiatives like Digital India, increased speeds of internet connectivity, cheaper smartphones, and affordable mobile data have helped the adoption of digital technologies to become easier. Urban areas were initially targeted by digital technologies, but now rural areas are emerging as an important target segment for digital marketers. The increased availability of internet services has made it easier for rural customers to get information, compare products, interact with the brand, and purchase online. However, despite all these changes, there is a considerable difference between the levels of awareness of rural consumers concerning digital marketing. Educational level, digital literacy, personal income, occupation, age, language issues, and availability of technologies play an important role in determining the ability of rural consumers to be aware of digital marketing tools. There are many rural consumers who are at the initial stage of their digital engagement and thus might have some difficulties with recognizing genuine information on the Internet, assessing digital ads, providing online security, and making digital payments. However, exposure to social media, influencer content, online marketplaces, and mobile commerce has definitely influenced the buying behaviour of these consumers. Rapid advancements in the digital economy have led to rural India becoming one of the most lucrative markets for marketers and business organizations. With the advent of smartphones, availability of cheaper internet and better digital infrastructure, rural consumers have also become active users of the digital market place. Various government schemes such as Digital India, Bharat Net, PM-WANI, and digital payment services have greatly improved digital accessibility among the rural population and have encouraged them to adopt various services available online. Thus, apart from being mere modes of communication, the digital platforms have emerged as key sources of information, education, entertainment, financial transactions, and online shopping for the rural population. Various social networking sites, video sharing applications, ecommerce websites and mobile applications have greatly impacted the purchase behavior of the rural consumers.

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The digital advertisements, influence of influencers, product reviews and marketing messages are gradually changing the perceptions and buying decisions of the consumers. Moreover, various contents on the web in regional languages have helped various consumers having varying educational and linguistic backgrounds to avail digital information and become aware about the digital marketing process.

II. NEED OF THE STUDY

Technological development has immensely revolutionized the marketing scenario where the marketers can engage with customers through various online platforms. Digital marketing has become one of the most important aspects of marketing which helps marketers to improve customer engagement and make their brands more visible to customers. Although digital marketing has been widely accepted in the urban cities, rural India seems like an exciting new market because of internet penetration, smartphones, and digitalization of India.

Rural consumers' knowledge about digital marketing needs to be researched systematically. There are ample opportunities for the rural consumers to use various digital platforms due to campaigns like Digital India, mobile data availability at cheap prices, and increase in the number of digital payment platforms. Rural consumers are getting exposed to various forms of advertisements in the digital platform such as online ads, social media promotions, influencer marketing, e-commerce sites, and mobile applications. The rural consumers have problems associated with digital marketing such as low digital literacy, lack of technical know-how, language barrier, cybersecurity, and online transaction issues.

The district of Salem is one of the economically important districts in the state of Tamil Nadu where rural communities form an integral part of the district working in various sectors such as agriculture, small scale industries, trade, and related fields. In recent years, there have been developments made in rural parts of Salem District in terms of connectivity using better mobile connections, digital payments systems, and digital inclusion programs by governments. Digital advertisements through various digital marketing techniques are becoming common for rural consumers through social media, e-commerce websites, mobile applications, and influencer promotion.

However, the level of awareness, knowledge, and use of various digital marketing tools among the rural consumers varies depending on their level of education, literacy, economic status, occupation, age, and access to technology. Despite increased exposure to various digital marketing tools, rural consumers in the district still have problems such as lack of knowledge about digital marketing tools, language problems, security issues related to online shopping, lack of confidence in making payments online, and lack of awareness of consumer protection laws in the digital market place.

III. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Rapid advances in digital technology have brought a change in the world of marketing, which now involves reaching out to customers via digital platforms like social networking sites, search engines, websites, mobile apps, email, and ecommerce websites. Digital marketing is a powerful tool for marketing products, creating brand awareness and influencing consumer buying behavior. With affordable mobile phones and internet facility as well as digital money transactions available to consumers all over India, the use of digital technology has seen a huge surge and the rural consumers have also become a part of this digital market. In one of the important districts of Tamil Nadu, Salem district, there have been great changes in the infrastructure and the availability of internet to rural consumers.

