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Research Article

The WhatsApp Effect: How Personal Messaging Platforms Are Restructuring the B2C Sales Funnel in Tier 2 and Tier 3 India

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Abstract

The existing literature on social commerce in emerging economies has relied largely on the empirical basis of broadcast-type platforms, namely Instagram, Facebook, and short video platforms, in which the seller shares content to a broad base of an anonymous audience. But this conceptual paper contends that this empirical basis is fundamentally inappropriate for understanding the present form of digital commerce found in Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities of India, i.e., transactions via the WhatsApp platform, which represents a completely different messaging platform in terms of scale as well as structure compared to broadcast-type platforms. Based on the funnel theory (Lewis, 1898; Strong, 1925), the Trust Equation (Maister, Green, & Galford, 2000), and established patterns in the reseller-commerce ecosystem in India (represented by Meesho among others), this paper proposes a conceptual model known as the Compressed Trust Funnel (CTF) in which the traditional six stages of the purchasing funnel (Awareness, Interest, Consideration, Intent, Purchase, and Loyalty) collapse into three observable phases of Imported Trust, Proof and Particularisation, and Frictionless Commitment under high relational adjacency. In the study, there is an integration of information about the secondary industry, trust and social-commerce literature, as well as selling process theory, showing that the use of WhatsApp in commerce reverses the order of trust creation in commerce from that which usually happens, whereby trust has to be created by the buyer's exposure to the brand, to the new case where trust is imported from existing social relationships.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The theory of commerce has relied upon a basic yet very important presumption from the start: that the buyer and the seller begin as strangers. The marketing funnel – introduced by Lewis (1898) as Attention, Interest, Desire, and Action (AIDA) and later refined through many years of work in advertising and retailing (Strong, 1925; Court et al., 2009) shows how an anonymous prospect is gradually converted into a known, committed customer through repeated exposures to communication, evidence, and persuasion. This has become such a fundamental part of marketing theory that it no longer needs to be stated explicitly; it has simply become embedded in the structure of all funnel diagrams in marketing textbooks and presentations. This assumption, on the other hand, was formed and validated within environments dominated by mass communication print advertisements, broadcast TV, and later on, digital forms of broadcasting such as search engines and social media feeds. In all these environments, the starting point of any seller-buyer combination before marketing begins is a lack of familiarity. The whole point of the funnel is to create familiarity and, finally, trust, which previously did not exist. This core assumption is increasingly being violated by India's ecosystem for digital commerce, especially beyond its largest cities. In the context of the second and third tier cities of India – urban locations such as Nashik, Coimbatore, Jaipur, Patna, Surat, and Indore, that have together hundreds of millions of consumers experiencing their first engaging exposure to digital commerce, a large number of buyer-seller relationships are not strangers meeting for the first time through marketing communication. They are existing social relationships, a neighbour, a former classmate, a relative, or a member of a shared WhatsApp group, being commercially activated. The channel through which this occurs is WhatsApp. This paper explores how the characteristics of WhatsApp, as a private, voluntary, and relational communications platform, distinct from a broadcast medium like Instagram or Facebook, creates a different type of sales funnel, rather than just a faster or more economical variant of the traditional one. In the case of the traditional sales funnel, trust is generated through a series of actions designed to create awareness, but in the case of the WhatsApp sales funnel, trust often comes directly from a previous relationship, completely changing the nature of subsequent stages. The paper is organized into six sections. The second section provides the literature review in three streams: funnel theory fundamentals, social commerce studies, and trust theory to determine the gap filled by the paper. The third section provides the conceptual rationale behind the structural difference between messaging platform commerce and broadcast platform commerce. Section 4 presents the proposed conceptual model, “the Compressed Trust Funnel.” The fifth section analyses the model's application to India's distinctive reseller-commerce ecosystem. The sixth section deals with theoretical and practical implications. Section 7 proposes a research agenda for empirical validation and concludes.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

