

Emerging Perspectives in Marketing: Changing Retail Marketing Strategies in Salem District

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the emerging and evolving retail marketing strategies deployed by businesses operating within Salem District, Tamil Nadu, India. Set against a backdrop of rapid urbanisation, digital adoption, and shifting consumer behaviours, the retail sector in Salem has experienced significant structural transformation over the past decade. The study employs a mixed-methods research design, combining structured questionnaire surveys administered to 320 retail entrepreneurs and managers with qualitative interviews and field observations across urban, semi-urban, and rural sub-markets of the district. Findings reveal a marked transition from traditional, relationship-based selling practices toward data-driven, omnichannel marketing approaches, while simultaneously demonstrating the enduring relevance of personalised customer engagement and localised promotional strategies. The paper identifies key drivers of this transformation-including government policy, technological infrastructure, competitive pressure from e-commerce platforms, and changing demographic profiles-and discusses the strategic implications for retailers, policymakers, and marketing practitioners. The results contribute to the growing literature on retail marketing evolution in Tier-II Indian cities and offer actionable recommendations to enhance competitiveness among small and medium retail enterprises (SMEs) in the district.

Keywords: retail marketing, Salem District, omnichannel strategy, consumer behaviour, digital transformation, small and medium enterprises, Tamil Nadu

INTRODUCTION

The retail sector occupies a central position in the economic landscape of India, accounting for approximately 10% of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) and providing employment to nearly 8% of the workforce (Deloitte, 2022; IBEF, 2023). Within this vast and heterogeneous sector, Tier-II and Tier-III cities such as Salem in Tamil Nadu have emerged as critical growth frontiers, reflecting broader patterns of economic decentralisation, urbanisation, and increased consumer purchasing power. Salem District, situated in the north-western zone of Tamil Nadu, has historically been recognised as a hub for steel, textile, and agro-based industries; however, the district is rapidly evolving into a vibrant retail market driven by a growing middle-class population, enhanced road and digital connectivity, and a burgeoning youth demographic.

The emergence of national and international retail chains, the proliferation of e-commerce platforms, and the accelerating penetration of smartphones and digital payment systems have fundamentally altered the competitive environment confronting local retailers in Salem. Traditional street-side vendors, kirana stores, and independent specialty retailers-which have long formed the backbone of the district's retail ecosystem-now face intensifying competitive pressures that necessitate strategic adaptation (Kumar & Anand, 2020). This evolving landscape demands a systematic understanding of how retail marketing strategies are changing, what forces are driving these changes, and what implications arise for diverse categories of retail stakeholders.

Despite the considerable body of literature addressing retail marketing transformations in metropolitan India (Varman & Belk, 2019; Srivastava, 2021), comparatively limited scholarly attention has been directed toward the specific

dynamics of Tier-II cities such as Salem. The unique socio-economic characteristics of such cities-including the coexistence of traditional and modern retail formats, the heterogeneity of consumer segments, and the variable availability of digital infrastructure-necessitate dedicated empirical investigation rather than straightforward extrapolation from metropolitan findings.

This study addresses this gap by systematically documenting and analysing the changing retail marketing strategies in Salem District. The research is guided by three primary objectives: (a) to identify and characterise the dominant retail marketing strategies currently practised in Salem District; (b) to examine the principal forces driving strategic change in the retail sector; and (c) to evaluate the extent to which digital and omnichannel approaches are being adopted and to assess barriers to adoption among small and medium retail enterprises. The paper proceeds as follows: the subsequent section provides a review of relevant literature, followed by a description of the research methodology, presentation of findings, discussion of implications, and concluding remarks.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Retail Marketing in Transition

The transformation of retail marketing has been extensively studied in the context of developed economies and major metropolitan markets in emerging economies (Kotler et al., 2021; Levy & Weitz, 2019). Scholars have documented the decline of purely transactional retail models and the rise of experience-based and relationship-driven marketing strategies (Pine & Gilmore, 2019). The concept of retail marketing has itself broadened considerably, encompassing not only product assortment and pricing decisions but also store environment design, digital engagement, personalisation, and supply chain integration (Grewal et al., 2020).