Through various government programs like Digital India, BharatNet and the provision of mobile broadband services, rural consumers have started accessing information from the online world, communicating digitally and making online purchases as well. The rural customers are now being approached through social media marketing, influencer marketing, video marketing and digital campaigns.

Even then, there is lack of awareness about digital marketing among rural consumers. Rural consumers in the Salem District are still facing difficulties including poor digital literacy, lack of understanding about digital marketing methods, poor faith in digital transactions, cybersecurity and privacy issues, language problems, and poor skills on how to distinguish digital information. Such difficulties may decrease their capacity to analyze digital advertisements, compare various products, check online information, and make purchases. Besides, demographics such as age, gender, education, occupation, income, and exposure to digital devices can have an effect on their level of digital marketing awareness and digital purchases.

IV. AIM OF THE STUDY

The study aimed to know the extent of awareness about digital marketing among rural consumers in Salem District of Tamil Nadu.

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V. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In an extensive review of existing literature, Ravi and Rajasekaran (2023) explored the role of digital marketing in rural regions. According to the findings of the review based on both quantitative and qualitative literature, trust, perceived value, attitude, adaptation, and service quality were the primary factors that played an influential role in the adoption of digital marketing. It has been suggested that digital marketing is more effective than traditional marketing in attracting rural consumers. Yet, lack of digital knowledge and infrastructural problems prevent the adoption of digital marketing techniques widely. In addition, the importance of more empirical studies dedicated to the topic and the awareness level of rural consumers of digital marketing has been emphasized. Goel et al. (2024) performed a systematic literature review about the application of digital marketing tools by rural micro-entrepreneurs in India. Social media sites, SEO, websites, email marketing and online advertisements were revealed to be efficient tools of promotion in the rural sector. However, the effectiveness of these digital marketing tools heavily depends on digital literacy and access to internet services as well as entrepreneurship skills. According to Singh (2026), the author conducted secondary data analysis to evaluate the level of rural consumer satisfaction toward digital marketing in India. In this research, the author found out that rising penetration rate of internet along with increased use of smartphones has widened the scope of digital marketing from urban areas into rural areas. The rural consumers are now using social media sites, eCommerce sites, and online advertising sites for their product search and purchasing decisions.

VI. METHODOLOGY

This current study seeks to investigate the level of awareness regarding digital marketing among rural consumers in Salem district of Tamil Nadu. This research makes use of a descriptive research approach for analyzing the awareness, perception, and digital choice behavior of the rural consumers with respect to various digital marketing methods. Both primary and secondary data will be used in this research. Primary data would be gathered by conducting a survey among the rural consumers through the use of a well-structured questionnaire. Secondary data would be collected from books, journals, research articles, government documents, conference proceedings, websites, and other sources. The research area of the current research is limited to the rural regions of Salem district, Tamil Nadu. A total of 120 rural consumers were chosen as respondents through convenience sampling approach. Multiple regression analysis was used for further analysis.

VII. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Multiple Linear Regression is one of the most commonly applied methods of statistical analysis which involves examining the association that exists between a single dependent variable and two or more independent variables. It is an analytical technique used to predict how much of the variance in the dependent variable can be accounted for by a combination of independent variables. The independent variables can either be numeric or categorical while the dependent variable should be numeric. Multiple regression technique is used in the current research in order to establish the comparative importance of the chosen demographic and digital usage predictors on digital marketing awareness of rural consumers in Salem District. The technique will help in establishing the important predictors for digital marketing awareness along with their individual and collective impacts. The findings would be useful for understanding the important predictors for digital marketing awareness of rural consumers and would also assist in developing appropriate digital marketing policies and strategy.