A) Foundational Funnel Theory and Its Embedded Assumptions

According to the AIDA model, suggested by the advertising professional E. St. Elmo Lewis in 1898 and then further refined by Strong in 1925, the consumer decision-making process is based on four successive steps: Attention, Interest, Desire, and Action (AIDA). Over the following century, the basic framework has been developed into more detailed models the purchase funnel, the consideration-set model (Court et al., 2009), and modern customer journey maps that typically distinguish six stages: Awareness, Interest, Consideration, Intent, Purchase, and Loyalty. What binds them together despite variance in granularity and emphasis, is the common structural assumption that the movement down the funnel is caused by the gradual buildup of knowledge through the process of persuasion until the psychological point of purchase is reached. In other words, the funnel is a model of trust and conviction being built from nothing. This assumption has been empirically well-tested in the environments where it has overwhelmingly been applied: advertising-driven, brand-to-stranger commerce. However, there have been several studies emerging that cast doubt on the relevance of this assumption within the realm of socially embedded, digitally mediated commerce environments. Hajli (2015) showed how social commerce channels increase the speed of movement within the sales funnel through social proof techniques such as peer reviews and ratings, which can partly replace the constant brand exposure that is required in conventional advertising. The significance of this study was to show that while the structure of the sales funnel remains the same, its internal processes could change due to the influence of the platform environment. Nevertheless, the platform environment utilized in this study, as well as most others in the area of social commerce, is a broadcast one in which anonymity of the seller-buyer communication persists.

B) Messaging-Platform Commerce: A Distinct and Under-Theorised Category

On the other hand, another more recent body of literature has looked at commerce taking place using messaging apps, especially focusing on WeChat in China. According to Lien, Cao, and Zhou (2017), trust, satisfaction, and loyalty of consumers in WeChat commerce have been significantly influenced by the social-commerce feature of the WeChat app; the integration of personal and business functions of the app within one app, popularly known as 'super-app'. This study has shown one of the most critical findings of this type of research: that platform design influences trust formation relative to platforms where these functions are separated. Yet, although the WeChat scholarship shares conceptual similarities with the present paper, it can't be applied directly to Indian WhatsApp commerce for two important reasons. The first of them is that the WeChat service throughout its commercial life cycle has integrated the native payment capabilities and 'mini-programs' commerce tools into the messaging application – this level of

deep integration of commerce capabilities into the messaging service, which is much higher than the one implemented in WhatsApp is simply missing from the latter. The second, even more important, reason the WeChat scholarship is not applicable to this paper is that India's WeChat commerce ecosystem lacks reseller intermediaries who serve as the main points of contact for buyers.

C) The Indian Reseller-Commerce Phenomenon

The Indian system of commerce through resellers, which has become most notable due to the company Meesho, has attracted significant attention in industry journals and trade press, but not so much in academic circles. As per data shared by the company and available in Indian business media outlets (Inc42; YourStory; founder interviews; 2022-2024), Meesho's network of resellers, which comprises mainly of women based out of Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities, has on many occasions surpassed 15 million participants where each of them acts as a point of sale and obtains the catalog of products from the company, shares images of the products on their own and community networks using WhatsApp, takes orders, and makes profit without maintaining any stock.

The theory is relevant for several theoretical reasons. First, it involves placing an identifiable individual with socially embedded ties in the position that lies between the brand or its producer and the ultimate consumer, a position which neither traditional theory of retail trust (which relies on brand and store reputation), nor influencer marketing theory (which revolves around parasocial interactions with celebrities and other individuals who are, by definition, unknown to their audiences) attempts to address. The reseller is neither a stranger, nor a celebrity; she is a person whom the buyer knows, yet who has assumed the commercial function. The hybrid nature of this position, which, according to this paper, is at the heart of funnel compression in Indian WhatsApp markets, remains, as far as we know, unstudied in the marketing literature.