Within the Indian context, researchers have chronicled the transition from traditional to modern retail formats over two decades, noting the coexistence of organised and unorganised sectors as a distinctive feature of the country's retail landscape (Gupta & Roy, 2018). Studies have highlighted the resilience of kirana stores and informal retail networks, attributing their persistence to the personalised service, credit facilities, and neighbourhood convenience they provide-attributes that formal retail and e-commerce platforms have struggled to fully replicate (Goyal & Aggarwal, 2021). Nevertheless, the encroachment of large-format stores, supermarket chains, and digital marketplaces has compelled traditional retailers to reassess and modernise their marketing approaches.

Digital Transformation and Omnichannel Strategies

The proliferation of mobile internet and the rapid adoption of digital payment infrastructure-substantially accelerated by the Government of India's demonetisation initiative and the subsequent expansion of the Unified Payments Interface (UPI)-have created new possibilities for retail marketing in previously underserved markets (RBI, 2022; NPCI, 2023). Research has demonstrated that digital technology adoption among small retailers in Tier-II cities has been uneven, shaped by factors including educational attainment, access to capital, availability of technical support, and the receptiveness of local consumer bases to digital interaction (Bhatnagar & Ghose, 2022).

Omnichannel retailing-defined as the seamless integration of physical and digital retail touchpoints to create a unified consumer experience-has become a dominant paradigm in contemporary retail marketing scholarship (Verhoef et al., 2015; Bell et al., 2018). While the adoption of omnichannel strategies has been most extensively documented in large organised retailers, emerging evidence suggests that smaller retailers in secondary cities are increasingly experimenting with hybrid approaches that combine in-store engagement with social media promotion, WhatsApp-based customer communication, and participation in e-commerce marketplaces (Nair & Shankar, 2021).

Consumer Behaviour in Tier-II Indian Markets

Consumer behaviour research in Tier-II Indian markets has revealed a complex interplay of aspiration, value-consciousness, cultural influence, and growing digital literacy (Sheth, 2020). Studies have found that consumers in cities such as Salem are simultaneously attracted to modernity and the experiential elements of contemporary retail while remaining sensitive to price, personal relationships, and locally rooted cultural values (Rajagopal, 2019). This dual orientation presents both challenges and opportunities for retail marketers seeking to differentiate their offerings. The role of social influence-manifested through word-of-mouth, community networks, and increasingly through social

media-has been identified as a particularly powerful determinant of purchase behaviour in these markets (Chaturvedi & Dwivedi, 2021).

Marketing Strategies in Salem and Comparable Districts

Scholarly literature specifically focused on Salem District's retail marketing environment remains sparse. Existing studies of adjacent districts and comparable Tier-II Tamil Nadu cities (e.g., Vellore, Tiruchirappalli, Erode) have documented the growing influence of private label strategies, loyalty programmes, and festival-driven promotional activities among organised retailers, alongside the persistent dominance of personal selling and community trust-building among traditional retailers (Murugan & Selvaraj, 2020; Rajan, 2018). The literature also points to the significant economic role of weekly markets (sandhai) and periodic fairs in maintaining the relevance of informal retail networks within the district's consumer culture.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, integrating quantitative survey data with qualitative insights drawn from semi-structured interviews and observational fieldwork. The mixed-methods approach was selected to enable both the measurement of broad patterns across the retailer population and the capture of contextual nuances that quantitative data alone cannot adequately represent (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The research framework is grounded in pragmatism, acknowledging the value of multiple methodological perspectives in generating a comprehensive understanding of the complex phenomenon under investigation.

Population and Sampling

The target population for this study comprises retail entrepreneurs and managers operating retail businesses of all formats within Salem District. According to data from the District Industries Centre (DIC), Salem, the district is estimated to host approximately 42,000 registered retail establishments, spanning grocery, textile, electronics, hardware, pharmaceutical, and food service categories. A stratified random sampling procedure was employed, with strata defined by retail format (traditional/kirana vs. modern format), geographic location (urban, semi-urban, rural), and merchandise category. This yielded a final study sample of 320 retailers, selected to ensure proportional representation across all strata. In addition, 24 in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with purposively selected key informants including senior retail managers, industry association representatives, consumer advocacy officials, and district-level government officers.