Table 1

Rural Minds and Digital Choices: Understanding Digital Marketing Awareness in Rural India

Variables	B	Std. Error	Beta	T	Sig
(Constant)	44.339	2.450		18.099	.000
Age	.862	.253	.316	3.411	.001
Gender	-.212	.153	-.128	-1.385	.169
Educational qualification	.724	.246	.278	2.941	.004
Family size	-.185	.338	-.052	-.547	.586
residential area	-.550	.257	-.202	-2.137	.035
Occupation	-.169	.173	-.092	-.982	.329
Device used to access the Internet	-.037	.106	-.033	-.352	.726
Average internet usage per day	.131	.282	.044	.464	.644
Most frequently used social media platform	-.857	.315	-.262	-2.721	.008
Preferred online shopping platform	-.207	.202	-.103	-1.024	.309
Frequency of online shopping	-.186	.197	-.094	-.945	.347

The multiple regression analysis was performed to identify the demographic and digital usage variables that significantly influence digital marketing awareness among rural consumers in Rural India. The dependent variable of the study is Digital Marketing Awareness, while the independent variables include age, gender, educational qualification, family size, residential area, occupation, device used to access the Internet, average internet usage per day, most frequently used social media platform, preferred online shopping platform, and frequency of online shopping. The regression results indicate that the constant has a value of 44.339, which is statistically significant (t = 18.099, p < 0.001). This represents the estimated level of digital marketing awareness when all predictor variables are held constant. Among the independent variables, Age has a positive and statistically significant influence on digital marketing awareness (B = 0.862, β = 0.316, t = 3.411, p = 0.001). This finding indicates that digital marketing awareness increases with age among the respondents. Educational qualification also exerts a positive and significant effect on digital marketing awareness (B = 0.724, β = 0.278, t = 2.941, p = 0.004). This suggests that respondents with higher educational qualifications possess greater awareness and understanding of digital marketing practices.

The variable Residential Area shows a statistically significant negative influence (B = –0.550, β = –0.202, t = –2.137, p = 0.035). The negative coefficient indicates that differences in the residential area are associated with lower levels of digital marketing awareness, depending on the coding of the variable. This implies that disparities in residential location influence consumers' exposure to and awareness of digital marketing. Similarly, the Most Frequently Used Social Media Platform has a significant negative effect on digital marketing awareness (B = –0.857, β = –0.262, t = –2.721, p = 0.008). This finding suggests that awareness varies across different social media platforms, and certain platforms may contribute less to digital marketing awareness than others based on the coding adopted in the study.

On the other hand, Gender (p = 0.169), Family Size (p = 0.586), Occupation (p = 0.329), Device Used to Access the Internet (p = 0.726), Average Internet Usage per Day (p = 0.644), Preferred Online Shopping Platform (p = 0.309), and Frequency of Online Shopping (p = 0.347) do not have a statistically significant influence on digital marketing awareness, as their significance values exceed the 5 percent level (p > 0.05). Therefore, these variables do not significantly explain variations in digital marketing awareness among the respondents. Hence, the regression analysis reveals that Age, Educational Qualification, Residential Area, and Most Frequently Used Social Media Platform are the significant predictors of digital marketing awareness among rural consumers. Among these, Age has the strongest positive influence (β = 0.316), followed by Educational Qualification (β = 0.278). The findings indicate that demographic characteristics, particularly age and education, together with residential location and social media usage patterns, play an important role in shaping digital marketing awareness among rural consumers.