D) Trust Theory as an Explanatory Lens

Trust Equation, created by Maister, Green & Galford (2000), within the context of professional services advisory relationships, breaks down the construct of interpersonal trust into four parts that include: credibility, which refers to perceived expertise and competence, reliability, which entails consistency in word and deed, intimacy, which is the extent of psychological safety and connectedness in the relationship, and self-orientation, which is the extent to which the trusted individual seems to be concerned with himself/herself, rather than the other person, where the first three are in the numerator while the latter is in the denominator. While this framework applies to advisor-client interactions rather than business, it can provide us with a helpful perspective for this particular argument. Commerce through broadcast platforms such as Instagram or Facebook is forced to build their credibility on external evidence (number of followers, professional photos, independent evaluations) since intimacy is not structurally possible between a brand account and an unknown customer.

On the other hand, commerce through WhatsApp is built upon preexisting intimacy since the reseller is automatically emotionally close to his client due to the very nature of this relationship. The main hypothesis of this paper is that preexisting intimacy allows the substitution of credibility building, which should be done at the very beginning, and this substitution forms the basis of funnel compression.

E) Identifying the Gap

The synthesis of the four literatures mentioned above reveals the precise gap. Funnel theory offers a strong general model, but it includes an assumption of a stranger-to-stranger world that might not be true for socially embedded business environments. The social commerce literature has revealed acceleration on broadcast media, yet it has not analyzed the same for the messaging media structurally. Literature on WeChat has analyzed commerce through messaging platforms in a structurally different setting than what WhatsApp is doing in India. The theory of trust provides an integrable approach that can be used to explain the possible difference between trust formation in messaging platforms and trust formation in broadcast platforms, but it has not been applied in this particular empirical setting. There is no existing study, according to this paper, that has integrated these four streams to come up with an improved funnel model for Indian Tier 2/3 messaging-platform commerce.

Conceptual Argument: Why Messaging-Platform Commerce Is Structurally Distinct

A) The Relational Adjacency Distinction

The present paper proposes the term relational adjacency as an indication of the level of the existing social relationship between the seller (or reseller) and the potential buyer before any transaction takes place. The term relational adjacency is defined herein as a continuum that spans from stranger (where no pre-existing relationship exists; the assumed default state in classical funnel theory) via weak tie (the acquaintance, the individual who is part of a common community group, the "friend of a friend") to strong tie (family members, friends, long-time trusted neighbours). The main concept behind this paper is that relational adjacency acts as a moderator that influences whether the six-stage funnel applies or not. In the case of low relational adjacency, when two people don't know each other (stranger condition), the traditional six-stage funnel, characterised by increasing awareness and credibility, still applies — after all, that's how the model has been developed. However, in the case of high relational adjacency (strong tie condition), prevalent in the commerce via WhatsApp with resellers, this paper suggests that the six-stage funnel accelerates not because of any acceleration, but because of restructuring, since all the psychological tasks that funnel stages 1 through 3 accomplish (knowing the seller, being aware of his credibility and safety) have already been completed before the actual commerce takes place.

B) Three Structural Properties of WhatsApp as a Commerce Channel

There are three structural elements of WhatsApp that make it different from broadcast platforms in terms of the funnel structure.

1. Contact-Gated Access

In contrast to an Instagram or Facebook page that is accessible to any user irrespective of any connection, WhatsApp communication happens only if users have exchanged contacts with each other, or in the case of broadcast lists/groups, if they have opted into the list/group. Thus, it is structurally impossible for a WhatsApp-based vendor to reach out to a potential client who has not exchanged WhatsApp contacts with him/her. It is more likely to happen via social connections than an algorithm-based one.

