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From Farm to Feed: How Ramnad Farmers Use Social Media to Engage Consumers

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Abstract

The rise of social media has transformed our day-to-day lives. From the emergence of Facebook posts to today's Instagram reels, social media has changed the way we interact with others, especially in the field of agricultural marketing. However, small farmers still face challenges related to agriculture, including inadequate rainfall, the presence of mesquite trees that consume groundwater, middlemen charging commission and brokerage fees, and the delayed distribution of farm loans. These challenges prevent small farmers from reaching out to potential customers to purchase their crops. To address this issue, social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, YouTube and WhatsApp were utilised by farmers as low-cost marketing tools to promote their crops, build relationships with consumers and enhance farmers' well-being. The primary objective of this paper was to investigate how the type of social media content used by farmers affects consumer engagement.

Introduction

In today's era, agriculture employs more than 55% of India's total workforce (Indian Brand Equity Foundation, 2025) and accounts for 18% of the country's GDP. During the pre-independence era, India heavily focused on food security by adopting a production-centric approach. The Green Revolution introduced High-Yielding varieties of crops and promoted irrigation and fertilisers. Despite the occurrence of the Green Revolution movement, the production-centric approach resulted in problems such as soil degradation, erosion, and groundwater depletion, primarily due to the excessive use of fertilisers, which destroy the soil composition.

Instead of focusing solely on food security and its corresponding production-centric approach, they immediately shifted to a market-centric approach. The market-centric approach aims to eliminate all middlemen & logistic issues, delivering freshly cultivated crops directly to the markets, which satisfies all consumers even in the remotest corners of the country. This shift is evident from the rise of social media, which small farmers widely use to promote their crops. For small farmers, social media platforms were widely used as a source of finance and as a zero-cost marketing tool to create awareness and advertise their crops nationwide (Gever et al., 2023). Apart from selling crops, they use their social media feeds, posts and videos to monitor crop health, receive updates on weather and cultivation patterns, build a loyal customer base, and advocate for fair and sustainable agricultural practices. Social media serves as a

mediator of communication between consumers and farmers, with a reach far beyond their localised area.

Background of the Study

For this paper, the main focus was on the small farmers of Ramnad district. Paddy, Sorghum, Pearl Millet, Mundu chillies, Finger Millet and Black gram were the prime food crops being cultivated in the district. Cotton is the main non-food crop, being grown here. The district has a mix of alluvium, sandy, red soil and black soil areas for different types of crops.

However, farmers residing in Ramnad face a major geographical issue – the distance between Ramnad and high-income urban cities such as Chennai, Coimbatore, or Bangalore is considerable. The price of a mundu chilli sold at a local market in Ramnad is less than the same variant being offered in Indian metro cities. Social media breaks the price difference barrier by allowing farmers to access the same prices for chillies being sold in Chennai while staying in Ramnad itself.

A farmer has to go through 4-5 levels (Farmer -> Village Aggregator -> District Trader -> City Wholesaler -> Retailer -> Consumer) in a supply chain while selling a product from one district to another (eg, Ramnad to Madurai). In each level, the intermediaries take up a certain percentage as commission, which loses a certain amount of value when it gets sold from one person to another. With the introduction of social media, farmers now have a D2C (direct-to-consumer) supply chain for delivering crops, along with the farmer capturing 100% of the revenue, tripling the amount earned from agriculture.

Review of Literature

1. The transition to social media marketing

Recent studies have shown the transition from the traditional way of promoting their cultivated crops to a much more modern way. While Othman et al. (2022) puts forth the challenges faced by the small traders dealing in Agri-products in Malaysia, including technological illiteracy and social connectivity, Liu & Wang (2023) answered in their paper that WeChat, a popular social media app in China, explained how orange farmers use it to improve their sales performance and the overall profit rate.

2. Short-form content and consumer engagement

Yu & Zhang (2022) argued how mobile livestreaming, being a long-form content, has a positive impact on consumer attitudes towards agricultural products, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Poureisa et al. (2024) countered their claim that short-form content, especially Instagram posts, stories and reels, motivates consumers to purchase organic and other agricultural products. This proves that most of the farmers prefer short-form content rather than long-form content, as consumers get what they need within a 1-minute video instead of a video that drags on and extends beyond 30 minutes.

Research Gap

However, existing literature largely focuses on the impact of social media marketing on farmers working in the agricultural sector of Iran, China, Malaysia and other Southeast Asian countries. It also widely focuses on the farmers' usage of social media in general. There are limited papers on how Indian farmers in other states use social media as a marketing tool to promote their crops. But there is a shortage of literature covering the drought-prone regions of Tamil Nadu, especially in Ramanathapuram, which is home to the iconic Mundu chillies, being the geographical indicator of the district. India, being the country with the second-highest social media user base worldwide, aims to fill the geographical gap.