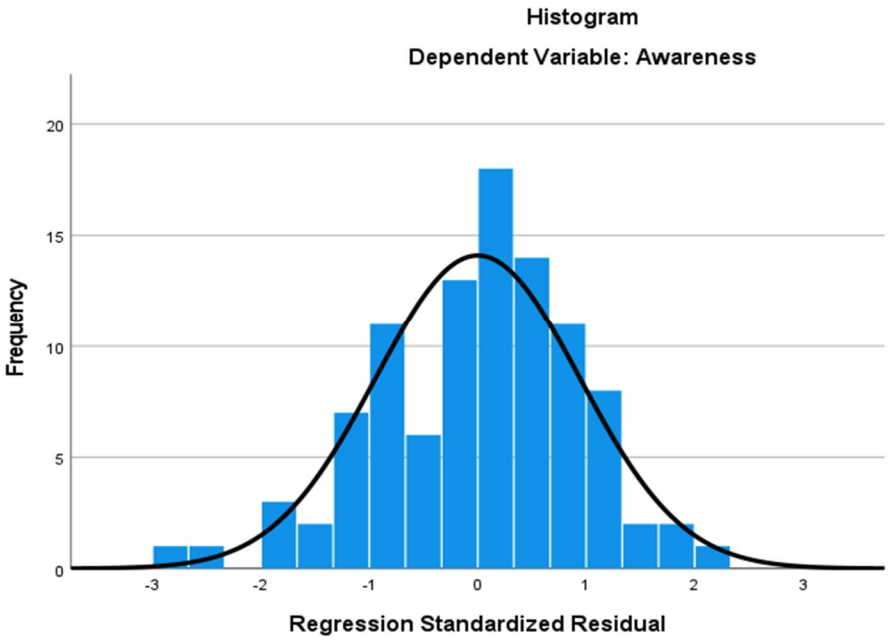
Table 2
R-Value

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.539[a]	.290	.202	2.429

Table 2 above gives the Model Summary of the multiple regression test carried out to analyze the factors affecting the level of digital marketing awareness amongst the rural consumers in Rural India. The R-value of 0.539 suggests a moderately strong relationship between the independent variables (age, gender, education, family size, residential area, occupation, internet device, daily internet usage time, favorite social networking site, preferred online shopping website, and frequency of online shopping) and the dependent variable. The R-Square (R^2) value of 0.290 suggests that 29.0% of the variability in digital marketing awareness amongst the rural consumers is explained by the independent variables used in the regression model. The adjusted R-square value of 0.202 suggests that after adjustment for the predictors included in the model, 20.2% of the variability in digital marketing awareness is explained by the selected independent variables.

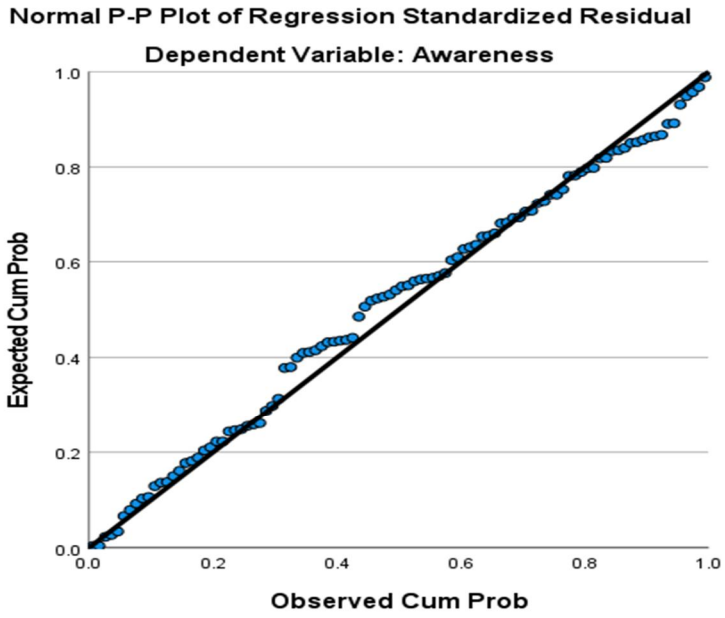
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Chart 1



Histogram shows that there is a mean residual of 3.55E-15, which equals to zero. Thus, the mean residuals are close to zero, as is supposed to occur in case of properly fitted multiple regression model. The standard deviation of standardized residuals is 0.943; it is quite close to the required value of 1, and thus there are acceptable deviations of residuals. The number of observations used in the analysis is 120 (N = 120). There are several residuals which can be seen at both ends of the distribution. However, they cannot be regarded as outliers, and therefore no violations of normality should be expected. Thus, histogram demonstrates that the assumption of normality in multiple regression is fulfilled. Hence, it may be concluded that the multiple regression model applied to study digital marketing awareness of rural consumers is appropriate, and all further analysis of regression coefficients and their significance may be carried out successfully.