2. Inbox Co-Location

The commercial message that gets delivered via WhatsApp will land in the same inbox alongside messages from the person's closest relatives, best friends, and other key personal connections. The co-location of such messages, their proximity in terms of both location and association in one undifferentiated message flow, has no counterpart on those platforms where the commercial message gets delivered by means of an algorithmic insertion in a separate content feed. In this paper, it is suggested that the co-location of the message in the inbox is the

underlying reason why the Intimacy factor in the Trust Equation gets amplified for WhatsApp commerce compared to feed-based commerce.

3. Synchronous-Asynchronous Hybrid Communication

WhatsApp facilitates a mode of communication that lies somewhere between being synchronous, like a telephone conversation, and being asynchronous, like an email or a static product description. The use of voice notes in particular allows the seller to provide warmth and presence through a message that the other party can access at his own time and convenience, thus offering the advantages of voice communication (tone, pause, excitement – paralinguistics absent from text-based media) along with those of asynchronous communication. It is claimed in this paper that WhatsApp's unique form of communication is ideally suited for the phase of 'Proof and Particularization' as explained in Section 4 of this paper.

The Compressed Trust Funnel: A Proposed Conceptual Model

Extending from the theoretical rationale outlined in Section 3 this paper proposes the Compressed Trust Funnel (CTF) as a revised model tailored to high relational adjacency and messaging platform commerce. This proposed model argues that the traditional six stages boil down to just three visible stages.

CTF Phase	Conventional Funnel Stages Subsumed	Proposed Psychological Mechanism
Phase I — Imported Trust	Awareness and Interest	Trust required to proceed is not generated within the commercial interaction but imported wholesale from a pre-existing non-commercial relationship. The conventional 'awareness' stage — the buyer learning the seller or brand exists — is frequently bypassed entirely, since the buyer already knows the reseller personally before any product is mentioned.
Phase II — Proof and Particularisation	Consideration and Intent	Having imported general trust in the person, the buyer seeks specific, particularised proof that this product, in this instance, will perform as claimed — typically through a voice note demonstration, a status update, or a photograph of a known mutual contact's prior satisfaction, rather than through generic brand credibility signals such as follower counts or institutional reviews.
Phase III — Frictionless Commitment	Purchase and initial Loyalty	The purchase decision and the order or payment action are proposed to occur within the same uninterrupted conversational thread as Phase II, without redirection to an external checkout interface or account-creation step, collapsing what is typically a distinct funnel stage into a continuation of the same conversation.

In this model, the Awareness phase comes into existence to address one specific problem, the buyer does not yet know that the seller, brand, or product exists. The Interest stage exists to solve a second problem: having become aware, the buyer must be persuaded that the offering is relevant enough to warrant his attention. Both of these are, fundamentally, problems of information transfer from an unfamiliar source.

This paper proposes that, under conditions of high relational adjacency, both problems are already solved by the nature of the relationship itself. A buyer who receives a product message from her sister, her old college roommate, or a member of her residential community WhatsApp group does not need to be informed that this person exists, nor does she need to be

persuaded that this person is a legitimate source of information — both facts are already established by years of prior, non-commercial relationship. What needs to be communicated is narrower and more specific: not 'who is this and why should I care,' but simply 'what, is being offered.' This is conceptually a different cognitive task, and this paper proposes it is accomplished far more rapidly.

Phase II: Proof and Particularisation — Conceptual Elaboration

Once general relational trust has been brought into this model, however, the buyer does not forego evaluation altogether – it does not suggest WhatsApp commerce is unreflective and

unconsidered in nature. What it suggests is a change in the type of evidence being looked for. With regard to a broadcast-commerce platform, where there is little knowledge about the seller, the buyer looks for aggregate and depersonalized evidence – number of reviews and ratings, number of followers, quality of professional content – all serving as indicators of reliability because there is no personal relationship of trust to speak of. With the high relational adjacency in WhatsApp commerce, however, this article suggests the buyer would be looking for personalized and individually targeted evidence – a voice message specifically addressing her questions, a photo of the item used by someone she knows, a status update she sees precisely because she is already a saved contact. The standard shift from statistical Credibility (many anonymous people approve) to particular credibility (this specific, trusted person vouches for this specific instance).