Data Collection Instruments

The primary quantitative data collection instrument was a structured questionnaire comprising five sections: (a) respondent and business profile; (b) current marketing strategy adoption; (c) digital technology use and omnichannel integration; (d) perceived drivers and barriers to strategic change; and (e) consumer orientation and satisfaction monitoring practices. The questionnaire was developed on the basis of established scales from the retail marketing literature (Levy & Weitz, 2019; Grewal et al., 2020), adapted for the local context through cognitive pre-testing with ten pilot respondents. The instrument was translated into Tamil and back-translated into English to ensure semantic equivalence. Reliability analysis confirmed satisfactory internal consistency across all multi-item scales (Cronbach's $\alpha \geq 0.78$).

Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interview guides developed to probe themes identified in the literature review, with sufficient flexibility to allow informants to introduce perspectives not anticipated by the researchers. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent, transcribed verbatim, and subjected to thematic analysis using the framework approach (Ritchie et al., 2014).

Analytical Procedures

Quantitative data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 26). Descriptive statistics were used to characterise the sample and document the prevalence of specific marketing strategy adoption. Inferential analyses, including chi-square tests of independence, one-way ANOVA, and binary logistic regression, were employed to examine relationships

between retailer characteristics and marketing strategy outcomes. Qualitative thematic analysis proceeded through iterative cycles of data familiarisation, code generation, theme development, and interpretive refinement, with inter-rater reliability assessed through independent coding by two researchers (Cohen's $\kappa = 0.81$).

FINDINGS

Profile of Respondents

Of the 320 survey respondents, 74.4% were male and 25.6% female. The modal age group was 31–45 years (48.1%), followed by 46–60 years (29.4%) and below 30 years (22.5%). The majority (61.3%) had completed secondary or higher secondary education, while 28.1% held undergraduate or postgraduate qualifications. A substantial proportion (56.9%) operated sole proprietorship businesses, with the remainder comprising partnerships and private limited companies. Businesses ranged in age from newly established (less than 2 years, 12.2%) to long-standing enterprises of over 20 years (18.4%), with the largest cohort having operated between 5 and 15 years (44.1%). Grocery and food retail accounted for the largest merchandise category (31.6%), followed by textile and apparel (22.2%), electronics and appliances (14.1%), and pharmaceutical and health (11.6%).

Current Marketing Strategy Adoption

The study identified a mosaic of marketing strategies currently employed across Salem District's retail landscape. Price-based strategies-including regular discounting, festival offers, and competitive pricing-were the most universally adopted, reported by 87.5% of respondents. Personal selling and relationship marketing, encompassing direct customer engagement, personalised service, and loyalty cultivation through informal mechanisms, were similarly prevalent (84.1%). Visual merchandising and store layout optimisation were practised by 61.3% of respondents, with notable variation by retail format: near-universal among modern format retailers (96.8%) but far less common among traditional kirana-type stores (41.2%).

Social media-based marketing-primarily through WhatsApp broadcast groups, Facebook pages, and Instagram profiles-was adopted by 52.2% of respondents overall, with adoption rates markedly higher among younger proprietors (under 40 years: 71.4%) and urban location businesses (63.8%) compared to semi-urban (48.1%) and rural counterparts (29.7%). Participation in e-commerce platforms (including Meesho, IndiaMART, Amazon, or Flipkart) was reported by 23.4% of respondents, predominantly electronics and textile retailers. The use of customer data analytics tools-even in basic forms such as sales tracking software-was limited to 18.1% of the sample, concentrated among larger and modern format establishments.