Chart 2



Normal Probability-Probability (P-P) plot of Regression Standardized Residuals was tested to confirm the assumption of normality of the multiple regression model applied in the study concerning Digital Marketing Awareness of Rural Consumers. It can be seen from the above P-P plot of regression standardized residuals that the observed cumulative probabilities of the residuals closely match the expected cumulative probabilities around the diagonal line. The data points tend to fall either on the diagonal line or near to it with some small deviations of few points. Minor deviations in the practical studies are quite natural and do not imply any severe deviation from the normality assumption.

Thus, the proximity of the data points to the diagonal line implies that the residuals can be considered to be normally distributed. Therefore, the regression model fulfills one of the main assumptions of multiple regression model.

Table 3
Anova

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	212.379	11	19.307	3.272	.001[b]
	Residual	519.331	108	5.901		
	Total	731.710	119			

The Regression Sum of Squares comes out to be 212.379, while the Residual Sum of Squares is found to be 519.331, and hence the Total Sum of Squares comes to 731.710. In the model, there are 11 independent variables with 11 degrees of freedom, while the degrees of freedom for the residual are 108, resulting in a total of 119 degrees of freedom with a sample size of 120 respondents. The Mean Square Regression is 19.307, while the Mean Square Residual is 5.901. The F-value calculated is 3.272, while the corresponding significance value is 0.001. As the significance value is less than the level of significance (0.05), the null hypothesis is rejected, and the alternate hypothesis is accepted. It implies that the set of independent variables under consideration in the study significantly impacts digital marketing awareness of rural consumers. The significant value of F implies that the multiple regression model is a better predictor of digital marketing awareness compared to a model without predictor variables.