Phase III: Frictionless Commitment — Conceptual Elaboration

The final suggested phase relates to a structural characteristic of WhatsApp commerce, which is well documented in the industry reports on the reseller model: there is no distinct stage of “checkout” that separates from the conversation itself. While traditional e-commerce websites demand that a customer exit the content/discovery interface and proceed to a transaction interface, often requiring entering a new set of account details, WhatsApp transactions in the reseller model traditionally occur in the same conversation, from initial question to order completion to payment organization (often using UPI), with the reseller being an active and responsive agent throughout the process. This paper suggests that this continuity, where no platform-imposed break occurs between evaluation and commitment, resolves a friction point that cannot be resolved by broadcast-to-marketplace commerce structurally, and this is exactly the frictionless commitment mechanism this paper discusses.

Boundary Conditions and Moderating Variables

The paper does not imply that the application of the CTF approach applies universal to all WhatsApp businesses and that the classic funnel becomes ineffective. Some moderation variables are suggested as those that determine how strong funnel compression is. Relational adjacency is considered a primary moderator variable within the model (as described in section 3.1). The application of the CTF model should become more significant the stronger the tie is and vice versa. It will gradually turn into the classical funnel as relational adjacency becomes closer to a stranger situation (for example, when cold reaching out through WhatsApp Business API of the company to the customer). Product Category and level of involvement: Categories that have high involvement and high cost (electronics and durables), it is suggested, will keep more of the traditional Consideration process even under high relational proximity due to the financial and functional risks involved being fairly high irrespective of the trust that exists in the salesperson. The low involvement categories (clothing,

personal care products and house hold goods) are expected to compress fully. Experience with digital purchases: buyers who have extensive previous commerce experience and buy goods online could maintain their normal evaluation practices (such as price comparison and looking for reviews outside of the communication) even in a highly relational adjacency context like WhatsApp. Novice digital buyers, particularly those targeted by this paper (Tier 2 and Tier 3), are suggested to experience the compression effect more intensely due to the absence of other evaluative frameworks.

Application: The Indian Reseller-Commerce Ecosystem as a Theoretical Test Case

1. The Reseller as a Trust-Transfer Node

The social-commerce reseller business model used in India by Meesho and others, according to this paper, serves as the best example of the processes involved in the CTF model, despite there being no primary testing of the model yet done. The unique positioning of the reseller lies in her being both an economic actor (with motive) and a socially-positioned actor (also motivated, but constrained, by her position in the community). In this paper, the dual nature of this actor becomes a key factor in making the process of trust transfer possible in Phase I of the CTF model – it is unnecessary to hide or overcome the reseller’s economic motive because of the trust that has been created due to her social position, and her customers’ knowledge of the fact that she has an economic motive doesn’t reduce this trust, unlike the case in the advertisement-based business.

The above theory is a valid departure from the concept of influencer marketing theory, which assumes that parasocial trust for a public figure is somewhat compromised by motives of commerce if the sponsorship is known (a factor that forms the core of the various regulations, such as those developed by the Advertising Standards Council of India). The trust factor in the case of the reseller is not as susceptible to compromise because of the very reason that it exists independent of the business transaction – the sisterhood between the seller and the buyer will remain unaffected no matter what happens in this particular business deal.

2. Documented Scale as Indirect Evidence

Despite its lack of original data collection, the scale of the reseller business model in this paper provides some indirect evidence in favor of the possibility of the CTF model. Reports from the industry have put the number of resellers currently active with Meesho at numbers higher than 15 million, with annual GMV measured in the tens of thousands of crores of rupees (Inc42; YourStory; company disclosures, 2022-2024) — all of which is hard to explain through any ordinary funneling mechanism given the almost complete absence, in this case, of paid advertisement, professional content creation, and investments in branding, which would otherwise be expected according to the principles of traditional funnel theories for trust formation. The plausibility of the CTF model in this paper

is based on this idea: trust formation is happening through some mechanism other than the usual one, on a scale that cannot be easily dismissed, and a mechanism that logically fits the relational proximity and intimacy substitution arguments presented in Sections 3 and 4.