Drivers of Strategic Change

Respondents were asked to rate the importance of twelve potential drivers of strategic change using a five-point Likert scale. The factor most frequently rated as highly important was increased competition from e-commerce platforms (mean = 4.31, SD = 0.74), followed by changing consumer expectations (mean = 4.22, SD = 0.81) and the availability of affordable digital tools (mean = 3.98, SD = 0.93). Government initiatives-particularly the Digital India programme and GST implementation-were rated as moderately important (mean = 3.67, SD = 1.02). Interestingly, competitive pressure from large-format chain stores, while acknowledged, was rated lower than anticipated (mean = 3.44, SD = 1.17), perhaps reflecting the geographic reality that Salem's retail geography limits the penetration of national chains beyond the central urban core.

Qualitative interviews provided valuable texture to these quantitative patterns. A senior textile retailer with over 25 years of experience articulated the competitive threat succinctly: "Earlier, my customers would come to me because they trusted my quality and my price. Now they compare everything on their phone before they even enter my shop. I have had to learn how to use Instagram just to survive." Such accounts underscore the motivational salience of digital competition as a strategic driver.

Barriers to Strategic Adoption

While the study documented meaningful strategic evolution, it also revealed significant barriers to more comprehensive change. The most frequently cited barrier was limited financial resources for marketing investment (cited by 71.3% of

respondents), followed by insufficient digital literacy and technical skills (59.1%), absence of reliable technical support and training (51.6%), and uncertainty about the return on investment from digital marketing initiatives (48.4%). Regulatory compliance burdens-particularly those associated with GST registration and e-commerce taxation-were cited as a barrier by 34.1% of respondents, predominantly among micro-enterprises.

Logistic regression analysis revealed that adoption of digital marketing strategies was significantly predicted by retailer age (younger proprietors more likely to adopt), educational attainment (higher education associated with greater adoption), urban location, and availability of at least one technically proficient staff member (all $p < .05$). Retail format and merchandise category were not significant independent predictors when these other factors were controlled.

Emerging Trends and Innovative Practices

Beyond documenting mainstream strategy adoption, the study identified several innovative practices representing the leading edge of retail marketing evolution in the district. A notable proportion of respondents (38.4%) reported the use of WhatsApp as a customer relationship management (CRM) tool, maintaining ongoing communication with regular customers regarding new arrivals, personalised offers, and order placement. Several retailers described the formation of collaborative promotional clusters, wherein neighbouring retailers in commercial streets pool resources to organise joint promotional events, loyalty card schemes, and festive decorations-an informal form of place-based retail marketing that leverages community cohesion.

The study also documented the emergence of live social commerce, with a small but growing cohort of retailers (8.4%, predominantly in electronics and fashion) conducting live product demonstrations and sales through Facebook Live or Instagram Live sessions, reaching both local and non-local audiences. This practice, while nascent, represents a significant departure from conventional local retail marketing and its growth trajectory warrants close monitoring in future research.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study illuminate a retail marketing landscape in Salem District that is simultaneously characterised by transformation and resilience. The near-universal prevalence of price-based strategies and personal selling reflects the enduring importance of value and relationship in a market where consumer trust remains a critical differentiator. These findings are consistent with prior research on kirana store survival strategies in Indian markets (Goyal & Aggarwal, 2021) and reinforce the argument that relational capital constitutes a genuine and defensible competitive advantage in Tier-II city retail environments.

The documented growth of social media marketing-particularly through WhatsApp, a platform deeply embedded in everyday social communication in Tamil Nadu-reflects a pragmatic form of digital adoption that leverages familiar technology rather than requiring sophisticated marketing infrastructure. This pattern resonates with findings from comparable Tier-II markets in other Indian states (Nair & Shankar, 2021) and suggests that social messaging platforms may serve as a low-friction entry point through which traditional retailers are transitioning toward digital engagement. The age and education gradients in digital adoption identified in this study align with broader patterns documented in the digital marketing adoption literature (Bhatnagar & Ghose, 2022), highlighting the importance of targeted capacity-building initiatives for older and less formally educated retail operators.

The finding that competition from e-commerce platforms constitutes the dominant perceived driver of strategic change carries significant implications. It suggests that the primary competitive framing for Salem's retailers is not horizontal competition with other local retailers but rather vertical competitive pressure from platform ecosystems operating at national and international scale. This competitive logic may actually facilitate retailer cooperation and cluster marketing, as evidenced by the collaborative promotional practices documented in this study. Policy interventions that strengthen collective marketing capacity-including the formation of retailers' associations, shared digital infrastructure, and co-operative loyalty programmes-may therefore offer disproportionate returns relative to support directed toward individual enterprise upgrading alone.