VIII. SUGGESTIONS AND CONCLUSION

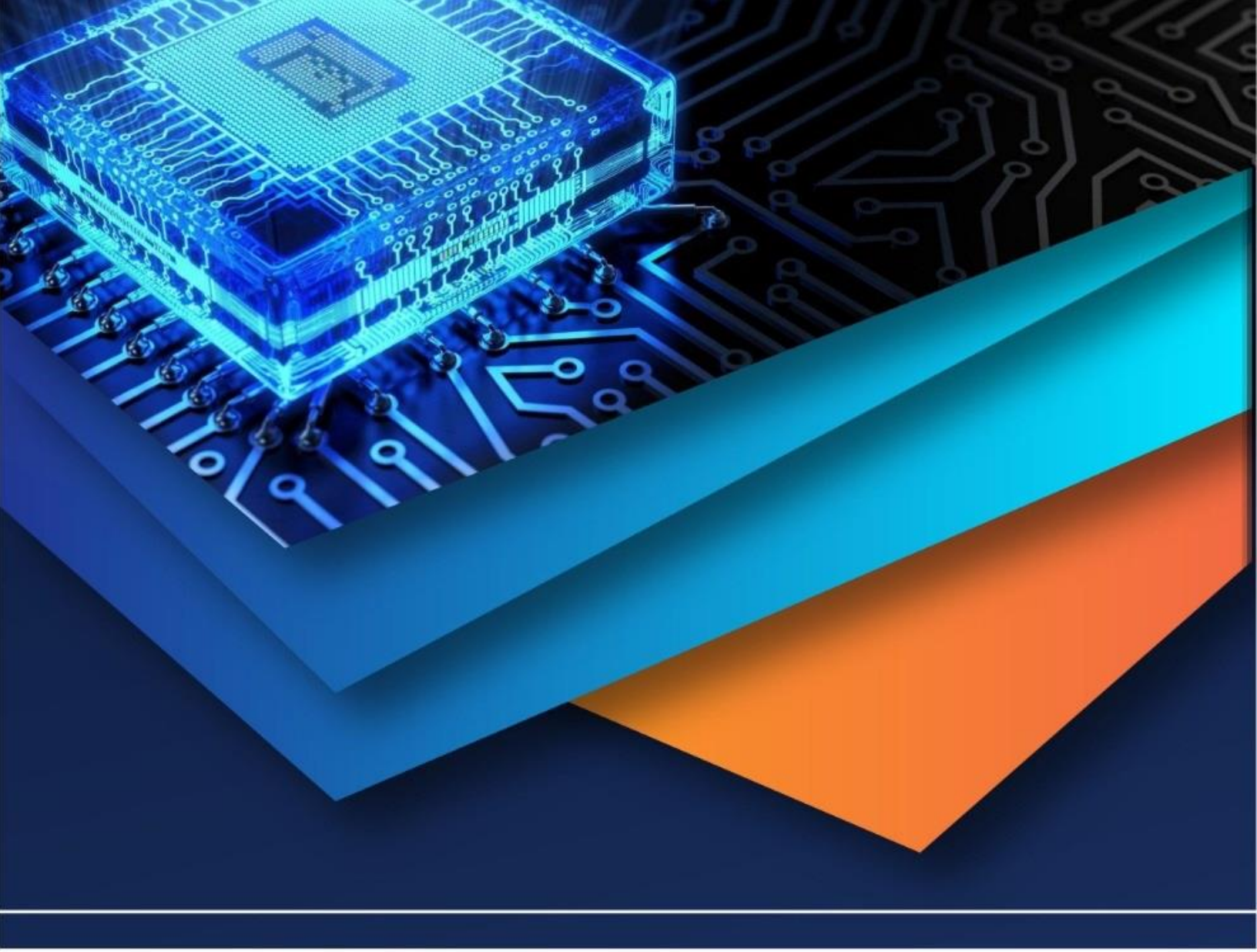
In today's world, digital marketing is an essential part of all business operations and influences how customers acquire information, evaluate and purchase products. With the fast development of connectivity via the internet, smartphones and electronic payments, rural markets have been affected and created the potential for companies to reach out to rural customers. On the other hand, the awareness of digital marketing varies among rural customers due to demographic features, education, technological literacy and technological access. In order to boost the digital marketing awareness of rural consumers, it is advisable for the government, educational institutes, non-governmental organizations and business organizations to conduct awareness programs on digital marketing, online shopping, digital payments and cyber security. It is advisable for businesses to undertake digital marketing campaigns using Tamil language and other regional languages in order to increase awareness and understanding of digital marketing amongst rural consumers. Improved internet connectivity and digital infrastructure needs to be ensured in rural areas in order to have better access to digital marketing tools and methods. Rural awareness programmes should provide knowledge to the consumers regarding online frauds, phishing, fake websites and safe digital payments. Marketers need to design marketing campaigns according to the age group of consumers and geographical location through effective use of social networking sites in order to provide information about the authentic products. Educational institutes can help in building up the digital marketing skills of rural consumers. Training sessions should also be arranged for rural entrepreneurs, farmers and self-help groups in order to improve digital marketing capabilities. In addition, companies need to keep transparency in their product information and customer services. According to the findings of the present research, the factors which are influential in determining the level of awareness of digital marketing among rural consumers are age, education, residential area and the most widely used social media platform. These factors play an important role in consumers' perception and use of digital marketing. Gender, number of family members, occupation, device used to access the internet, time spent per day on the Internet, preferred website of online shopping and frequency of shopping online have no significant effect on the awareness of digital marketing.

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