3. A Worked Conceptual Illustration

For a demonstration of the suggested usage of the model, consider a hypothetical, yet typical, situation, which has been created based on observations found within industry descriptions of the process of reseller commerce (and not from original data generated by this paper). The example is that of a housewife living in a Tier 3 city who gets a WhatsApp message from a community contact – another parent from the WhatsApp group for her child’s school – showing pictures of a new catalog of clothes. According to the traditional sales funnel, the communication has to be followed up with Awareness, Interest, Consideration, and Intent stages before Purchase can happen. In the case of the CTF framework offered above, phase I (Imported Trust) is believed to take almost no time at all as the recipient is well aware of this person and trusts him/her from the school context and therefore the trust transfers over to the commercial context without having to be established in the latter separately. Phase II (Proof and Particularisation) may include just one voice message explaining the quality of the fabric in response to an explicit question or a picture of some other common friend wearing the same clothes – evidence that is highly personal and particular rather than general. Phase III (Frictionless Commitment) is expected to occur in the same conversation as well as the buyer verifies the size and color, the reseller verifies the price and delivery schedule, while UPI transaction is carried out right there. As per this theory, the entire process would take minutes to be completed as opposed to the days or even weeks that are common for traditional funnels when dealing with unknown brand e-commerce situations – an assertion that the paper clearly states needs to be empirically verified.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

1. Theoretical Implications

Assuming these implications are empirically confirmed using the research design outlined in Section 7, the CTF model would have broader implications for marketing and sales theory beyond the Indian case study. First of all, it would imply that any funnel model needs to make an explicit assumption regarding the underlying relational-adjacency property of the funnel model, namely that strangers should be assumed by default, not the opposite, as is often done in both academic literature and pedagogic presentations of the funnel model. Secondly, it would further expand trust theory and in particular, apply the equation of trust as the separation of trust into two components to the prediction of the ratio between Credibility and Intimacy in terms of their influence on consumers’ purchasing decisions based on the properties of the communication channel used. Finally, it would imply that there exists a special class of social commerce, namely messaging platform commerce, as opposed to broadcast platform social commerce.

2. Implications for Sales Pedagogy and Training

Sales training modules for today, which include digital or social selling, have mostly been conceived in terms of the underlying mechanisms of broadcasting platforms: creating a brand with content (LinkedIn's social-selling literature) or cultivating parasocial trust through authentic influencers (Instagram's social-commerce literature). In line with the thesis proposed in this paper, however, WhatsApp-specific selling skills should be seen as being conceptually different, and need their own pedagogical approach focusing on different competences: how to leverage existing relational capital, how to provide specific rather than general proof (how to make the specific task of a responsive voice note rather than a broadcast-posting one), and how to ensure conversation continuity, rather than moving leads to another transactional platform

Stakeholder	Proposed Practical Implication
For SMB Sellers and Resellers	If the CTF model holds, sellers operating in this channel would be best served by training that emphasises responsive, particularised communication (voice notes addressing specific questions) over generic content production, and that helps them consciously map which relational-adjacency tier each contact occupies, in order to calibrate the depth of Phase II evidence required.
For Platform Product Design	WhatsApp Business's feature roadmap (catalogue tools, quick replies, broadcast lists) could be evaluated against which CTF phase each feature is intended to support, potentially revealing under-served phases — for instance, whether sufficient tooling exists to support the particularised, responsive proof-giving this paper proposes as central to Phase II.
For Digital and Financial Inclusion Policy	A validated CTF model would offer policymakers a more granular behavioural account of how non-metro digital commerce participation actually functions — relevant to designing digital literacy and consumer protection interventions appropriately calibrated to a relationally mediated, rather than anonymous-marketplace, commerce environment.