Objectives of the Study

1. To analyse the effectiveness of social media as a direct marketing tool for small-scale farmers in the Ramnad District.
2. To profile the digital literacy and platform preference of farmers in Ramnad.
3. To categorise the "Content Strategies" adopted by farmers for customer engagement.
4. To examine the relationship between "Visual Engagement" (Reels/Videos) and "Sales Inquiries".
5. To identify the challenges faced by Ramnad farmers in sustaining digital commerce.

Research Questions

1. How does the adoption of social media marketing strategies influence the consumer engagement and sales conversion of small-scale farmers in the Ramnad District?
2. Which social media platforms (WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube) are most preferred by Ramnad farmers for business purposes, and what is their level of digital proficiency?
3. What types of visual content strategies (e.g., educational reels, harvest videos, customer testimonials) generate the

highest consumer engagement for dry-land crops?

4. Is there a significant correlation between "visual engagement metrics" (Likes, Shares, Video Views) and "actual sales inquiries" (DMs, Calls) for these farmers?
5. What are the primary logistical and technical challenges (e.g., delivery, payment trust, network connectivity) faced by Ramnad farmers in sustaining a Direct-to-Consumer (D2C) model?

Analysis and Interpretation

Objective 1: To analyse the effectiveness of social media as a direct marketing tool for small-scale farmers in the Ramnad District.

Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	**df**	**Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)**
Pearson Chi-Square	**5.992[a]**	**6**	**.424**
Likelihood Ratio	**5.867**	**6**	**.438**
N of Valid Cases	**100**		
a. 2 cells (16.7%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 4.16.			

As per the given chi-square test, there is no statistical relationship between the frequency of social media posts and the profitability levels **(χ^2 = 5.992, p = 0.424)**. It simply suggests that increasing the posting frequency does not guarantee higher profits for the farmers in Ramnad.

Objective 2: To profile the digital literacy and platform preference of farmers in Ramnad.

Age Group * Who manages your social media account? - Crosstabulation						
			Who manages your social media account?			Total
			I do it myself	I pay someone to do it	My children/family members help me	
Age Group	18 – 25 years	Count	6	7	5	18
		% within Age Group	33.3%	38.9%	27.8%	100.0 %
	26 – 40 years	Count	8	9	10	27
		% within Age Group	29.6%	33.3%	37.0%	100.0 %
	41 – 55 years	Count	26	4	10	40
		% within Age Group	65.0%	10.0%	25.0%	100.0 %
	Above 55 years	Count	9	3	3	15
		% within Age Group	60.0%	20.0%	20.0%	100.0 %
Total		Count	49	23	28	100
		% within Age Group	49.0%	23.0%	28.0%	100.0 %

Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	12.916[a]	6	.044
Likelihood Ratio	13.427	6	.037
N of Valid Cases	100		
a. 3 cells (25.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 3.45.			

According to the given chi-square test, there is a statistically significant relationship between age and account management styles **(χ^2 = 12.916, p = 0.044)**. The cross-tabulation table shows that middle-aged farmers (41-55 years) show high reliance on managing the social media accounts on their own (65%), whereas younger farmers (18-25 years) are more likely to outsource the social media management task to third-party agencies or their family members.

Objective 3: To categorise the "Content Strategies" adopted by farmers for customer engagement.

Content type		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
	Photos of the product only	42	42.0	42.0	42.0
	Customer reviews/Feedback videos	21	21.0	21.0	63.0
	Educational (Explaining crop quality)	19	19.0	19.0	82.0
	Short Videos/Reels of harvesting (Farm activity)	18	18.0	18.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	

The frequency table indicates that the most commonly adopted strategy by farmers on social media is posting static photos (42%), followed by customer reviews and testimonials (21%). Explanatory content (19%) and short videos (18%) are used less frequently. It suggests a massive preference for visual evidence of crop quality over narrative engagement.

Objective 4: To examine the relationship between "Visual Engagement" (Reels/Videos) and "Sales Inquiries".

What type of content do you post most frequently? * Which type of post gets you the most phone calls/orders? - Crosstabulation

			Which type of post gets you the most phone calls/orders?			Total
			Photos	Text Messages	Videos (Reels/Shorts)	
What type of content do you post most frequently?	Customer reviews/Feedback videos	Count	8	6	7	21
		% within What type of content do you post most frequently?	38.1%	28.6%	33.3%	100.0%
	Educational (Explaining crop quality)	Count	7	8	4	19
		% within What type of content do you post most frequently?	36.8%	42.1%	21.1%	100.0%
	Photos of the product only	Count	27	7	8	42
		% within What type of content do you post most frequently?	64.3%	16.7%	19.0%	100.0%
	Short Videos/Reels of harvesting (Farm activity)	Count	8	2	8	18
		% within What type of content do you post most	44.4%	11.1%	44.4%	100.0%

		frequently?				
Total		Count	50	23	27	100
		% within What type of content do you post most frequently?	50.0%	23.0%	27.0%	100.0%

Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	**df**	**Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)**
Pearson Chi-Square	**11.789[a]**	**6**	**.067**
Likelihood Ratio	**11.270**	**6**	**.080**
N of Valid Cases	**100**		
a. 4 cells (33.3%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 4.14.			