The barriers identified in this study-financial constraints, digital literacy deficits, and absence of technical support-point toward a structural gap between the strategic aspirations of Salem's retail entrepreneurs and the resources and capabilities

available to realise those aspirations. This gap is most pronounced among micro-enterprises and rural-located retailers, categories that are simultaneously the most vulnerable to competitive pressure and the least well-served by existing support systems. The findings echo calls in the policy literature for more tailored, context-sensitive digital skilling programmes designed for small retailers in non-metropolitan locations (Government of India, 2022).

The emergence of live social commerce, while currently limited in scale, is particularly significant as a harbinger of future retail marketing evolution. The ability to conduct real-time, interactive product demonstrations that transcend geographic boundaries fundamentally alters the spatial logic of retail marketing, enabling even small district-level retailers to access consumer audiences previously inaccessible without substantial advertising investment. The trajectory of this practice deserves ongoing scholarly and policy attention.

IMPLICATIONS

Implications for Retail Practice

Retail practitioners in Salem District should prioritise the development of integrated social media and in-store marketing strategies that leverage the established strengths of personal relationship management while layering in digital engagement capabilities. Investment in basic customer data management—even using accessible tools such as structured WhatsApp contact management, spreadsheet-based sales tracking, or low-cost CRM applications—offers a practical starting point for data-driven marketing adoption among SMEs. Retailers should also explore cluster-based promotional initiatives and trade association membership as mechanisms for accessing shared marketing resources and skills.

Implications for Policy

District-level and state government agencies should consider the design of targeted retail marketing capability programmes that go beyond generic digital skills training to address the specific strategic challenges confronting small retailers in competitive Tier-II environments. Subsidised access to e-commerce onboarding services, digital advertising credits for first-time adopters, and facilitated linkages with technology service providers could materially reduce adoption barriers. The potential of collective retail marketing models—including retail BIDs (Business Improvement Districts) and multi-retailer loyalty platforms—merits serious policy exploration.

Implications for Research

This study identifies several directions for future research. Longitudinal panel studies tracking the marketing strategy evolution of a cohort of Salem retailers over a multi-year horizon would substantially strengthen causal inference regarding the drivers and outcomes of strategic change. Consumer-side studies examining the match between evolving retail marketing strategies and consumer expectations in Salem's diverse market segments are notably absent from the current literature and are urgently needed. Comparative studies across Tier-II cities in Tamil Nadu and other Indian states would enable the identification of generalisable patterns versus context-specific dynamics.

CONCLUSION

This study has documented a significant and ongoing transformation in retail marketing strategies within Salem District, Tamil Nadu. The retail marketing landscape is characterised by the coexistence of time-tested relational and price-based strategies with emerging digital and social media approaches, the latter driven primarily by competitive pressure from e-commerce platforms, changing consumer expectations, and the growing digital infrastructure of the district. The transition is neither uniform nor complete; it is shaped by retailer characteristics, geographic location, merchandise category, and the availability of digital capabilities and financial resources.

The findings underscore the strategic importance of personalised customer engagement and community embeddedness as enduring sources of competitive advantage for local retailers, even as they increasingly supplement these relational assets with digital marketing tools. The study also identifies critical barriers to more widespread and sophisticated digital marketing adoption, pointing toward a need for targeted capacity-building and policy support.

In synthesising the emerging perspectives on retail marketing transformation in Salem District, this paper contributes to the broader understanding of how Tier-II Indian cities are navigating the intersection of tradition and modernity in

commercial life. The insights generated here are relevant not only to Salem but to the many comparable district economies across India that share similar structural characteristics and face analogous strategic challenges. Future research that tracks the trajectory of these changes over time and examines the outcomes for retailers, consumers, and the wider local economy will be essential for building a comprehensive evidence base to guide strategic and policy decisions in this important sector.

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