3. A Necessary Caution: Risks of the Model Examined

The argument put forth in this paper must not be mistaken as an unqualified endorsement of relationally-driven commerce. While the very method described here – replacing the external and verifiable Credibility with Intimacy as means of fostering trust and eliminating friction – holds potential dangers in itself: it can lead the customer to have less of an incentive to verify on their own the quality of the products, the terms of return, and

even responsibility of the merchant precisely due to the feeling of trust developed during this process. Indeed, reports on complaints from the industry and consumers related to various problems in reseller commerce ecosystems, such as product quality, return policies, and deliveries, suggest this danger is a real one. Thus, when designing any empirical test for the CTF model, as described in section 7, one should consider not just the speed of the funnel, but the results coming out of it as well.

Proposed Research Agenda and Conclusion

1. Toward Empirical Validation

As a conceptual paper, this work is explicitly positioned as theory-building rather than theory-testing. The main idea proposed in this paper — the Compressed Trust Funnel framework and the concept of relational adjacency on which this framework is based — is presented as a falsifiable statement and not as a proven idea, and its worth can be judged only through empirical validation. The following is the proposed research agenda based on this conceptual paper.

- A mixed-methods field study, consisting of structured surveys of WhatsApp-based sellers and buyers in several Tier 2/3 cities along with anonymized transaction time data (wherever possible), to empirically test the duration of funnel stage as a function of relational adjacency, thereby testing the central thesis of this paper.
- Research based on qualitative interviews to understand the process of trust building in WhatsApp business from the perspective of buyers to either validate/reject the proposed mechanisms for each phase of CTF.
- Cross-comparative experimental research by offering equivalent products to respondents in systematically different relational proximity contexts (stranger, weak tie, strong tie), isolating the causal effect of relational proximity amidst other factors like the type of product being offered or its price
- Examination through longitudinal research on outcomes of buying, which could include satisfaction with purchase, returns, repurchases, complaints, etc., checking if there is an adverse impact of the proposed funnel stage compression as indicated in Section 6.3.
- Cross-platform comparison of relational-adjacency across other commerce-related messaging platforms (e.g., WhatsApp for commerce in Latin American or African countries where such structural features have been noticed but not formally studied) in order to determine whether the model is applicable in any other context besides India, where it was conceived.

3. CONCLUSION

In this paper, it has been suggested that although the classic sales funnel has ruled marketing thinking for over a century now, there exists an implicit assumption in this theory, namely that the buyer and the seller are strangers at the start of the sale process. This assumption however, does not exist for a rapidly growing area of commerce that takes place in India's tier 2 and tier 3 cities – commerce which is mediated via WhatsApp, often via socially embedded reseller intermediaries, where preexisting relationship, as opposed to manufactured brand awareness, is the initial state. Using the theories behind funnel, social commerce, WeChat commerce and trust equation, this paper has attempted to explain how the classic six funnel stages compress into three distinct phases, namely Imported Trust, Proof and Particularisation, and Frictionless Commitment, in scenarios of high relational adjacency and has justified the same via the workings of India's reseller-commerce eco-

system. The value of this model, ultimately, rests not in this paper's conceptual argument alone but in the empirical research it makes possible to design with precision. In particular, the specification of a relational adjacency measure; the breakdown of the customer journey into three separate theoretical stages, each of which has distinct observable features; and the identification of concrete mechanisms at work in each of those stages (intimacy substitution, particularized proof seeking, conversational continuity). This paper seeks to turn 'WhatsApp commerce is big in India' from a curious industry observation into a structured subject of theoretical and empirical inquiry, one whose implications stretch from sales training courses to platform design to digital inclusion policy. The job left for us to do, and for which this paper prepares the ground, is to test the hypothesis of whether a funnel where trust leads, not lags, awareness really does look the way we propose it does.

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