A chi-square analysis revealed distinct engagement patterns based on content type **(χ^2 = 11.789, p = 0.067)**. Farmers posting educational content received inquiries via Text Messages (42.1%), mentioning that the in-depth crop explanations require pre-purchase conversations. The farmers posting static photos (64.3%) get more direct orders, indicating a faster conversion path to visual-first content.

Objective 5: To identify the challenges faced by Ramnad farmers in sustaining digital commerce.

Ranks	
Challenges	Mean Rank
Courier/Delivery issues from the village	2.54
Customers bargaining too much	2.92 (least severe)
Mobile network issues	2.18 (most severe)
Difficulty in creating videos	2.36

Test Statistics[a]	
N	100
Chi-Square	18.000
df	3
Asymp. Sig.	.000
a. Friedman Test	

As a part of this objective, the Friedman test was carried out to identify the most and least severe challenges faced by farmers in Ramnad district. The results indicated a significant difference in the severity of the challenges **(χ^2 = 18.000, p < .001)**. The most severe problem faced by farmers is the complete lack of mobile network coverage (mean rank = 2.18). This was followed by the difficulty in creating videos, which is ranked as the second most difficult challenge (mean rank = 2.36), while customer bargaining (mean rank = 2.92) is ranked as the least significant challenge.

Findings

1. The chi-square test results confirmed the lack of link between posting frequency and profit (p = 0.424), suggesting that for agri-crops, harvest timing, scarcity and demand drive sales more than social media recommendations.
2. Middle-aged farmers (41-55 years) demonstrate higher levels of self-reliance in managing their own accounts (65%).
3. In contrast, younger farmers (18-25 years) prefer to outsource their social media management jobs to third-party

agencies (39.1%), to focus on other activities of the value chain.
4. Farmers prefer visual evidence of crop quality through photos (42%), rather than videos or narrative engagement.
5. The study only found a marginal trend (p = 0.067) linking video content to sales. This removes the barrier of video-only content as a prerequisite for sales. Even a simple photo of a crop (64.3%) is enough to generate sales.
6. The Friedman test explained that the lack of mobile network connectivity is the most severe challenge faced by the farmers (Rank 1, mean rank 2.18). The difficulty in creating videos is ranked second, which explains why farmers stick to photos rather than videos and reels.

Suggestions

For farmers:

1. Farmers must shift from spamming low-quality daily updates to pre-harvest updates, where they should focus on posting high-quality updates 1-2 weeks before the harvest season to create a demand shortage. This is in line with the finding that scarcity drives sales.
2. Farmers must learn basic photography, which involves good lighting and clear focus, because paddy/rice farmers want customers to inspect rice quality before making a sale.
3. Millet farmers learning and wanting to educate customers about crop quality must be trained to use WhatsApp Business labels and quick replies to handle conversations about crop sale deals effectively, which converts to sales.

For Government & Policymakers:

1. Ramnad district administration must install signal boosters and mobile network towers in high-density farming areas of the district. This enables farmers to make use of digital literacy schemes offered by the government.
2. The government can also train unemployed youth to become social media administrators for the farmers in Ramnad. Since educated farmers prefer to pay for account management, this suggestion employs local youth and provides professional marketing to farmers.

For NGOs & Agricultural Extension Centres:

1. Instead of focusing on video editing, millet farmers must be taught how to write up good descriptions explaining the advantages of millet crops and collect customer testimonials, as consumer trust and education become the main USP for this type of crop.
2. Developers must shift their focus to creating marketing tools that enable farmers to manage orders and draft posts offline, which will then sync automatically to the Internet once they are within the range of the nearest mobile tower.

Conclusion

The research is a demonstration of the development of a unique "Ramnad Model" of digital agriculture, which focuses more on utility and less on algorithmic trends. The statistical analysis debunks the "Influencer Myth" to prove that neither aggressive nor daily posting are guarantees of financial success, because what really drives sales are market fundamentals such as seasonality and scarcity, which are more effective than volume. Furthermore, the study shows an inverted digital divide in which the self-reliance of middle-aged farmers in dealing with their digital storefronts is higher than that of the younger generation, which prefers to outsource technical tasks. In terms of content, the barrier to entry is low, with only a marginal link having been found between video content and sales. Simple and high-quality photographs are still the most effective tool for generating direct orders, while educational content is more of a tool for kick-starting inquiries. Ultimately, while the farmers of Ramnad have succeeded in adapting their content strategies, their commercial growth is at an upper limit right now by not skill but infrastructure, as the "Mobile Network Issue" is the statistically worst hurdle, which leads us to the realisation that we need to shift focus in policy from soft skills to hard infrastructure.

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